

Saving paintings presents challenge

By Doug Whiteway

Entertainment

While most of us regard a painting as a permanent record of artistic achievement, likely to be as available to our great-great grandchildren as to our children, professional conservators, a worried group of people, see the works of man as frighteningly impermanent.

Paintings are fading, their training tells them. Or being eaten by acid or dehydrated by the air. Flaking away bit by bit, many paintings hold only the promise of being lost to time.

And often the artists themselves either don't or can't help the situation, according to Winnipeg conservator Charles Brandt.

Take Emily Carr. The acclaimed West Coast artist who died in 1945 was poor. So poor that she couldn't afford good quality artistic materials. She would sometimes thin her paint with gasoline. Or she would use cheap Manila paper or glue her works on paper to plywood. She was known to use white house paint. None of these materials guaranteed the permanency or durability of her works.

Consequently, many of them, says Brandt, are not at all in good shape these few decades later. But they are valuable, esthetically, historically and monetarily. They have to be saved.

Which is where people like Brandt come in.

'Bubbling all over'

Recently he received from a private collector in Calgary, *The Heart of the Forest*, a Carr work in oil on paper, valued at \$80,000. "It was 'bubbling all over'", says Brandt. "It had lifted. I had to take off the whole backing."

He did it inch by inch in a period of some 80 hours, on weekends and evenings away from his job as chief conservator of works on paper for the Provincial Archives. Carr had used a "really cheap"

Manila paper, said Brandt, who found it had been glued to a thick piece of cardboard. Using a bamboo spatula, he slowly peeled the cardboard off only to discover the original painting was dry mounted to yet another board.

Once this was removed, the painting was properly remounted on museum mounting board using a simple wheat starch paste that can be removed easily should the need ever arise. Where once the life of the painting was dangerously shortened, now he says it should last for hundreds of years.

300 works

In the two years he has been here, Brandt has privately restored some 300 works of art on paper, including those by such well-known locals as W. J. Phillips and Eric Bergman. American-born, Brandt began his career by studying biology at Cornell University, eventually taking his conservationist's interest in wildlife into the areas of civilized life, studying extensively in Europe and America before coming to Canada to work for the federal government's national museums programs. "I have a sense of vocation to conservation," he says.

For this reason, Brandt has worried about a lack of concern among some artists for their materials. Some painters have either designed their work to be impermanent or else they have not wanted to preserve their early and less accomplished work. However, he says, there has been a renewed interest among artists lately in the permanence of their work and concern over finding

appropriate durable acid-free papers.

He says consumers, on buying works of art, are not careful to frame the work for durability; nor, he says, are some framing shops in the city knowledgeable about materials or diligent enough to use them properly.

However, Brandt remains undaunted in face of the need for restoration. "I've handled a lot of stuff," he says. "If you have the time and patience you can do almost anything."

Charles Brandt completes his restoration job on *The Heart of the Forest*, an Emily Carr work in oil on paper.

