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William Suhr has restored paintings for major museums on both sides of the ocean for nearly 60 years. He was born in Kreuzberg, Germany, on March 31, 1896. His grandfather had emigrated to North America, cleared land and built a log cabin in Ohio and became a United States citizen. His father, born in Milwaukee, retained that citizenship when he went to Germany to become an actor. William Suhr, an American citizen by birth, was over 30 years old before he saw the United States.

W. R. Valentiner went to Berlin in 1927 in search of a restorer of paintings and invited William Suhr to come to the Detroit Institute of Arts. Suhr accepted. In 1933 he moved from Detroit to New York and became the conservator of the Frick Collection for over 40 years. He has also cared for the paintings in private collections and museums in Cleveland, Toledo, Cincinnati, New York, Detroit, San Francisco, Chicago and St. Louis. "To the skills and understanding of the great restorers (and William Suhr made himself one), lovers of art owe an untold debt," wrote E. P. Richardson.

This interview is excerpted from an oral biography of William Suhr in the Foundation of the American Institute for Conservation (FAIC) Archive housed at Winterthur Museum.

I understand that your parents were Americans. Why did you begin your career in Germany?

Yes, both were Americans. In 1850 my grandparents built a log cabin in Wood County, Ohio, in which my mother was born; my father was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. My father had trouble with his hearing and when he was about 25 years old went to Vienna, where there was a famous ear doctor, but he could not help him, and, in time, my father became completely deaf. He had to give up his profession and stayed on in Germany. He was always very interested in art, and as a small child, I was taken to museums on Sundays—it became part of my upbringing. Showing some talents, I started out as a sculptor apprenticed to a stonemason for about three years. I made tombstone monuments, "specializing" in beautiful madonnas with folded hands holding palms. Later I attended the Royal Art Academy in Berlin to study painting—nearly starving to death while studying there. The then famous art historian Max Déri befriended me and introduced me to the restoration of paintings, as a means of livelihood.

Were you about 20 years old then?

About that. You see, there were no schools for restoration at that time. The profession was kept in families as a secret. Hauser, a very famous restorer in Central Europe, didn’t accept any pupils—only his son. You had to acquire skill by practice and whatever one was able to learn by trial and experiments.

In a few years I had earned quite a reputation among European collectors and museums. In fact, Colin Agnew, the English dealer, brought Ralph Booth, the Detroit collector, to my studio in Berlin where I attended to paintings Booth had acquired from Agnew. It was in 1927 that W. R. Valentiner, director of the Detroit Institute of Arts, called me to his museum as its permanent conservator. I stayed with the Detroit Institute of Arts for about five years, using my studio in the museum as a kind of headquarters; soon I was asked by practically every museum and collector in the States and Canada to attend to their problems. In those days hardly any museum had its own restorer, or to use more elegant terms, conservation department or laboratory.

When I came here [the United States] I had expected to find my profession more developed; the systematic study of conservation was, however, just beginning, under the guidance of Paul Sachs, Edward Waldo Forbes, George Stout and R. J. Gettens.

When did you begin work at the Frick?

In 1935 the first director of the Frick Collection, Mortimer Clapp—who actually instigated and oversaw the transformation of the building on Fifth Avenue into a museum—asked me to become the permanent restorer (conservator) of the collection, with the freedom to accept any outside work I pleased. This made it possible for the Metropolitan Museum to call on me for the restoration of the Merode Altarpiece, now housed in the Cloisters. [See the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Bulletin XVI, no. 4.] I held the

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position at the Frick for more than 40 years.

And you also did work for a number of museums in the Midwest...!

For many years I took care of all the paintings in the Cleveland and Toledo museums. In addition, I found myself, during the summer heat, in the St. Louis Museum attic putting down blisters on some of its paintings. That, as a matter of fact, was one of my main activities during those first years in America—putting down blisters—because there was no air conditioning at that time, the lack of which caused cracking and paint blisters in panel and canvas pictures. I spent a great deal of time traveling in the States and Canada, taking care of blistering paintings like a traveling doctor tending to sick patients.

*Did you have a lot to do with teaching art historians about proper restoration techniques?*

Yes. The Frick Collection had and has a program of selecting outstanding young art historians as lecturers and assistant curators. I took these young people (Thomas Baird, Richard Brown, Kenneth Donahue, Alden Murray, Craig Hugh Smyth, Alan Staley, Evan Turner, John Walsh) under my wing, introducing them to the mysteries of my profession, acquainting them with the care of works of art.

Quite a number of them have become museum directors. This was the extent of my “teaching”... no, I forgot, I did teach at Mills College, California, in 1936 with Alfred Neumeyer and Lyonel Feininger. In the course of my long activity, however, I had several people as my assistants who later went out on their own. They, indeed, received training. I presume I was a hard taskmaster.

*Did you train Helmut Ruhemann before coming to America?*

When Ruhemann, a painter by profession, came to Berlin he was somewhat lost. A mutual friend suggested that he learn restoring in my studio. He became my first pupil, so to speak. Later he went to London and became one of the restorers at the National Gallery.

*Did he seem to be a promising pupil right away?*


*Our conservation students read that regularly. We have also found your Frick records extremely useful.*

Thank you. At the Frick I kept extensive records of the treatment of every picture I worked on—that means practically all the paintings the Frick owns. These extensive records including photos are used by art students.

