# CONFERENCE ON MODERN OIL PAINTS

## RIJKSMUSEUM, AMSTERDAM / 23-25 MAY 2018

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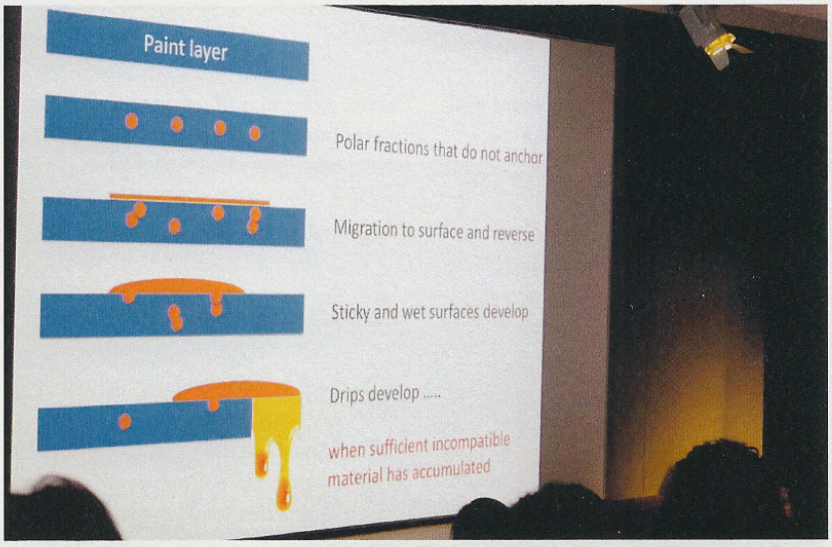
**Slide from Jan van den Berg's introductory presentation The Cleaning of Modern Oil Paints Project**

This conference presented the results of the Cleaning Modern Oil Paintings research project (2015-2018), a collaboration between The University of Amsterdam/Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands, Tate, Courtauld Institute of Art, the University of Pisa's Department of Chemistry and Industrial Chemistry, and many associate partners. The results, which never stopped revealing surprises, proved just how dramatically modern oil paint surfaces differ from their classical forerunners. Talks discussing aspects of current oil paint manufacture, treatments for such vulnerable objects and specific artists' materials and methods rounded out the program.

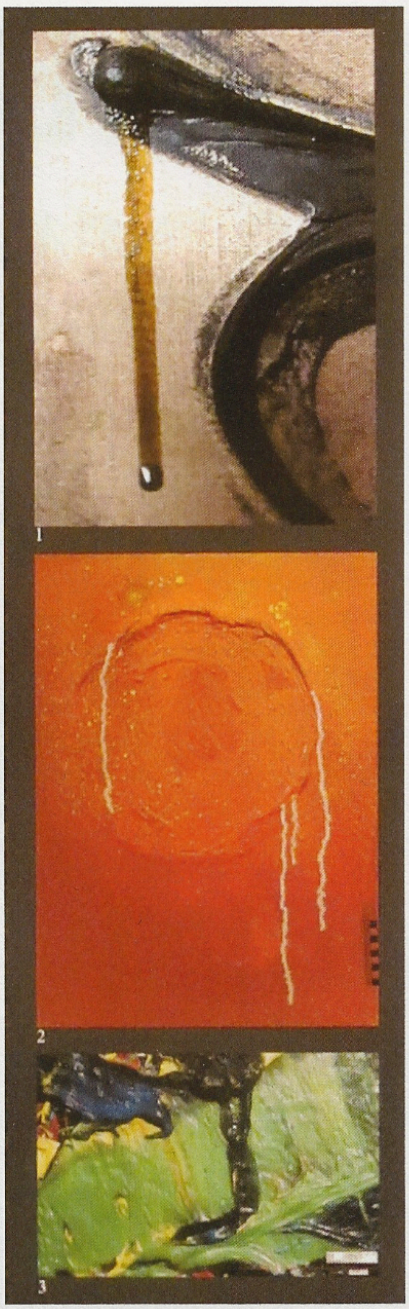
In short, the reasons for modern oil paints' idiosyncratic nature are many. For example, a comparison of paint samples cured in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, with samples cured in Melbourne, Australia. The Malaysian samples were more matte and brittle then their Australian counterparts. Talks on the materials and methods of paint manufacture also explored diverse tangents.

Robert Gamblin emphasised how today's professional artists use student grade paints as much as students do and Carolina Salis Gomes spoke on the artist paint manufacturers' dependence on industrially produced pigments. Pigments currently available tend to be coated and/or treated with materials that, in addition to altering their physical properties for practical reasons, can also skew the results of scientific analyses. Moreover, their impact on the long-term stability of artists' paints remains unknown. Additives, such as driers, surfactants and fillers, can negatively affect film formation and promote premature degradation in various ways. Lead compounds, on the other hand, which tended to stabilise oil paints, can no longer be used.

