

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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Three mural-size paintings by Monet, damaged by bombardment in World War II, are now being restored in a Manhattan warehouse prior to their first American showing at the Museum of Modern Art in November. Caroline K. Keck, well-known conservationist is in charge of the work on the 6 1/2 x 14 foot paintings which are so large and fragile that four men are required to lift and turn each one.

The paintings form a triptych and are from the famous French artist's Waterlily series. They replace in the Museum Collections the single Waterlilies painting destroyed in a fire at the Museum last year. Painted shortly after World War I, the newly acquired paintings remained in Monet's studios in Giverny until the mid-1950s. During 1944 Giverny suffered bombardment and many of the big paintings were damaged.

Major damage to the triptych, according to Mrs. Keck, were cuts in the canvas made by falling glass and metal fragments, weather exposure, dust and dirt. Fortunately, says the expert, who is consultant on conservation for the Museum of Modern Art and the Brooklyn Museum, the total amount of damage was not extensive and the cuts were relatively sharp-edged so that the loss of paint was minimum.

Today, each has been lined, infused with twelve pounds of wax resin, cleaned front and back, re-stretched and re-framed and the original colors are again fresh and clear. They are in the best condition they have been in since Monet finished them in his studio at Giverny more than thirty-five years ago. After they are returned to the Museum Mrs. Keck will complete the job by re-touching or in-painting the few areas of paint loss.

First step in the restoration process was to cover the surface with sheets of handmade Japan paper applied with a clear white paste. This was done to protect the paint which was powder dry and fragile. Dried out Japan paper protects the surface so that the paintings can be laid face down on a specially constructed table.

Thirty years of accumulated dirt was vacuumed from the back of the canvases. The amateurish patches, including adhesive tape, which had been used to mend the cuts were removed. Each cut was rejoined, thread to thread with polyvinyl emulsion and Japan tissue, built in layers and allowed to dry. These repairs were then sanded to the original canvas until all that remained of them were the thin pencil lines of repair. The Monets were then infused with wax resin, applied in a melted state, to reattach the paint film and give it added protection against humidity change. Thirty-six pounds of wax was used in this process. A piece of double weave natural linen was applied to the back of the original canvas over this wax for support and solidity.

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Once lined, the paintings were lifted off the work table and the Japan tissue facing was gently sponged from the surface. Dirt and grime came away too and the original colors emerged, fresh and undisturbed.

Mrs. Keck had a staff of six assistants on the project which was one of the largest she has ever undertaken. Andrew Olah, Museum of Modern Art carpenter, constructed strainers and final stretchers which made it possible to work safely on the pictures. The Seven Santini Brothers staff of the warehouse constructed the special working table in which precise level was important particularly in the waxing process.

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