*What do you look for in someone who wants to work with you? An art history background! The skill in their hands!*

Manual skill. Of course training as a painter, color sense, good eye and empathy. But more than that, his or her ethical qualifications—humility, respect for the work of art, love of art—and a sense of responsibility. I would like to mention another aspect of teaching. Few of the old generations of art historians, museum curators and surely few dealers knew anything about technical problems, paint techniques, what material went into the making of old masters or how to preserve them. May I give an example? 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. Yes, he had heard that the American climate did a great deal of harm to Italian poplar 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. A panel surface acquires a very distinct panel crackle system that, in time, will clash with a newly developed canvas crackle. In fact, the intrinsic character of the paint film on a panel picture transferred to canvas is being altered.

After a short time of working with Duveen, I suggested adopting a different treatment for his Italian panels. [Mind you, all this before air conditioning prevented the harm climatic...](MUSEUM NEWS)
conditions did to Italian panel paintings. This was a treatment I had developed over years of experimentation—transferring the paint film to a specially constructed panel support that is much less susceptible to contraction and expansion under adverse climatic conditions. A great deal of my activities involved retransferring Duveen's panel pictures, then on canvas, back to panel.

*How did you feel about the 1947 National Gallery, London, cleaning controversy?*

Cleaning and too much cleaning were the points of these attacks. Maybe I should say a little more about this controversy, which was a somewhat more alarming repetition of a similar upheaval about 100 years earlier. In general, the culprit in these disputes is rarely the paint film itself, but mainly the surface film—the varnish. All natural varnishes darken in time and acquire an opacity as well as the "golden glow"—so loved in French museums and taken as the original intention of the artist, which is and was rarely the case. Of course, there exists what is known as a glaze, a transparent colored thin paint film used by painters in certain periods in certain areas of a painting. Even today there are hot debates about when, where and if they were used. Very difficult and elaborate scientific examinations might show whether they were actually applied by the author or if they are later additions or just discolored, old varnishes. At any rate museum visitors had become accustomed to this "golden glow" and associated it with the original paint film.

Now, suddenly they were confronted with a "cleaned" painting. Cold—all blues bluer, glaring con-
of rose madder in English paintings of the 18th century—Reynolds even spoke of it himself. And later the use of tar colors, as in Ryders and other painters of the late 19th century. There is undoubtedly an improvement in today’s materials. As far as the way in which a painting is to be restored, there are fundamental changes. Throughout the ages, the idea had been to put a faded, damaged, ruined painting back into the same condition in which, presumably, the author left it finished on his easel. To correct any damage, any defect and even “beautify” it. Still, in the first years of my activity museums and surely collectors, and consequently dealers, demanded works of art to put back into a “perfect state,” which too often meant, in the case of paintings, totally repainting. The restorer had to be a painter, not a creative artist, but an imitator, a chameleon. One day he had to be Botticelli, the next Boucher, Watteau, Rembrandt, Rubens.

As I have emphasized time and again, it is to me so much a matter of the qualification of the individual restorer. It is important to know technique and all the technical means available, but the main thing is still the ability of the man or woman. It means, then, that the selection and screening of gifted students are prerequisites to progress. You can teach certain ground rules. The materials are available to everyone, but the question is still how they are used. Again and again I say it is the reverence for the work of art, humility is the important thing. And one fundamental rule is to be observed: Whatever is being done to a painting, except of course cleaning, should be reversible without harm to the painting.

What should be done about incompetent practitioners?

They should be hanged! I do not know if there is anything that can be done. It is the same in the medical profession—somebody can be excellent in the laboratory, but in the treatment of a human being he might be a complete failure because he does not have bedside manners, so necessary for a good doctor, a healer. A restorer must feel by instinct what is needed, where and how far to go.

Do you inpaint with synthetics?

Yes. Actually I paint with alcohol, pigment in alcohol, and then spray with polyvinyl acetate. But I know that in the Frick, for instance, there are paintings that I did 40 years ago using commercial oil paint with the oil withdrawn as much as possible and pure turpentine as medium. They have
stood up perfectly well. I can observe them today in the Frick—no change. This is the strange thing, often seemingly unstable materials, if you use them knowingly, will do what one wants them to do without disadvantage. Again, it depends on the man who does it.

You say "man", have you met a female restorer whom you feel . . .

As a matter of fact, I think women are much more gifted because of their empathy, their natural ability to project themselves into something else. Isn’t that what a restorer has to do? I think women are, by nature, much better restorers than men, and they have much more patience, as a rule.

I understand that you also enjoy gardening [Suhr’s extensive garden was featured in Mein Schöner Garten March 1979, and House and Garden, November 1980], mountain climbing and traveling. You recently returned from Tunisia. Why did you choose to visit Tunisia?

To see large numbers of Roman remains, buildings and preserved mosaics. I have been in the Himalayas climbing. Climbing is my great passion. As I said, I am an insatiable sightseer. I have been four times in India and have been on many safaris. I did the first safari when it was still a difficult and dangerous thing.

Do you go to Europe often . . . to see exhibitions!

I go to Europe every year. If there is an exceptional exhibition, I will go to see it.

I understand that an exhibition of watercolors from all your travels is planned. When will this be held?

That is in the hands of the Almighty!