

Abstract

The career of William Suhr (1896–1984) spanned the history of paintings conservation in the 20th century. He spent his early professional life in Berlin, known in the 1920s as the international art centre, and by the time the acknowledged centre of the world of Western art had moved to New York, Suhr worked for the Frick Collection and was treating paintings for many major US museums from his New York city studio on East 62nd Street. His files include letters to and from leading 20th century museum figures as well as pioneers of conservation. His teaching notes on the history of artists' techniques, and his interviews, articles, and letters provide a useful survey of the evolution of conservation treatments and attitudes.

Keywords

history of paintings conservation, 20th century, William Suhr, panel paintings, easel paintings, Mantegna, BEVA, Ruhemann



Figure 1. William Suhr (far left) in his Berlin studio, 1920s

The legacy of William Suhr: from Berlin to New York

Joyce Hill Stoner

Winterthur/UD Program in Art Conservation
Winterthur
DE 19735, USA
Fax: +1 302 888 4838
E-mail: jhstoner@udel.edu

I first met William Suhr in 1977 when my former professor at New York University, Lawrence Majewski, suggested I interview him for the Foundation of the American Institute for Conservation (FAIC) oral history file. I sensed immediately that he considered Suhr somewhat out of the mainstream of US conservation at the time. George Stout had even told me, 'Billy Suhr never kept records of any consequence.' However, the white haired, courtly, and larger-than-life connoisseur-conservator I encountered remains one of the most memorable of the 52 pioneers I have personally interviewed so far for the FAIC archive. I hasten to add that his black notebooks discussing each of his treatments at the Frick Collection are some of the most thorough and carefully photo-documented treatment records I have seen.

Most mid-century American conservators thought of William 'Billy' Suhr as a German immigrant to the US; however, his grandparents had built a log cabin in Wood County, Ohio, in which his mother was born. His parents were both actors, but his father had trouble with his hearing and had gone to Vienna to consult a famous ear doctor. The doctor was not able to solve the problem; Suhr's father gave up his profession but stayed on in Germany. Suhr was born a US citizen in Kreuzberg, Germany, on 31 March 1896, but did not see America until he was over 30. As a small child, Suhr was taken to museums on Sundays. He apprenticed to a stonemason for about three years, making tombstone monuments, 'specializing in beautiful Madonnas with folded hands holding palms.' He studied painting at the Royal Art Academy in Berlin, and Viennese art historian Max Deri introduced him to the restoration of paintings as a career (FAIC 1977).

From his private studio in Berlin in the 1920s, Suhr already had an international reputation and was a part of the notable art-historical milieu surrounding the Kaiser Friedrich Museum (KFM). KFM art historians known for their seminal approaches to connoisseurship and restoration, Max J Friedländer and Julius Held, interacted with Suhr and with Helmut Ruhemann and Johannes Hell. Hell and Ruhemann both later emigrated to London and became the centres of the two opposing camps represented in *The Burlington Magazine* cleaning controversy of the 1960s. Colin Agnew, the English dealer, brought Ralph Booth, the Detroit collector, to Suhr's studio in Berlin to treat Booth's paintings purchased through Agnew. William Valentiner, who had worked at the KFM, became the director of the Detroit Institute of Arts in 1924, and in 1927 brought Suhr to the USA. Friedländer authored *On Art and Connoisseurship*, and was called by Kenneth Clark 'the greatest living connoisseur of Northern European painting.' Held had briefly considered restoration as a career but moved to the USA and became an art historian renowned for his studies in 16th and 17th century Dutch and Flemish art. Suhr had helped to train Helmut Ruhemann, who became First Restorer at the KFM. Suhr, in Helmut Ruhemann's words, 'gave unselfish advice to his budding competitor.' Suhr referred to Ruhemann as his 'first pupil' in his oral history interview of 1977. The skills of Ruhemann and the conservation staff of the KFM were of such renown that Philip Hendy (curator at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and later Director of the National Gallery in London) had the painting of *St. Luke Drawing the Virgin* by Rogier van der Weyden shipped from Boston to Berlin for treatment in 1932–33. Suhr and Valentiner had already left Berlin in 1927, but the political circumstances in Germany beginning in 1933 led to the emigration of many of the other professionals of Berlin museums and universities, including Friedländer, Held, Hell, and Ruhemann. Suhr and Ruhemann stayed in touch, writing letters back and forth from 1925 to at least 1968.



