

CULTURE

Another Painting Bungled, Here's How Not To Disfigure Art With Restoration

BY **ANDREW WHALEN** ON 6/25/20 AT 2:33 PM EDT



A private art collector's copy of "The Immaculate Conception of El Escorial" by Spanish painter Bartolomé Esteban Murillo was disfigured after a furniture restorer's efforts to clean the painting resulted in a blurry, ill-proportioned recreation painted over of the Virgin Mary's face.



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The original is on the left. The two attempts at "restoring" it are on the right. Ouch.

"Experts call for regulation after latest botched art restoration in Spain: Immaculate Conception painting by Murillo reportedly cleaned by furniture restorer."

theguardian.com/artanddesign/2...



3:54 PM · Jun 22, 2020



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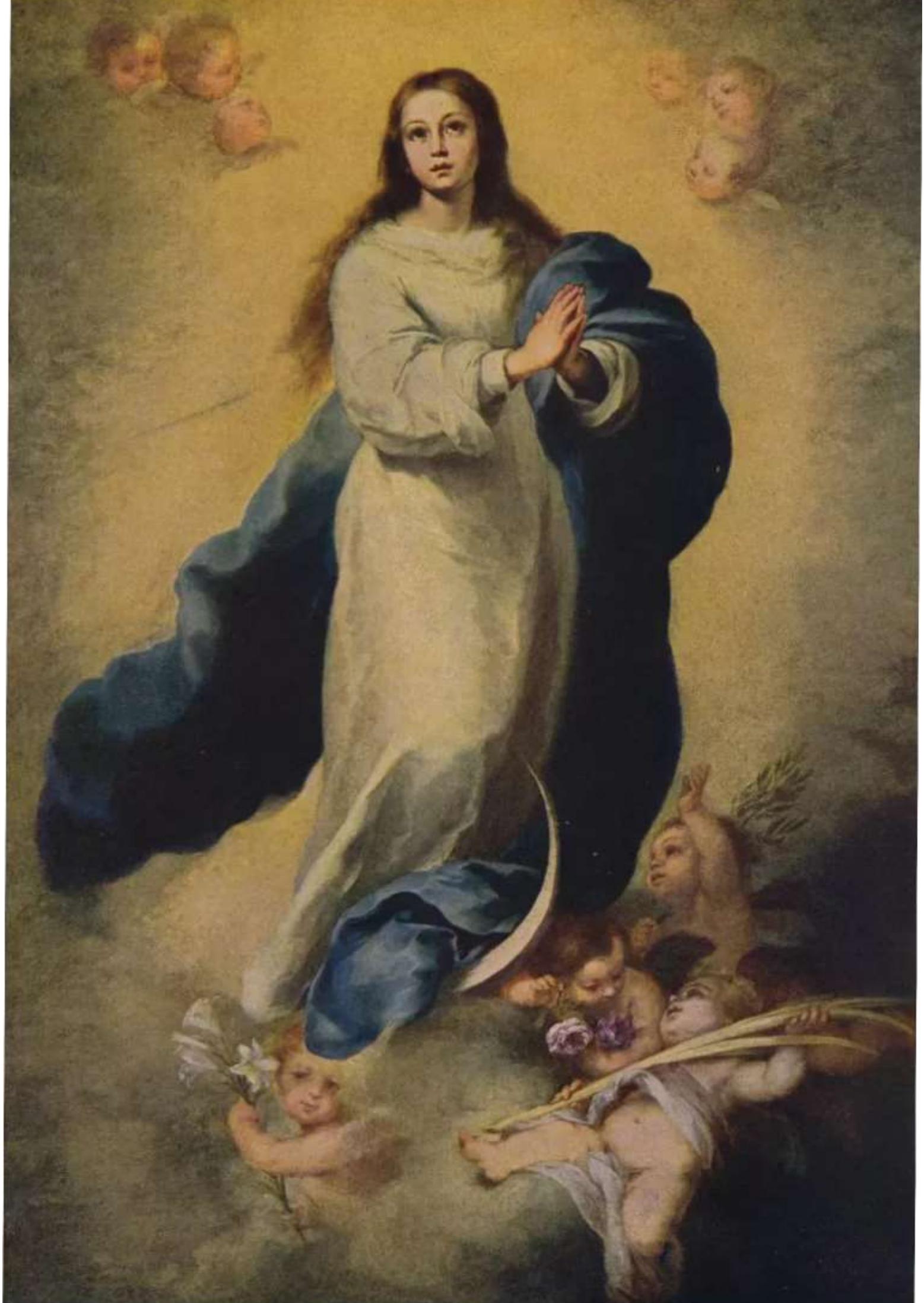


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The undated, painted copy of the Murillo was held by a private art collector in Valencia, Spain, who was reportedly charged 1,200 euros for the botched restoration, according to The Guardian. The original painting by the 17th century Baroque painter is held at the Museo del Prado in Madrid. "

"They gave it to furniture restorers, which is like going to a plumber for my dental work," art conservator Lisa Rosen told Newsweek in a phone interview.

