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Penta Daily

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September 29, 2014, 2:12 P.M. ET

How Stable is Your Rothko?

By Barbara Haislip

If you're about to purchase a major art work, there is one more bit of due diligence you will want to perform before you pay your bill: Check out the stability of the materials the artist used in the work. It's a key bit of information you need to have before making a major purchase.

Consider what happened to Harvard University. In 1962, five Mark Rothko panels were commissioned by the university and hung in Harvard's Holyoke Center. The murals were removed in the late 1970s and put into dark storage, after years of damaging exposure in the light-filled Holyoke Center. The materials Rothko commonly used to paint his remarkable color studies are unstable. The paint is made from animal glue and dried pigment, and if the paintings are exposed to high levels of light, they can fade within a decade. It is for such reasons the Getty Trust is studying and testing the acrylic paints used by many modern painters, so that [future conservators can properly restore late 20th century masterpieces](#).

"A great deal of art being sold today may deteriorate quickly and cause the monetary value to decline – precipitously in some cases," says Emily MacDonald-Korth, founder of the conservation practice Longevity Art Preservation LLC and formerly an Associate Project Specialist at the Getty Conservation Institute.

Rothko's "Untitled (Red, Blue, Orange)" painting of 1955 – almost certainly painted using similar light-sensitive colorants as was used in the Harvard works – was sold in May at auctioneer Phillips for \$56.2 million. This new buyer would have been alerted to the work's vulnerability to fading, if they had consulted art conservation experts prior to purchasing the painting.

MacDonald-Korth's answer to this ongoing collectors' dilemma is, she hopes, the Art Preservation Index, or APIx, which she helped invent and is in the process of protecting through a full patent. The rating system, in the provisional stages of the patent process, standardizes the measurement for material stability in artworks that may deteriorate over time; the full patent application will be filed in a few months. "While the APIx might not make everyone in the art market happy at first," she says, "the system needs to be adopted. We need this new model for trading art as an asset because it incorporates stability and risk awareness."

MacDonald-Korth says the APIx system will be similar to the investment ratings produced by Moody's and Standard & Poor's to judge the financial stability of companies, but with the goal, in this case, to quantify stability-related investment risks for fine art. The current provisional system, assigns the equivalent of a triple-A rating to a work of art that is projected to be stable in a controlled environment over a multigenerational time frame. "In some cases, we may even specify 100+ years," says MacDonald-Korth. On the other end of the spectrum, artwork inherently unstable that will deteriorate within a decade –and to such a degree that conservation can do little to stop the degradation –



Untitled 1952-1953 by Mark Rothko. Rothko's exuberant color paintings often used animal glue and dried pigment, which can fade if exposed for long periods to harsh light.

would get one of the lowest ratings.

Each Stability Rating Report includes details about the artwork, the stability rating, and the firm's rating rationale. During the process, the Art Preservation Index LLC, based in Los Angeles, evaluates the stability of the materials used to make the art, their application,

condition, and a number of other factors, besides the work's projected longevity. A positive stability rating report will probably be valuable, MacDonald-Korth claims, by increasing the value and desirability of the work assessed. The Art Preservation Index charges \$1,975 for the basic report; more detailed analysis can be had for an additional fee.

Unstable materials used in major modern artworks include newsprint and magazines, house paint, and low-quality glues. Robert Rauschenberg often used discarded remnants of posters and flyers that fade rapidly. Other works, such as the multi-part sculptures of Joseph Beuys, Jean Tinguely, and James Turrell, require careful packing and complex installation techniques that have to be followed to the letter to prevent traumatic damage to the works. Such factors will all influence a work's stability rating.

In MacDonald-Korth's experience, selected works by Damien Hirst and Anselm Kiefer, besides Rothko and Rauschenberg, are some of the most vulnerable to deterioration. Of course, a lower rating does not mean an artwork is less important or valuable in art history terms; it does mean the work has potential stability risks, which could very well affect the work's monetary value. Such risks may only require displaying the work in a specific way, to lessen the danger, or it might mean the artwork will require, say, a \$75,000 conservation treatment. There are cases, however, where it might mean the work will self-destruct in as little as five years.

While carrying out the rating for a Picasso drawing, MacDonald-Korth had to tell the client that there were stability issues with the paper that required expensive framing, but, more seriously, she also had to tell the collector that his Picasso was almost certainly a forgery. But that's the exception. Mostly the discussion is entirely about the material durability of the work.

"When a collector or investor realizes that their new acquisition needs to be kept in a dark, refrigerated room or the \$20 million asset could become too disfigured to be shown, or sold, within the space of a decade – they will be concerned," says MacDonald-Korth.

APIx is currently carrying out provisional ratings for the Robert Fontaine Gallery in Miami, a private collector in Miami, and SourceCulture, a curated online art marketplace based in Oxford, England. Further collaborations are being discussed with galleries in Los Angeles and New York City. We understand why. When you're spending \$300,000 and up for a single work – peace of mind for under \$2,000 seems like a small price to pay.

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