Figure 2. William Suhr at the Clark Art Institute, 1960s

William Suhr arrived at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) in 1927; but owing to financial concerns he lived in the city full-time only about two years. The Suhr–Valentiner correspondence from 1927 through 1944 highlights the vicissitudes of the museum’s financial support from the city. Valentiner wrote in June 1927, ‘I am afraid that it will be very difficult to persuade the city officials to...spend more than \$2,500 or possibly \$3,000 for the position.’ Valentiner next telegraphed Suhr ‘after considerable difficulties position for restorer on one year contract for five thousand dollars approved by city salary corresponding to highest salary paid for curator.’ The next telegraph read: ‘delighted you are able to come November sorry city unwilling to pay traveling expenses.’ After a few years Suhr was working on contract for Detroit, visiting for three months a year for a salary of \$1000 a year. By 1935 he asked the Arts Commission to allow him to spend only a month of the year in Detroit for that salary but to be able to do more complex treatments ‘such as transferring a large picture for which I should need the help of a cabinet maker’ in his New York studio. He also asked for \$50 for materials, ‘canvas, varnishes, paint, etc.’ The reader can infer from the Suhr–Valentiner correspondence a reluctance from the city officials to pay for conservation treatment; Suhr wrote to Valentiner in 1936,

It seems so illogical that good business men who count on items of both upkeep and depreciation in connection with all other possessions, sometimes seem to wonder why a work of art needs care and attention...It seems so obvious that they would want to protect their initial investment by adequate funds for preserving the pictures. (Suhr Archives 1936)

For 50 years, from 1927 to 1977, Suhr used his studios at the DIA or in New York, as ‘a kind of headquarters’; he was asked by major museums and collectors in North America to ‘attend to their problems’ as few museums had in-house conservation facilities. He further noted in his 1977 interview:

Shortly after my arrival my services were called for by every museum in the Middle West. For instance, I found myself, during the summer heat in the St. Louis Museum, up in the attic putting down blisters on some of their paintings. That, as a matter of fact, was one of my main activities during these first years in America: putting down blisters, because there was no air conditioning at that time. ...I spent a great deal of time traveling taking care of blistering paintings like a traveling doctor tending to sick patients in the States and Canada. (FAIC 1977)

The Frick Collection in New York City opened in 1935, and Mortimer Clapp, the first Director, asked Suhr to begin that year as ‘the permanent restorer of the collection, with the freedom to accept any outside work he pleased.’ This arrangement made it possible for him to treat the Merode Altarpiece for the Metropolitan Museum, now housed in the Cloisters. He worked on paintings for

Albert Barnes both in Detroit and on site in Merion, Pennsylvania in the late 1920s. Barnes wrote about an El Greco painting, 'I shall have it systematically cleaned by the best restorer in the world, Suhr of Berlin, who is now in Detroit.' (Buckley 2003). Suhr's files document his work for Barnes, Walter Chrysler, the Clark collection in Williamstown, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the City Art Museum of St Louis, Chester Dale, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the de Young Museum in San Francisco, Lord Duveen, Edsel Ford, William Randolph Hearst, Samuel Kress, Robert Lehman, Paul Mellon, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Nemours collection in Delaware, Duncan Phillips, John D Rockefeller, Jr, the Taft House in Cincinnati, the Toledo Museum, the Thyssen Collection, Georges Wildenstein, and many others. Edgar Munhall of the Frick wrote that Suhr treated 89 of the paintings listed in Horst Gerson's Rembrandt catalogue (Munhall 1996).