Rosen apprenticed in Rome, Italy and spent more than a decade restoring frescoes, oil paintings and marble for churches, museums and private collectors throughout Italy. Her last restoration job, before returning to the United States to open her Fine Art Restoration studio in New York, was at the Vatican. She has restored paintings by 16th century painter Paris Bordone (an apprentice of the Renaissance painter Titian) and 20th century American artist Jean-Michel Basquiat.



"The Immaculate Conception of El Escorial" by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo was painted sometime between 1660 and 1665 and is now held in the Museo del Prado, Madrid.

PHOTO BY THE PRINT COLLECTOR/GETTY IMAGES

The disfigured Murillo has caused a similar incredulous and shocked response as the 2012 "Monkey Christ" fiasco, caused when an 81-year-old parishioner of the Santuario de Misericordia—a former hermitage in Borja, Spain—attempted an amateur restoration of the painting "Ecce Homo." The results drew ridicule from around the world, who compared the blemished portrait of the religious figure Jesus to a monkey or potato.

"I know the feeling," Rosen said. "I can just feel her going, 'Oh, just a little bit further, just a little bit more—extending that color. And then the whole damn face is done. She didn't have 30 years experience; it was from the heart. And I'm sure these furniture restorers thought similarly: 'What could it possibly entail?'"

But with 30 years of experience, Rosen knows exactly what professional restoration entails, which includes some counterintuitive practices the next untrained art cleaner should keep in mind—though it would be preferable if they didn't make the attempt in the first place.

Restoration efforts begin with cleaning, using cotton swabs to remove both layered grime and the yellowing varnish found on many old paintings. The next step is called 'consolidating,' which is the process of glueing down paint that's lifting, chipping or flaking away. Specialized glues, like idoneous adhesive, are applied with a heated spatula, or injected, or used to contour around loose edges to keep corroding air from leaking into the space between the paint layer and the canvas. The next step is filling, which Rosen compared to "spackling a wall" with plaster.

"You fill wherever the painting is missing," Rosen said. "The filler is going to recreate the height of the surrounding paint."

Cleaned, consolidated and filled, the artwork is now ready for restorative painting.



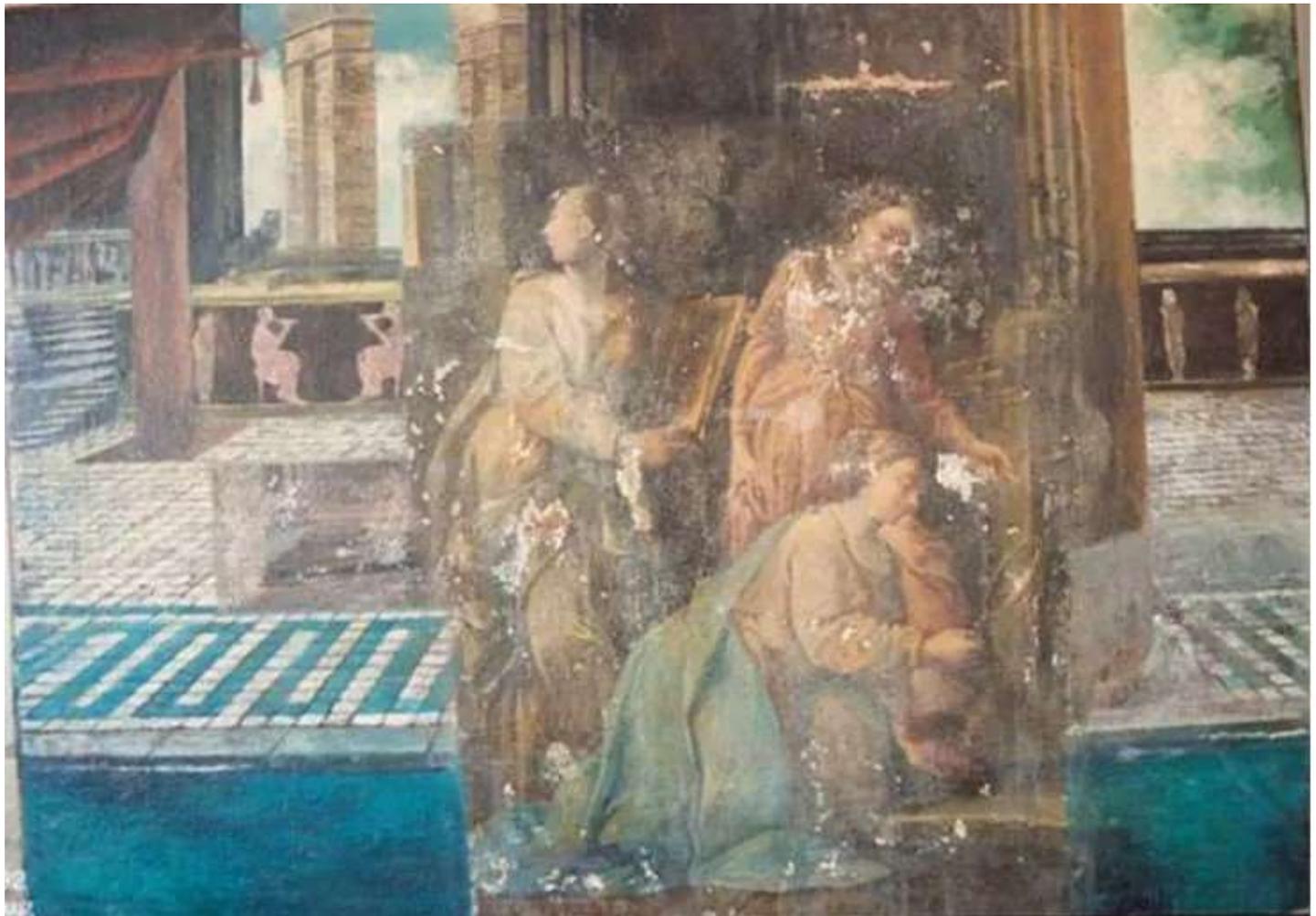
Lisa Rosen cleaning mosaics at the Church of Saint Ignatius Loyola in New York City.

