

Expert finds that restoring art helps restore owners, too

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Molly Reid, The Times-Picayune

Today, she is the president and founder of one of the only multi-disciplinary art restoration houses in the South, but 18 years ago, Blake Vonder Haar was between careers, waiting in a Paris subway station and reading a magazine.



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Blake Vonder Haar works on a painting at her New Orleans Conservation Guild studio.

She had just sold her business that distributed animated films and was "on a sabbatical -- a break to decide what to do next" when she saw an article that appealed to her background as a fine art major in college.

"Newsweek magazine had a story about (art) restoration," Vonder Haar said. "I thought, 'Wow, this is really interesting.'"

It was interesting enough that Vonder Haar spent the next year searching for the right program to enter the restoration field. She settled on a two-year London program and apprenticeship, which included a stint in Florence, Italy.

After completing her first restoration project early in the program, she knew she had found her life's work, she said.

"It was as if everything in my life had come together in some way -- business, art, antiques," she said.

Restoration center

One year after finishing her apprenticeship and moving back to the United States, Vonder Haar established the New Orleans Conservation Guild Inc. here with the intention of building on the city's solid reputation as a center of furniture restoration.

"I was pretty well-received, because at the time, there weren't a whole lot of people doing (art restoration)," Vonder Haar said. "Furniture restoration is a whole different thing."

In addition, New Orleans provided the fledgling conservation house with a strong, built-in market of art lovers, she said.

"A lot of it is the antique stuff that people have inherited and need maintenance for," she said. "There's a huge market in regional art collecting. That's actually become a specialty of ours."

Consultation for collectors and normal maintenance -- eliminating the effects of smoke, dirt and time on paintings -- were Vonder Haar's main areas of work until the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina opened the business up to a "whole new world of problems," she said.

Work poured in, in the form of pieces as different as their owners and all afflicted by any combination of water damage, mold, chemical damage, muck or tearing.

"All the chemicals in the floodwaters -- these fragile, organic paintings were sitting in these things for weeks," Vonder Haar said.

"Not only did (the storm) bring us new challenges, but it brought us a whole new set of clientele. It didn't have to be of monetary value, just sentimental value."

A flood of work

To meet demand, the conservation guild, flooded with both jobs and offers of help from restorers around the world, upped its staffing to 40 people.

Since Katrina, it has completed more than 6,000 restoration jobs and has had a 98 percent success rate, with success measured as "a significant reversal of damage," Vonder Haar said.

Normal maintenance procedures typically include using chemical solutions, applied with small cotton swabs one square inch at a time, to remove accumulated dirt, grime and varnish.

Cracks and tears would be sealed and covered with retouch paint, which is different from regular oil paint in that "it's not going to change color when it dries," Vonder Haar said.

"My work will be completely, easily reversible. That's one of the differences between an amateur and a professional. You want your work to come off with the next restoration."

With the Katrina pieces, though, "it wasn't just a simple tear or dirt, but chemicals and mold," she said.

In some cases, chemicals in the floodwater would change the chemical makeup of the pigments in paint, resulting in "shifting of colors" that was irreversible, Vonder Haar said.

In many instances, water damage caused canvases to shrink, forcing the layers of paint and varnish on top to wrinkle and crack in an effect called cupping.

To fix it, Vonder Haar and her team would apply a new substrate and adhesive to the piece, and use a hot table, iron and special vacuum to smooth out the layer of paint.

Whole again

Aside from the technical challenges, handling clients' fragile emotions, especially in regard to cherished pieces of art, was "very difficult, physically and emotionally," Vonder Haar said. "Often, all they had left in the home was what was hanging on the walls."

The conservation guild finished clearing its backlog of Katrina paintings just nine months ago, and more than 200 pieces of Katrina-damaged paper -- birth certificates, Bibles and sentimental scraps -- still await treatment.

"Paper is much more time-consuming," Vonder Haar explained. "It's much more fragile."

The past five years of emotionally draining work, however, have given new meaning to Vonder Haar's appreciation for her work, she said.

"You feel like you have a much more important role in recovery," she said. "You're helping people feel whole again."

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THE ARTIST: Blake Vonder Haar

HER CRAFT: Fine art restoration

YEARS IN THE TRADE: 14

WHY SHE LOVES IT: 'I like that there's a great sense of accomplishment when you finish a project,' Vonder Haar says.