



To preserve *and* protect: *Conservation at the Frick*

At the Musée d'Orsay, Paris, visitors can watch through glass walls as conservators clean Gustave Courbet's monumental 1855 painting of his workshop. For three months earlier this year, patrons of the Cincinnati Art Museum could look on as its chief conservator restored the Retablo of Saint Peter, a turn-of-the-fifteenth-century altarpiece attributed to Lorenzo Zaragoza. Such public displays of hitherto behind-the-scenes activities are becoming more common as museums seek ways to demonstrate how they work and why that work requires constant funding.

The preparations for the Gouthière exhibition undertaken by the Frick's chief conservator Joseph Godla offer another case in point. "I conducted a yearlong treatment of the duchess of Mazarin's table, which included dismantling it completely to clean the marble and the gilt-bronze mounts," he says. "Many of the mounts needed repair, which was done using several techniques including laser welding."

In addition to physical conservation, Godla made a detailed study of Gouthière's working techniques by examining more than one hundred pieces by or attributed to him in European and American collections. Hoping to shed new light on the artist's practices, including his signature matte gilding method, Godla also conducted scientific analyses of Gouthière pieces, and made an extensive review of period technical treatises and the artist's invoices.

Far from hidden, Godla says the work of his department is "visible in every gallery. We are responsible for the care of the historic interiors as well as the decorative arts and sculpture. Taken together, this constitutes more than seventy percent of the collection," he says, adding: "Yet the department carries out its work in a 350-square-foot lab that lacks even such basics as a sink with running water." Needless to say, upgrading this facility remains a priority as the Frick continues to investigate ways to expand its physical plant.