



## **Conservation; Reversing the Ravages of Time**



Compare the photograph of our painting of Sam Houston on the left with the one on the right. A professional conservator can stabilize museum objects and reverse the effects of time, ensuring that they will continue to benefit future generations. The investment by individual donors and businesses

In early 2017, with support from the family of J. Fred Bucy III of Fischer, Texas, the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame undertook a project to preserve an important oil painting of Sam Houston. James Fowler donated the painting in honor of the opening of the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame. Houston declared it to be his favorite likeness—strong praise from the man who led Texas through the revolution, served twice as President of the Republic of Texas; a US Senator and the only person in US history to have served as governor of two states.

The work was entrusted to Anne Zanikos Art Conservation in San Antonio, Texas. Ms. Zanikos began by carefully photographing, measuring and documenting the condition of the painting. This provided a benchmark for the conservation work and determined the most appropriate course of treatment

After documentation superficial layers of grime, old repairs and yellowed varnish were painstakingly removed over many hours using carefully chosen solvents, small tools akin to dental tools and 'Q-tip' swabs. The photograph at to left of this page was taken after the layers of grime and old, poor quality repairs were removed.

Time is the enemy of all objects in museum collections; deterioration begins when an item is created and accelerates with use. Canvas sags from gravity. The oil lamps and candles of our ancestors created smoke that settled on paint. Varnish darkens after exposure to light. Changes in temperature and humidity cause paint and canvas to expand and contract. No matter how carefully objects are handled and stored, time takes an inevitable toll. Eventually, paintings and museum objects require conservation to reverse these effects and stabilize them.

So what exactly is conservation? According to the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, conservation is any set of “actions taken toward the long-term preservation of cultural property. Conservation activities include examination, documentation, treatment, and preventative care, supported by research and education.”<sup>1</sup>

Most conservators graduate from college with dual degrees in science and art. The recommended courses are the same as pre-medical students (biology, chemistry, organic chemistry, and at least one other science elective) and an art major, usually in painting, drawing or another fine art specialty. After this intense course of education, conservators then must complete at least a year of apprenticeship under a practicing conservator. Once those requirements are met, a conservator usually applies to one of six graduate programs in the United States or others abroad in countries such as Great Britain, Italy and

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<sup>1</sup> (American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, 2017)

France. Graduates completing a one to four year course of study earn a Master of Science degree with concentration in a specific type of cultural property.

Painting conservators understand the chemical and material properties of paints, paint mediums, the woods used for frames and stretcher bars, and how a painter of a given era would normally prepare canvas, apply paint, and seal the paintings. This specialized knowledge allows a conservator to effectively clean, consolidate and protect a painting from future damage.

We hope that our readers will consider helping the museum fund preservation of other precious artifacts of Texas history.

--- Mary McCarthy, Collections Assistant