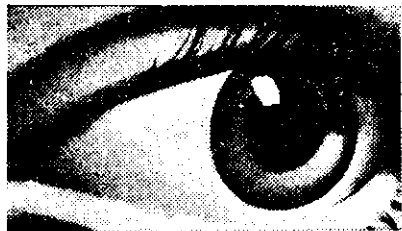


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CLEANING OLD MASTERS

(A Talk by COLIN MACINNES, broadcast in the BBC's Overseas Service)

AN interesting argument has been going on recently in the correspondence columns of *The Times* newspaper. The subject is one most people don't care much about, but there are a few who take it very seriously. It's this: Should you clean a picture painted by an Old Master?

Now to understand the argument, this word "clean" needs some definition. Obviously, no one could object to removing the surface dirt from a picture, to washing off the grime and soot which go to make the London air (together with a certain amount of nitrogen and oxygen, of course). But what is more open to question, is whether the varnish or the actual paint of the picture should be touched.

You can show that some old pictures have been heavily covered with varnish, and that this varnish has darkened, making the picture dull and colourless. You can even show that parts of the picture may actually have been repainted by an inferior artist later on. So those in favour of cleaning say: Take off the dirty varnish, remove the later repainting, and let us see the picture bright and fresh as it was when it left the artist's studio. And those against it say: You can't be sure what is later painting. If you start removing paint at all you may remove some of the original colours. And what is more, we shouldn't expect to see old pictures looking like new ones. Any more than we expect to see an old lady looking like a girl.

A "Ruined" Rembrandt

For some time past the policy of the National Gallery here in London has been to clean some of the pictures in their collection pretty thoroughly. And as every picture in the National Gallery is a masterpiece, the public has been waiting with considerable interest for the return of these newly-cleaned pictures to the gallery walls. And it is over one of these, a picture by the great Dutch artist Rembrandt (called "A Woman Bathing") that the storm has burst in the columns of *The Times*.

To describe this picture, I can't do better than quote the National Gallery's own catalogue: "A woman, holding up her smock, wades forward through a pool. On the bank behind her—left is a rich crimson-and-gold brocaded drapery. Behind—right—a dark tree trunk. Signed: Rembrandt, 1654." And according to some of the critics, this picture has now been ruined. Let us hear what they have to say.

The first letter to *The Times* was from Sir Gerald Kelly, the Royal Academician, whose pictures hang in the galleries at Sydney, Johannesburg and elsewhere. He wrote: "I believe that a series of terrible mistakes has occurred in the National Gallery. Some pictures have been so drastically cleaned that worn and spoiled passages in them are only too visible. I appeal to the trustees to call a halt to this dangerous activity."

And now, Round Two. Rodrigo Moynihan, the young Associate of the Royal

Academy, who has just painted a portrait of Princess Elizabeth, joined in the fray. "May I add to Sir Gerald Kelly's objections to the recent cleaning of paintings at the National Gallery. I would like to draw attention particularly to Rembrandt's 'A Woman Bathing,' which, I believe, has undergone a complete change of character."

"Time Also Paints"

After this opening skirmish, the big guns were brought into play. For the next letter was from the President of the Royal Academy himself, Sir Alfred Munnings. "With warning examples like Sir Joshua Reynolds' 'Three Graces' skinned long since under some past rule, why do present controlling powers still allow this drastic cleaning to go on? Those who make periodical visits to the shrine of art may never know what is happening in between and on returning may discover too late, alas! that a change has befallen:

'Some unhappy master whom unmerciful disaster
Followed fast and followed faster. . . .'

The defence had so far been silent. But after 48 hours' lull, two letters appeared which supported the Gallery's cleaning policy. One was from Sir Robert Witt, a former trustee. He pointed out that "Time also paints" and that the mere lapse of years tends to darken almost any picture and lower its tone. This being so, the eye of the spectator inevitably comes to expect a somewhat darkened effect and to be surprised, even shocked, by seeing a picture which seems unusually bright in colour because it has just been cleaned.

And here is what Victor Pasmore wrote. Pasmore is a very gifted young artist, whose pictures already hang in the Tate Gallery. "Far from being spoilt or damaged," he says, "the picture is now a revelation of beauty. The piece of paint which is missing from the hand is clearly the work of a previous restorer long ago who repainted it afterwards either to cover up his mistake or to give the picture a more finished appearance."

At last the National Gallery itself came into the open and laid its cards on the table—or promised to do so. The Gallery's answer didn't take the form of a letter, but of a little paragraph that appeared in the news section of *The Times*. Here it is: "An exhibition will be held at the National Gallery in February. This will group together many of those pictures which have been cleaned during the last ten years. In an adjoining room will be an exhibition designed to illustrate the processes and results of cleaning. There will be partly cleaned pictures, photographs, and a catalogue in which full technical information will be made available to the public."

So, you see, a truce has been called until this exhibition opens. And then, I have no doubt, the battle will begin again.

A Hundred Years Ago

What is interesting about this argument over cleaning pictures is that it
(continued on next page)