Suhr's correspondence with museum directors provides a survey of types of treatments needed, attitudes toward cleaning and retouching, and Suhr's diplomacy with regard to his clients and their ability to see. In 1936 and again in 1944 he believed that for blisters 'I am more than ever convinced that the only lasting treatment in a case like this would be the transference' (to Valentiner 1936, to Burroughs 1944, SA). He explained to E P Richardson of Detroit in 1941 that 'a cradle might introduce new dangers.' In a letter to Barnes in February 1937, Suhr explained tissue facing and wax lining. He warned clients that the discoloured varnish might be performing a service: 'Cleaning the Faust picture may prove a disappointment because I think that with the dirt it might go as a Rubens, without it, it will show its weaknesses' (SA 1936). However, regarding another picture, he wrote to Valentiner in the same letter, 'it itches me to draw the curtain away.' Regarding aesthetics, he wrote Richardson, 'I dulled the varnish down...if the picture is hung tipped forward the reflections will not be too bothersome' (to EPR, SA 1946), and 'Here as always with pictures which have suffered, it was a matter of striking the balance between attenuating the losses and yet not doing too much. I hope I succeeded' (to EPR, SA 1949). In 1952 he bemoaned to Richardson the 'problem of lending pictures. It just doesn't do them any good.' In 1955: 'Works of art, especially pictures, should be seen in daylight, a living, changing light.' Suhr wrote to William A Milliken, the Director of the Cleveland Museum, in 1937,

I am sorry to hear that the Lippi misbehaves so badly. Pictures are very much like human beings and one never knows what they are going to do. I had hoped that, with our attempts to keep the atmosphere a little more humid, we might be able to check the progress of blistering.

In 1938 after cleaning a Pintoricchio painting for Milliken he noted, 'All the unnecessary "dressing up" which has come off leaves the picture in a much purer state, much more luminous and stronger in style.' Milliken left flowers by Suhr's easel, noting in a poem:

Suhr and Schulman [Suhr's assistant] pull aside a veil
Which hide the hidden truths
From less trained eyes'. (n.d., SA)

(Another museum assistant wrote a poem: 'Homage to Billy's Eyes.') Suhr was not biased against American paintings; to Perry Rathbone of St Louis he wrote 'The Bingham arrived—indeed a jolly picture. I confess a great weakness for them.' (SA 1942). Suhr was aware of the need for conservation research:

I am very conscious of the fact that our knowledge of the reasons for the defects in works of art and their treatment is not as advanced as it could be if the same amount of research had gone into such studies as was given to industrial problems...It is a slow advance and too often based on trial and error.

He lamented the self-promotion of some restorers; in the same 1942 letter to Clapp, he lamented the 'Hollywood influence' and an 'unhealthy desire for publicity,' and recent publications about conservation

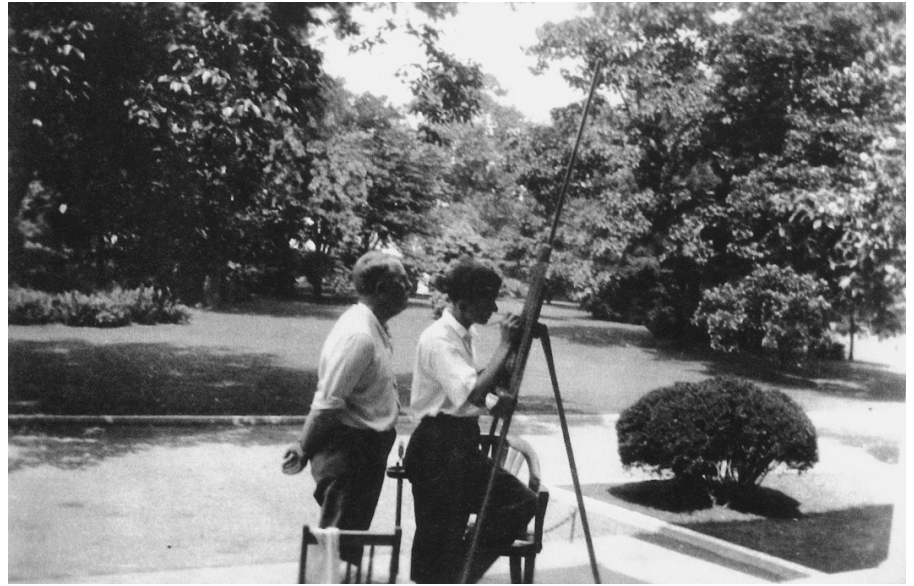


Figure 3. William Suhr with Albert Barnes looking over his shoulder, late 1920s

written in a pontifical manner and effectively supported by intriguing photographs, there are many wrong statements and half truths which merely befuddle the minds of the public and guardians of pictures. I would welcome it if a more critical and modest attitude would be propagated. (SA 1942)

