

RESTORATION FROM BEYOND: IS THERE A HAPPY MEDIUM?

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OBITUARY - It was with great regret that we witnessed Jason Argo, the most well-known and accomplished painting restorer of this part of our decade, passing beyond the curtain in February of this year. Argo began his long and illustrious career as a painter but was bitten by the restoration bug in the late 1930s. He never painted another work until he died. He will be sorely missed by many colleagues, friends and clients, especially those to whom remuneration of one sort or another was still outstanding. He leaves a fully equipped restoration studio and three young female apprentices.¹

INTRODUCTION

Jason Argo left several paintings half treated with but fragmentary documentation when called by the shades, obliging the authors (the executors of his estate whom he appointed while still in the flesh) to transcend the normal boundaries of our mortal world in order to get the job finished. Argo was a firm believer in the existential reality of the hereafter, and so attempts at contact were considered likely to yield positive results. Little did we guess what our sorties into the unknown would ultimately reveal. Aside from our precognition of his belief, in the days immediately following his demise small clues presented themselves to us while sorting through his atelier, thereby assuring us that he desired contact. Small crescent-shaped brown marks would appear on horizontal surfaces, almost as if brimming coffee cups had been set down. Brushes would be moved from their storage jars and scattered as if in use and, most significant of all, a large storage jar labelled "Argo's Favorite Stripper" kept appearing beside one of the paintings together with some cotton batten² a bunch of stir styx and tooth pyx.

The psychic force surrounding two paintings in particular indicated to us executors that they were ripe for completion and that what remained of Jason Argo in our perceptual

¹ Bids on the former properties are welcomed by his estate; beds can be made on the latter.

² The term 'batten' is used here advisedly - it is now so rare to see it spelled correctly that we might as well take the plunge and get its new spelling and resultant pronunciation firmly entrenched in the literature.

framework was all for it. These paintings were *Charon's Ferry* by William Blake and *The Rubicon* by Omar Khayaam. The private owner of both paintings, the late but still evident William Lyon Mackenzie King, has asked us to preserve his anonymity, a request to which we acceded with no compunction.

THE SQUEEGEE BOARD

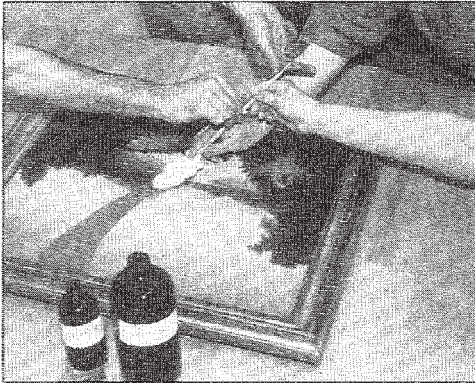
Argo's intention had obviously been to clean the deeply discoloured varnish from the surface of *Charon's Ferry*, and a small start had indeed been made before his untimely removal from the physical sphere of influence. The continuing supernatural reappearance of "Argo's Favorite Stripper" beside this work influenced our choice of solvent in a way not normally encountered in the treatment protocols of great paintings. The painting was placed on a low table with chairs all around, and each executor sat facing it. One of the stir styx, wrapped in cotton batten and moistened with the specified solvent, was grasped by each person's right hand and was brought in contact with the paint surface. The lights were extinguished, leaving but one tallow candle on a sconce, and we all waited with debated breath for a sign. After what seemed like hours,³ the squeegee began to move, describing circles over the surface (Figure 1). We remained transfixed, only our arms moving, until by the light of the one guttering candle we could see the whole surface transformed and cleaned of unsightly varnish.

INPAINTING

In order to ascertain the correct media for the next phase of restoration, it was necessary to find some way of contacting Jason Argo more directly. (The media used by mediums, and the mediums used by media, will be the subject of a short monograph.) Argo, however, took matters into his own hands, or at least into the hands of one of the executors. It was late one evening, while experimenting with inpainting media on a corner of *The Rubicon* using an unashamedly modern material - our good and faithful friend Acryloid B-72 - that the brush in the executor's hand was wrested from his grasp, whereupon it dashed itself over the canvas rendering the message shown in Figure 2. Without demur, we adopted dammar for the inpainting.

³ But was regretfully only a few minutes because, as executors, we were being paid by the hour.

VARNISHING



Attempts to contact Jason Argo by the more conventional method of seance failed. Several intense sessions to call up his shade resulted only in the appearance on one occasion of billowing white clouds and a strong smell of beeswax.⁴ It seemed to us that the psycho-kinetic effects he had so far manifested to us were his preferred means of communication. Or perhaps a spiritual stricture had been placed upon him of which we knew nought. Whatever the case, we knew that we would have to encourage some kind of physical manifestation in order to help him guide us in our choice of varnish.



Sure enough, once the painting was ready for varnishing a ceramic vessel containing a curious yellow fluid, enigmatically labelled "Argo's Favorite Spirit Varnish," was teleported from the solvent cupboard one dark night with the wind moaning in the chimney, had there been one.

Figure 1 (top). Cleaning using the squeegee board.

Figure 2 (above). The message demanding the use of dammar for inpainting.

CONCLUSION

We consider it significant that once work on *Charon's Ferry* and *The Rubicon* was completed, peace settled over our comrade's studio and no further manifestations of

⁴ The hot plate was turned off soon after this manifestation.

his intent were apparent. Our duties as executors were soon completed, and the money owing for the works was fleeced. We also feel that we have established a legitimate field for further study in a field already running fallow of innovative thought. It appears to us that it is no longer necessary for great old restorers to continue occupying space which would be better utilised by their young successors. Indeed, they should be encouraged to topple off this mortal coil, secure in the knowledge that, although their bodies lie a-mouldering in the grave, their souls will go marching on.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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