



In a workroom at the Milwaukee Art Center, Jim De Young inspected several Toulouse-Lautrec posters from the Mrs. Harry Lynde Bradley collection before preparing them for shipment. As part of the Art Cen-

ter's conservation and restoration program, the posters will be taken to Chicago for extensive testing, possible bleaching and de-acidification to prevent them from turning brittle. —Sentinel Photo by Ronald M. Overdahl

Artworks Get the Blahs, Too

By DEAN JENSEN

Those Georgia O'Keeffe, Lyonel Feininger and Emil Nolde watercolors that almost daily have been thrilling crowds at the Milwaukee Art Center are going to start getting some well earned rest.

A lot of the oils in the center's collection, including some which were old when they were displayed when Milwaukee's first public art museum was opened 90 years ago, are going to get thorough checkups, including X-rays, to insure that they will be around for your great-great-great grandchildren to enjoy.

Those lithographic playbills by Toulouse-Lautrec, which even today make the gaslight and cigar smoke atmosphere of the Moulin Rouge so enticing, are going to get deacidified, bleached, rematted, reframed and

whatever else experts determine is needed to save them from the degradation that comes with age.

It is all part of the Art Center's new emphasis on conservation and restoration of the 10,000 works in its collection.

Artistic beauty, like human beauty, is, alas, transient. Thanks in part to science and technology, though, a painting of a nude can hold its beauty long after it has faded from the sitter.

"Conservation is an area that has been too long neglected, not just by the Milwaukee Art Center, but by perhaps most art museums in the country," said Art Center Director Gerald Nordland. "It would be foolhar-

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dy not to save for our children and their children, these works which give us so much pleasure."

About a year ago, a team of art conservators from Oberlin College in Ohio spent a week at the Art Center and made preliminary pronouncements on the health and life expectancy of each painting.

"We told them to make recommendations as though price were no object to us, as though we had all the money in the world," Nordland said. "Based on their recommendations, and considerations of our own, we are now establishing a kind of hierarchy for what paintings should get the attention first."

Price was definitely an object when the survey was made. At that time, the center had little money for conservation and restoration work.

However, the center now has a tidy sum to at least start on a conservation and restoration program. The thanks, once again, go to Mrs. Harry Lynde Bradley, the same woman who gave a \$13 million collection of art to the center a few years ago and then contributed \$1.5 million to help the museum build an addition.

Mrs. Bradley gave the Art Center a gift of \$150,000 in January so it could start on a conservation program, Nordland said.

"She shared the concern of the staff that we couldn't keep putting this off," said Nordland of Mrs. Bradley, who died earlier this month at age 83.

Among the artworks getting immediate attention will be the Toulouse-Lautrec posters in the Bradley wing. On Monday, many will be taken away by print conservators from R.R. Donnelley and Sons Co. in Chicago for extensive testing, possible bleaching and deacidification to prevent them from turning brittle.

Nordland said the center's watercolors and pastels also will start getting more tender loving care. Among them are crowd pleasers like the O'Keeffes, Noldes and Feiningers.

"They're going to need more rest for one thing," Nordland said. "That's critical. They've been on display too long."

One of the biggest enemies of artwork is light, particularly the ultraviolet radiation that is emitted from the sun and the high intensity lamps that are used in museums. It can cause the colors in paintings and prints to change in value or vanish completely.

In installing works in the museum two years ago, care was taken to keep the watercolors away from the sunlight flooding into the galleries through the win-

dows. But there is no way to completely protect exhibited artworks from the deleterious effects of light, Nordland noted.

"Anytime you have light in a room, you have ultraviolet radiation," he explained. "Even if the pictures are protected from direct exposure, they are still vulnerable to ultraviolet radiation because the rays from the sun and lamps can bounce around."

Watercolors, pastels and prints that have started to age will not spring back to their earlier glory by placing them in storage, Nordland said. However, the life of almost all artworks can be extended by letting them hibernate regularly, Nordland noted.

"Watercolors, especially, shouldn't be on display longer than three months out of the year," Nordland said. "What we're going to do is keep changing our walls. We'll retire some works for months at a time and bring other things out to replace them."

Nordland said the center also would be reframing many of the watercolors, pastels and prints with picture glass that is now available that screens out most of the damaging ultraviolet rays. He said the center also would be covering the gallery lights with filters that cut down on ultraviolet radiation.

The regular changing around of artworks should make the museum a more exciting place, especially for regular visitors who think they now know every nook and cranny of its three acres of exhibition space, Nordland observed. While it may mean that museumgoers will be seeing less of their "stars," they now will be introduced to some works that have been waiting in the wings for years without an audience to appreciate them.

Some paintings already have been sent out for re-cleaning, including a few that were hanging on the walls of the Layton Art Gallery when it first opened its doors in 1888. Because theirs is a slow, painstaking and highly skilled profession, conservators commonly charge \$1,000 or more to clean a medium sized canvas.

Larger and older art repositories like the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Chicago Art Institute have their conservation and restoration departments. Nordland said it could be years before the Milwaukee museum follows suit because of the tremendous expenditure that would be required to hire full time conservators and set up a laboratory for them.

"Art conservation and restoration is a highly specialized business, with experts in painting, prints, sculpture," Nordland said. "What we're going to try to do is pick and choose the cream of American conservators from the different fields."