

Hamilton Kerr Institute

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Ms Anne van Grevenstein
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Dear Ms Grevenstein

Oranjesaal, Huis den Bosch

It was a great privilege to be invited to see the Oranjesaal on the 12th September and an honour to be invited to give my opinion on the proposals for its conservation. The documentation detailing the present state of the room, the history of conservation work and the context of the whole project which was sent to me before my visit was of a very high standard and indicative of the thorough research and consideration of the complexities of this project made by your team.

The first priority of the project should be, as is proposed in the "concept", the stabilisation of the climate within the room, so that the paintings on canvas are treated and returned to favourable conditions and the wooden panelling is not subjected to further stress by fluctuations in relative humidity. I suggest that if possible, the problems caused by repairs made in concrete and the insulation of the cupola with polyurethane foam should be dealt with at this stage to remove the possibility of further major intervention in the foreseeable future. In addition maintenance of light levels to current museum standards should also be a requirement. Measures should be taken to prevent the access of insects rather than tackling the problem in the room itself.

The next priority is to stabilise the paintings on canvas which exhibit flaking of the paint layer and deformations of the canvas support. The report fully documents the rare, unlined state of most of the paintings, but the history of piecemeal repair where the looming threads are broken and the inevitable fragility of the canvas supports now mean that striplining and loose lining are urgently necessary. At this stage it might be necessary to remove some of the layers of varnish applied during different treatments in the past to facilitate consolidation and also to reduce cupping of the paintlayer which can be deformed by brittle layers of degraded varnish. This factor might also determine the level to which existing varnish layers might be cleaned to achieve some aesthetic balance. Again the report shows a clear awareness of the problem and the correlation of documented past conservation work to the condition of the room itself, gives the conservators a historical

context that previous conservators working in the room did not have. I think it would be preferable to consolidate and undertake cleaning to the level decided at the same time as this would reduce the amount of movement of the paintings. It would be quite ethical to tone paintings that have been overcleaned (for example the triumph scene to the left of the entrance on the north wall).

The largest painting, *The Triumph of Frederick Henry*, will pose particular problems in handling and moving and will of necessity take a considerable time to treat. With other paintings it might be possible (though expensive) to make life-size photographic reproductions for installation while the paintings are away.

The greatest visual distortions are the purple borders surrounding the paintings that originally were stone coloured and the purple edging of the architectural elements of the ceiling. While the painted stone wall under the lowest level of paintings can be recovered, it seems unlikely that the condition of the original paint in the borders is sufficiently good to justify its uncovering although less accessible areas of the room where preparations for repainting might have been less thorough, could reveal areas in better condition. However reconstruction of the original decorative paint scheme (with the removal of added strips and gilded mouldings) would enable the provision of a matched context for the conserved paintings where uncovering very worn original paint of the architectural elements would not. The removal of some purple overpaint might be necessary to prevent the texture and outline of the earlier repaint showing through in raking light. The same treatment might be applied to the gilded pilasters although the test areas show in addition to the very worn state of the original, that the width of the fluted areas and the width and tone of the painted shadows is very different and much more subtle compared to the present nineteenth century regilding. The areas of the ceiling which have been painted are very distorted with discoloured varnish. However the open joints caused by contraction of the planks is I feel, irreversible.

In conclusion, the execution of this major project will require careful planning with the palace authorities made clearly aware that some of the work cannot be done to a tight schedule. However the conservation of this wonderful assemblage of paintings integrated into an architectural setting, now requires major conservation work to ensure its survival. The wide ranging research and analyses by your team of art historians, conservators and scientists removes the risk of ill-judged measures which are all too evident from the past.

Yours sincerely,

Ian McClure
Director.