However, Suhr kept up a healthy correspondence with other conservators and remained curious about new methods and materials throughout his career. His correspondence from 1925–1968 with Helmut Ruhemann discussed blister consolidation, brushes, that Germany supported museums better than the US did, the relative merits of acetone and ethanol for varnish removal, and the whitening of retouches, with the note:

The greatest service we can do one another is to tell each other when we happen to see anything that has gone wrong with the other's work, and you must promise me to do the same by me. (SA 1952)

Suhr also discussed the whitening of retouches and other issues with Hermann Kühn of the Doerner Institute in 1965 and 1971. His exchanges with George L Stout at the Fogg, from 1931 to 1936, discuss the Rome Conference, the Museum Directors' Association, pigment identification, transfers of panel paintings, Suhr's article for *Technical Studies*, the need for better chemical analysis, various adhesives, and problems with varnishes. Edward W Forbes asked Suhr to speak for the Art Technique Section of the American Association of Museums in 1934. Suhr wrote to Stout in 1934:

I must confess that reading of papers has never impressed me as being the most effective method of conducting a meeting of restorers. I should think that a round-table conference with discussion would be infinitely more stimulating and fruitful. (SA 1934)

Suhr received answers from Dr A van Schendel about relining adhesives and varnish mixtures used in the Rijksmuseum in 1951. James Roth of the Nelson Museum in Kansas City answered Suhr's questions about facings and Roth's own transfer methods in 1962. Dr Christian Wolters of Munich wrote back about PVA AYAB in 1962. In 1972 Suhr was investigating Xylamon through the Process Materials Corporation in New Jersey.

Improvements in climate control in US museums are emphasized by the fact that today's conservators are no longer so regularly involved in the treatment of 'blisters' on panel paintings as Suhr once was. A particularly notable occasion of

the consolidation of flaking paint occurred in connection with the 'Masterpieces of Italian Art' exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1939. The paintings in the exhibition, which traveled from San Francisco to the Museum of Modern Art (surprisingly) in 1940, were lent by the Mussolini-led Italian government. Suhr wrote several letters detailing his reactions to being told he was to set down dangerous blisters on *St. George* by Mantegna in only a few days time under the constant supervision of Mussolini's guards in November 1939:

I can hardly express my horror at seeing one of the outstanding pictures in art history...in such a deplorable condition....I still do not know how I finished in four days an amount of work which ordinarily would have occupied me at least two weeks. (letter to E Ventura, SA 1940)

The test of skill for a conservator in the mid-20th century was often the ability to supervise or to carry out transfers, also caused by the constant reactivity of panel paintings before climate control. Suhr noted in his 1977 interview:

Lord Duveen, the great English art dealer who probably did more to create American collections than anybody else, had very little idea of what could happen to his pictures. He had heard that the American climate did a great deal of harm to Italian popular panel paintings. So he had them transferred, wholesale, to canvas in Paris. He was simply not aware of the loss of the important surface texture in transferring a painting on *panel* to a *canvas* support. (FAIC 1977)

Suhr became involved with re-transferring many of Duveen's panel paintings back to solid supports to try to retrieve the mirror-like surfaces typical of paintings on panel. In 1977 he donated to our program many of the samples of Masonite panels he had prepared to receive the surface layers. (A Mr Gawelek was doing transfers for him in the 1950s.)

William Suhr at the Frick and Edward Waldo Forbes at the Fogg Art Museum introduced young art historians to the technical side of connoisseurship and caring for paintings. These two unique situations created a generation of conservation-friendly museum directors, curators, and administrators. Suhr's protégés included Thomas Baird, Richard Brown (Kimbell Museum), Kenneth Donahue, Alden Murray, Craig Hugh Smyth (Institute of Fine Arts, New York University), Alan Staley, Evan Turner (Philadelphia and Cleveland museums), and John Walsh (Getty Museum).

