

CHRISTINE THOMSON
DECORATIVE ARTS CONSERVATION & HISTORIC PAINT ANALYSIS

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ASSESSMENT OF PAINT CONDITIONS

For: David Hart, Architect
Project: First Congregational Church, Nantucket, MA
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Introduction

A one-day site visit was undertaken June 23, 2008 with the intent of examining the condition of the interior painted walls and ceiling in the large sanctuary of the First Congregational Church in Nantucket, MA. The purpose of the visit was to assess the current condition of the painted decoration and to make recommendations for a conservation treatment that will preserve it while improving the overall appearance.

The walls and ceiling in the large sanctuary are painted in a trompe l'oeil style, done in the 1970's. The walls are decorated with painted columns and paneling having a three-dimensional appearance. The ceiling has a painted medallion that also gives the effect of three-dimensionality. In the center of the medallion is a circle that is believed to be the remainder of an earlier decorative paint treatment, and appears inset because the ceiling was covered with plaster wall board during the 1970's renovation, leaving this area



exposed.

Images of the church interior that survive in old photographs suggest that the current trompe l'oeil decoration is the third decorative treatment since the church was built in 1806. Earlier decoration, a glimpse of which is still visible on the ceiling, may also survive underneath the plaster wallboard that was put up on both the walls and ceiling in the 1970's.

Observations

1. The painted decoration is generally in very good condition. There are areas of obviously aging paint, particularly behind the altar, where the paint exhibits tiny fissures in its surface or "cracquelure" from age and exposure to weather. This surface is not necessarily disfiguring, however and gives the paint an antique appearance, or "patina". In general, though, the paint is secure and stable; no active flaking or detachment of paint was noted on any of the flat surfaces.
2. The painted walls appear dirty in many areas. This is the result of a number of factors. For one, periods of high humidity have caused a mold bloom consisting of dark, round splotches to appear in many areas. In addition, images of the under structure have telescoped through the paint and have left a pattern on the surface. This is often thought to be the result of a disparity in temperature between structural members that are in direct contact with the back of the wallboard and the gaps between the members. The difference in temperature can affect the surface and can cause dirt to adhere more tightly in some places than in others. This phenomenon is visible in the photograph of the wall on the first page.
3. Aside from the dirt and grime, the most disfiguring aspect of the paint's current condition is the buckling that has occurred between wallboard panels. As was noted earlier, the walls and ceiling were covered in wallboard during the 1970's renovation. The tape applied to cover the joints between panels has distorted and buckled in areas, causing the paint on it to flake off. Panels must have shifted and settled slightly afterwards, causing them to pull on the taped seams.
4. There is minor evidence of wear and abrasion around door frames and other areas that are vulnerable to contact. Selective inpainting can reduce the appearance of wear.
5. It was not possible to get close enough to the ceiling to accurately assess the condition of the paint but damage along the taped seams that join wallboard panels is visible from the ground.

Test Cleaning

To test clean some panels, we used a simple water-based cleaning solution that included the non-ionic detergent Triton XL 80-N mixed with a with 2% triammonium citrate

solution. It was rubbed lightly onto the surface with a clean cloth and rinsed off with water. This soap solution easily removed mildew spots and surface grime. (See photo at the end of this report). A 6 x 9" rectangle was cleaned in several areas, and in all test areas the results were successful.

We feel it is very important to avoid using any alkaline cleaners such as TSP and other products on the market for cleaning walls, as their high pH tends to etch the paint and make it much more susceptible to attracting and holding dirt and grime in the future. Milder, more neutral cleaners do not have such an effect on the paint and are therefore more appropriate choices if long-term preservation is the goal.

Recommendations

The overarching philosophy behind these recommendations is that the conservation of the 1970's decorative paint scheme by cleaning and inpainting to blend in areas of missing paint is preferable to total repainting. We feel that the existing unique and well-executed paint scheme is in good condition and should be preserved. Repainting would end up looking "new" and much of the appeal of the present appearance of the decorative paint is its subtle patina of age, as evidenced by cracquelure and subtle disparities in color that are the result of exposure to light.

If the only issue with the appearance of the ceiling and walls were the dirt and grime, it would be a straightforward project to simply clean the walls and inpaint any areas of paint loss or discoloration. However, the problem with the buckling of the taped joints may make it necessary to undertake a more invasive treatment, which could include scraping and sanding the buckled areas so they are flat, filling the scraped area so it is flat and blends with the level of the walls, then inpainting to match the filled area with the paint around it. In discussion with David Hart and Church representative Robert Olson, we agreed that repair of the taped joints, either by redoing them or flattening them in some other manner, then filling and inpainting them to blend with the surrounding surfaces would require a high level of painting skill but be preferable to a complete repainting of the walls. A more specific protocol for repairing the taped seams can be outlined after a procedure is worked out during the proposed testing phase.



In the center of this photograph is a 6" x 9" rectangle showing the cleaned area. The cleaning solution easily removed mildew and grime, and revealed an acceptably clean painted surface consistent in color and appearance.