



INTERVIEW WITH LISA ROSEN

by [Claire Cushman](#) (MFA 2015)

“People tend to think that “golden” (more like murky) hues of older paintings were the artists’ original colors,” says Lisa Rosen, director of [Fine Art Restoration](#). “But this isn’t the case. The further back in time you go, the richer and more vibrant the colors were. Color screamed MONEY. It’s just that the varnish used to cover the paintings has become severely discolored over time.”



Cleaning the ceiling of the Chelsea Hotel Office

Lisa Rosen has been restoring fine art for over three decades. In 1984, she moved to Rome, Italy, and began as an apprentice. She learned the techniques of a wide variety of media, from frescoes to ceramics, from mosaics to marble. And of course, oil paintings. For the next 16 years, Rosen honed her skills working on masterpieces in churches, museums and private estates throughout Italy. In 2000, Rosen returned to the United States and opened her own studio in New York City. Rosen specializes in oil paintings on canvas or panel from any period. So when the

Academy needed a painting restored, we knew just the lady to call. In early June, Lisa and a handful of Academy students restored "Merovingian Funeral," by Belgian artist Louis Charles Van Dievort (1899). The painting is part of the Academy's permanent collection, and has been exhibited in the lobby of 111 Franklin for almost 10 years.

Below, Lisa answers some questions about the restoration at the Academy, and her path to this exciting and challenging career.

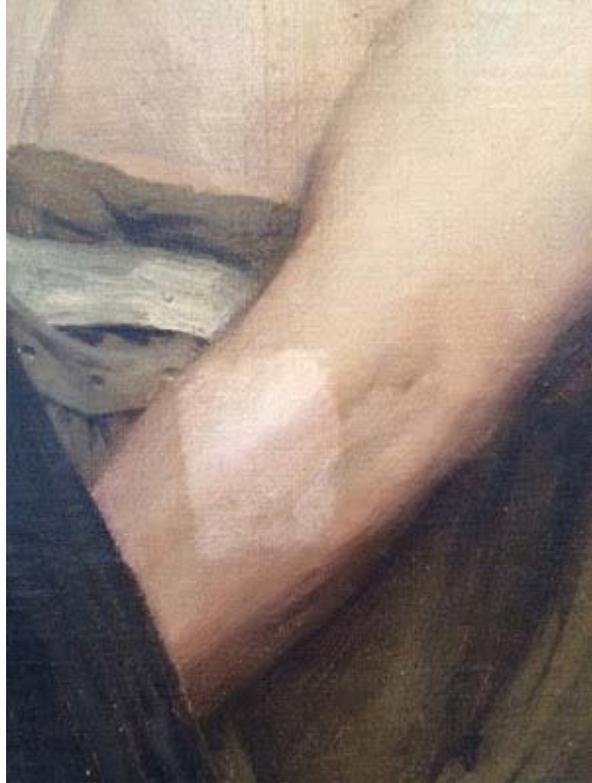
What were the issues with "Merovingian Funeral"?

I noticed the wonderfully large painting (16 x 8') on the main floor of the Academy several years ago. It depicts a Merovingian funeral. The Merovingians ruled a region in what is today's France, from approximately 500 to 800 AD. I couldn't find out much about Mr. Van Dievort, except that he studied in Paris at L'Ecole des Beaux Arts.

In this painting, the layer of varnish that covered the work was severely discolored, as though the original paint surface was wearing a pair of yellow-brown sunglasses. This patina was falsifying all the colors – the blues seemed green, whites seemed yellow, reds seemed brown, etc. The canvas had a 3x3 inch hole in the bottom right quadrant. There was also some flaking of the paint in various areas.

Can you describe the restoration process for this painting?

In restoration, a 'cleaning', aside from the first removal of surface grime and soot, means the removal of this discolored varnish. It is very exciting to watch as the yellow/brown melts away under your cotton swab and the original jewel-like colors are revealed.