Suhr directly trained only a few pupils, including Helmut Ruhemann in Berlin and Charles Munch in New York, but influenced many conservators and art historians with his ideas and attitudes. Gustav Berger, who worked for William Suhr from 1964 to 1967, noted, 'Suhr asked me to formulate an adhesive that would be stronger than wax, free of the hazards of aqueous glue-paste, stick to oil paint, and be reversible.' The resulting adhesive, BEVA 371, is one of the most widely used painting conservation materials internationally.

William Suhr taught formally at Mills College for a 'residential summer school for men and women' in 1936. Alfred Neumeyer taught 'History of Art,' Lyonel Feininger taught 'Technique of Art,' and Suhr taught 'The Technique, Restoration, and Preservation of Paintings.' Suhr's 1½ inch thick booklet of teaching notes (FAIC Archive) is still useful for teaching today. He covered the history of media, the changes in pigments, the increased translucency of oil paint with ageing, the importance of travel to compare the actual air quality of Florence with that of Venice, the use of coloured grounds, the visual impact of emulsion paints, the cracking of paintings by Reynolds, brushstrokes and light sources used by various artists, and so on, up to and including the techniques of Reginald Marsh. In his section on restoration he notes that 'every case presents a different problem and the deciding factor is the tact, respect, and understanding of the individual restorer.' He discussed the importance of reversibility, humility, and written and photographic documentation. The battle he seemed to be fighting was against curators who objected to any retouchings, which he called the 'ultra-modern' or 'scientific' approach, noting, 'My main objection to this method is that it overlooks the artistic function of a painting by over-emphasizing its desirability as a cold record of style.'



Figure 4. William Suhr at work in the M H de Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco, ca. 1932, by Ansel Adams (1902–1984)

Suhr was also an artist himself and knew several contemporary artists. He was trained in stone carving and tempera painting and painted water colours of his extensive travels from Africa to the Himalayas until his death in 1984. Suhr told his pupils at Mills College that Oskar Kokoschka told him that he ‘regarded his paintings finished only after they had been left on his easel five years’ owing to the increasing translucency of oil paint. Suhr met Diego Rivera while the artist was painting the frescoes in Detroit in 1931. After they had taught together in 1936, Feininger wrote to Suhr a year later, mentioning their weekend in Nevada and Yosemite; ‘it begins to seem as though America had been a dream and William Suhr too good to be true’ (SA 1937). In the early 1960s Suhr visited with Andrew and Jamie Wyeth in Chadds Ford, PA. The Wyeths still remember and speak of Suhr’s unique presence, advice, and passion for the arts, including that it simply did not matter whether *The Polish Rider* was by Rembrandt or not; it was still a very great painting.

Conclusion

Although sometimes considered an ‘old-school restorer’ William Suhr was clearly a forerunner of most of today’s ethics and attitudes in treatment, preventive conservation, and understanding of conservation materials. His treatments in the 1960s of paintings in the Winterthur collection have stood up well, whereas treatments by other conservators of his era have had to be redone. His inpainting remains both excellent and fascinating in its restraint: for example, he inpainted only a portion of the flyspecks on a Peale portrait, leaving it looking healthy but not overtreated. His constant worries about blisters and transfers are happily no longer with us; however, his in-depth sympathy for artists’ techniques and the role of conservators has not often been surpassed. His career and archives remain revealing sources for understanding the evolution of 20th century conservation.

References

- Buckley, B, 2003, ‘The Barnes Foundation: The conservation history of a 20th-century Institution’, AIC lecture.
- FAIC, 1977, ‘Oral history interview by JHS, William Suhr’, Winterthur Museum Archives.
- Munhall, E, 1996, *Remembering Billy Suhr*, New York, private publication.
- Ruhemann, H, 1968, *The Cleaning of Paintings*, New York.
- Stoner, J H, 1981, ‘Pioneers in American museums: William Suhr’, *Museum News* 60 (1), 30–35.
- Suhr, W, 1932, ‘A built-up panel for blistered paintings on wood’, *Technical Studies in the Field of the Fine Arts*, 29–34.
- Suhr, W, 1957, ‘The restoration of the Merode altarpiece’, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* XVI, 140–144.
- SA (Suhr Archives), consulted courtesy of Henriette Suhr.