LISA ROSEN / FINE ART RESTORATION / CHURCH OF SAINT IGNATIUS LOYOLA

Since art restoration evokes old methods and materials, it's easy to assume conservators like Rosen are akin to Dan Brown characters, tracking down centuries-old paint or using high-tech forensics. But restoring damaged paintings actually requires nearly the opposite: the application of materials completely unlike those used in the original painting.

"You never use the same products the original artwork was made out of," Rosen said. "I have a feeling that in this situation they used oil paint on an oil painting. You can't do that; you can't get it off."

For oil paintings, conservators use restoration colors, which can be dissolved with acetone, instead of the turpentine used to dissolve oil paints. For ceiling frescoes, Rosen has sometimes employed watercolors.



Rosen sometimes finds and restores older paintings that have been painted over. She discovered these "Vestal Virgins" beneath a bath scene painting owned by a private collector in Rome. "It was missing a lot of paint," Rosen said. "Which was probably why whoever painted the bath scene bought the canvas, at some flea market, in terrible condition, for nothing."

LISA ROSEN / PRIVATE COLLECTOR, ROME, ITALY

"In restoration or conservation everything we do has to be what we call 'reversible,' which means it can be removed without harming the original," Rosen said, describing a keystone principle for conservators, not just with paint, but also with glue, varnish and any other material to be applied.

There are even schools of thought that argue against too-perfect color matching. While some conservators seek perfection in their restorations, others try to offset their modifications just enough for naked eye identification of exactly where on a painting restoration work has been performed. Conservators may, for example, select colors that are a slight shade darker than the original painting, restoring the original artwork to perfection when viewed at a distance, but revealing altered sections up close.

But while there are processes and best practices that weren't followed in the case of "The Immaculate Conception of El Escorial" or "Ecce Homo," sometimes it just comes down to experience. There is no foolproof method for reliably reproducing matching colors. It just takes practice.

"That's the years of experience," Rosen said. "Being able to match colors and create them on your palette quickly. It takes years of doing it to get it right."

Early in her apprenticeship, Rosen was tasked with restoring a left hand. After eight hours spent on a single inch of the painting, her instructor came back in the room and wiped away all her work.

"She said, 'You didn't look at the other hand,'" Rosen recalled. "I wasn't thinking of the master who had done the original painting. I was painting a Lisa Rosen hand."

In her intensive concentration on what needed fixing, she hadn't looked just two inches down, to the other hand, which could have revealed the original painter's methods, because the aim of the restorer is to emulate the original, brush stroke by brush stroke.

"You have to obliterate your ego," Rosen said.

It's not as easy as 'buy a tube of flesh color and squeeze it out and put it on the painting,'" she added. "You've got to create the shade, but it's not ever just that shade: it's got a patina of age on it, so you've got to look at the other parts of the painting and realize you're not painting for you."