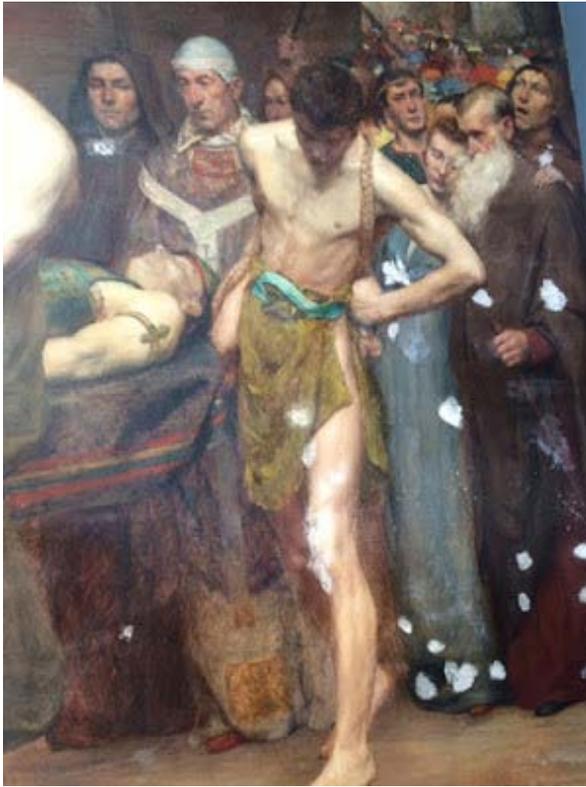


Detail of Cleaning

Most old paintings that have been varnished in the past suffer from this discoloring. (Mastic and Damaar varnishes yellow rather quickly. Today's new synthetic resins do not yellow.)

For the rip, we used a heated spatula to apply a resin patch with Beva (a gel adhesive) and Pe-cap (a polyester fabric). All painting restoration has to be easily removable for future restorers without harming the original. Beva is fantastic, because it is painlessly reversible.

Once the patch on the back was dry and secure, we turned the painting over to 'fill' the space created by the now adhered rip on the paint surface. For filler we used stucco (a plaster-like substance mixed with resin, which allows for movement in the canvas). Once dry, the stucco



"Merovingian Funeral" with stucco fills – midway through restoration

was lightly sanded to re-create the exact same level of the surrounding paint surface. For the chips and deep scratches, we followed the same method: fill and sand.

Once the painting was clean and the chips, rips, and tears were filled, we used watercolor to 'dirty' the bright white of the stucco. If this had not been done we would never have succeeded in getting the colors right when retouching. The white stucco would have glowed through the in-painting.

We laid the painting flat, brushed gloss varnish over the entire painting, and allowed it to dry.

Next came retouching/in-painting. Like cleaning, this part provides a most satisfying feeling! One in-paints only in the stucco areas where the original paint is missing.

Tiny dots of color are placed next to each other, using a Series 7 sable brush and Maimeri retouching colors.

When we were satisfied with the final results, we applied the final coat of gloss varnish to the entire painting, and allowed it to dry overnight.

How did you become interested in art restoration?

When I was 13, during my summer vacation to LA, I was taken on a tour of the restoration laboratory at the Getty Art Museum in Malibu. I remember thinking as I walked through, "THIS is what I want to do when I grow up!" When I got back to NYC, I told my mother. Certainly to get me out of her hair, she suggested that I write to museums (in places where we had friends/family) to ask if they would take a volunteer for the following Summer. Out of all the museums I wrote to, the only one that responded "yes" was the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, in Copenhagen. I saved all of my babysitting money that year, bought the plane ticket and set off to stay with



Applying a patch with Beva



The rip.

our Danish friends. My mother is pretty brilliant! **I'm assuming it was a good experience?**

For one month, I was in heaven. The lab was in the basement of the museum. I would sit at the sink, wearing a white lab coat (and braces on my teeth), feeling very grown up. I carefully washed shards of Etruscan pottery. A week before I was to leave, the director of restoration, Dr. Johansen, said "Please come early tomorrow, as we have a

going away present for you." In the morning, the real assistants and I stood in our white coats around a large worktable. On a pulley above us was a huge 'thing' covered by a tarp. Grinning, as he slowly lowered the ropes, he said, "You have 'graduated' – and for your final week you may start the cleaning of.....THIS..." He pulled off the tarp to reveal a colossal head of the Roman emperor Titus. Well, I was in love.

When I think back on their generosity, I often cry. It was so kind of them to say 'yes' to a 10th grader, an American no less, to allow me to come and basically take time away from their own work so that they could show me the ropes. When possible, I try to give back in a similar way.



Church of Saint Ignatius Loyola, Park Avenue, NYC.

How did you proceed with restoration after that month?

Years later, at the age of 25, I settled in Rome, Italy. I began as an apprentice, emptying slosh buckets up and down church scaffolds and helping in the studio with small jobs for a very long time AND eating loads of lentil beans. I now know that this was a test of sorts, to see how serious I was. I saw several people leave after months of the same.

Each work of art is so different from the next, so restoration is a continual learning experience. Within four years, the studio started to pay me. Four years after that I

branched out with a partner. We worked all over Italy – public churches, private villas and palaces. It was amazing. I stayed 17 years.

I was getting older and was still eating too many lentils (read: broke). In Italy, the restorer almost always has to advance the money for scaffolding. The state pays you in instalments over a period of 3 years. We never broke even. So with all the glory of touching beautiful objects in the most sublime places, I was eventually swayed back home by filthy lucre.

I returned to New York City in 2000. I made cold-calls to galleries, private dealers, anyone that would look at my 'book' of past restoration work. Little by little, by word of mouth and my [website](#), I built up a steady clientele. I can proudly say that I haven't had lentils in a very long time! I love my work.

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