

METAPHYSICS OF ART MASSART'S 150TH THE CURRENT'S: *IN THE GARDEN* MICHELE JOHNSEN

art

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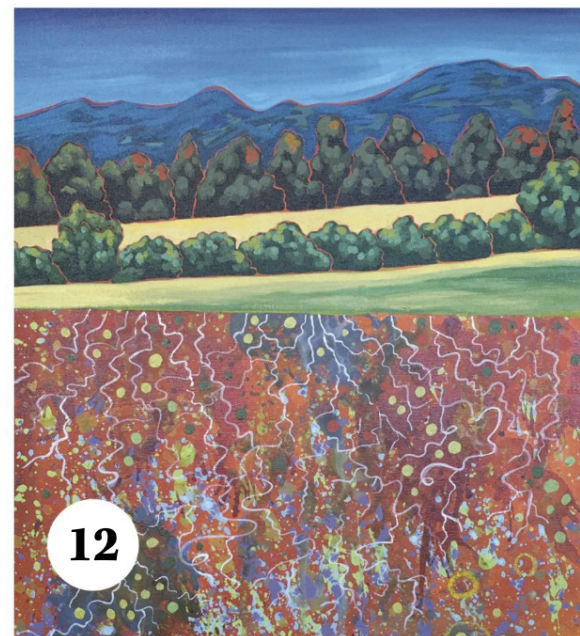
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By Charles Bonenti

Troy Amuso



Troy Amuso entered the realm of painting conservation at age fourteen. At sixty-one, it's become his life's work. An art enthusiast and A-student in his hometown of Mount Kisco, NY, in 1977 Amuso was introduced by a family friend to Dutch conservator Yan Vanderviver as an after-school helper.

"I did not work on paintings, but he gave me odd jobs beyond sweeping the floor," Amuso said. "I was fascinated."

A few years later, he was prepping paintings for treatment and taking canvases off stretchers. At seventeen, he was given a painting to frame and told afterwards that it was by English artist J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851). "It was a big moment," he declared. "That set my course."

Amuso studied at New York's School of Visual Arts and landed jobs at conservation studios in New York, Connecticut, and Los Angeles, where he honed his skills and established his credentials as a professional painting conservator.

In 1995, he and his wife, Denise DiGrigoli, a marketing consultant, established Troy Fine Arts Services Inc., in Fairfield, Connecticut.

Two years ago, they expanded into the art-rich Berkshires, buying a house in Ashley Falls and opening a satellite studio.

It's "a niche business," Amuso explained, serving private museums, collectors and art lovers. Oil paintings are his primary focus. He also lectures around the region.

"I love sharing how restoration preserves our history though paintings that will be otherwise lost," he shared.

It was at one such lecture in November 2023 at Berkshire Community College in Pittsfield, MA, that this writer first met Amuso. Our Studio Visit became a three-act production, with a telephone interview after the lecture and a subsequent virtual visit to Fairfield.

Painting *conservation*, he explained, is mainly cleaning and re-varnishing, while *restoration* may

involve surgically repairing damaged canvases. All work, he noted, has to be reversible and must not damage the original, according to the American Institute for Conservation code of ethics.

Artworks owned by everyday art collectors are more vulnerable, he said, to "the havoc of environmental effects" than those kept in climate-controlled conditions at major museums.

Among the damaging effects he cited: sunlight that fades colors; heat that dries and cracks paint surfaces; damp that rots canvas and paper; smoke that discolors with soot; and aging that weakens an artwork's structure.

Amuso cautioned against hanging paintings over fireplaces or storing them in a basement or

plate with a sheet of acetate over it. The edges of the overlay are sealed and a compressor draws the air out, creating a vacuum that gently presses the acetate onto the warmed paint/adhesive layers, flattening them against the canvas. A worn canvas can also be "relined" to a new one by a similar process.

Amuso repairs paintings of all styles, time periods and subjects because the baseline process is essentially the same, yet he studies each maker's methods to accurately recapture how the artist intended the artwork to look.

An example he uses in his lectures and on his website is an 1854 oil portrait of Pittsfield mill owner Thaddeus Clapp. It passed through generations, until a hurricane destroyed one heir's house severely damaging the portrait. It was wrapped in newspaper and stored for decades before a descendant took it to Amuso. Extensive work, he said, "brought it back to good health ... It looked great when it left."

"I can restore anything if the client has the emotional commitment along with the financial resources to do so." On

fees, Amuso declined to generalize, saying he has to study a painting's condition before providing a free, detailed estimate. "Some of the most extensive restorations have been for sentimental rather than street value."

History repeats as his daughter, Ava, twenty-one, joined his practice part time as a junior apprentice.

"She doesn't know if she wants to be a conservator," he said, "but I love her to be involved. She is the only one who touches paintings besides me. She's got my DNA."

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Above: A before and after look at an early 19th century still life painting (artist unknown), oil on canvas. It was severely damaged by heat and smoke in a house fire. Amuso was able to fully restore it back to a healthy state. **Top:** A portrait of Troy Amuso. Images courtesy of Troy Amuso.

attic where temperatures and humidity fluctuate. For surface cleaning, he advised a feather duster.

During the virtual visit through his studio, Amuso toured his workspace and tools, housed in an area the size of a two-and-a-half-car garage.

Ventilation is crucial, he said, to exhaust the fumes of solvents used to clean and remove varnishes. Before such health hazards were addressed, conservators often suffered skin or respiratory reactions.

"I wear an aerator mask with certain solvents," he explained. Portable tabletop fans exhaust fumes from close workspaces. Correct lighting is essential for accurate color coordination. He combines fluorescent and halogen fixtures to approximate natural light.

A "hot table" is useful to repair damaged paint surfaces. The artwork is placed face up on a heat