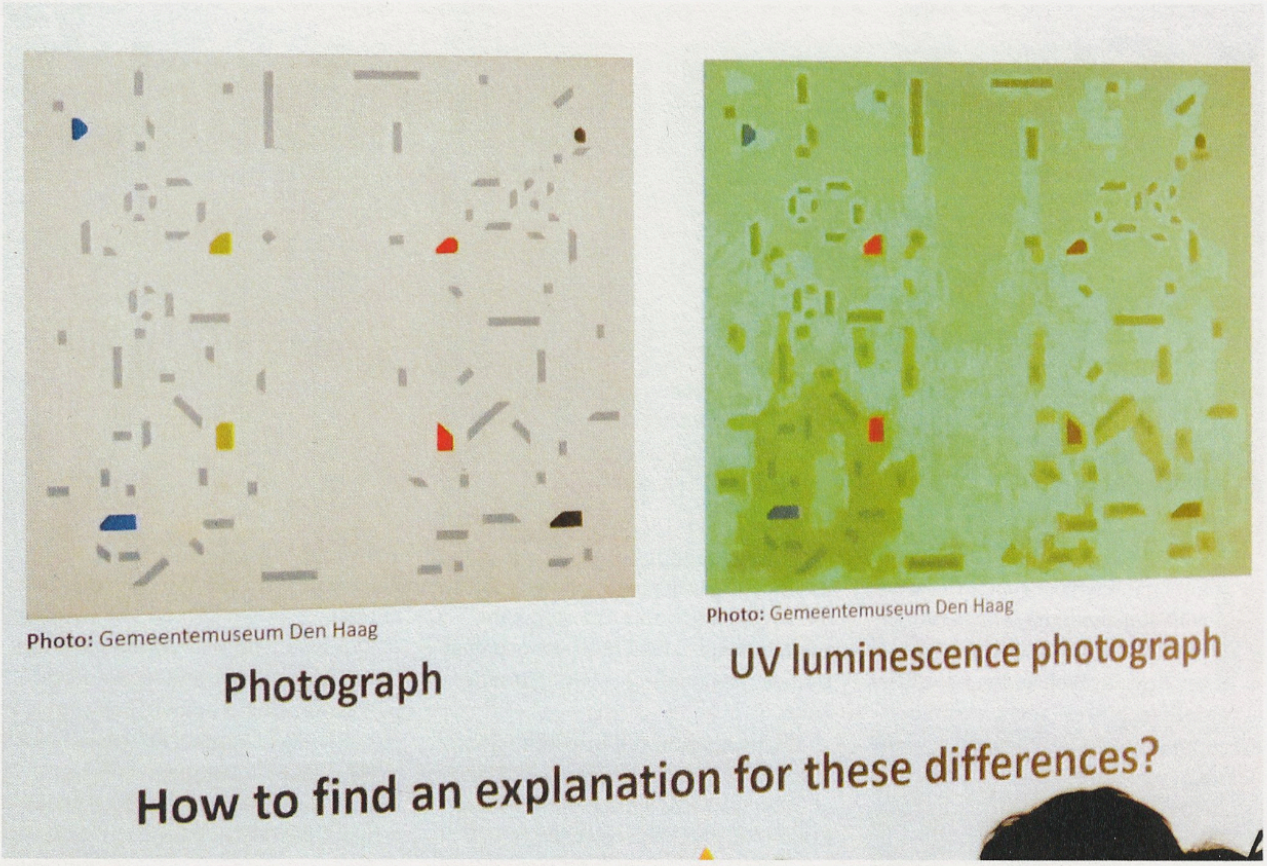
**Detail of Pierre Soulages, Peinture, 162 x 200 cm, 12 mars 1960, Sara Hildén Foundation Collection maintained by the Sara Hildén Art Museum, Tampere (Finland)**




**Slide image from Jaap J. Boon's presentation Microscopic aspects of softening, exuding, dripping and delaminating paints in paintings post 1950.**




**Detail from Jazzy de Groot et al.'s conference poster: Decision-making processes regarding the treatment of modern oil paintings (1950s – present) exhibiting oil exudates. 1) Detail of Georges Mathieu Théoréme de Godel 1957. Original photo: Hélène de Segogne. 2) Detail of Otto Piene Harvest 1993. Original photo: J. Schulz. 3) Detail of Jean-Paul Riopelle Composition 1952. Original photo: I.A.T. Bronken.**




**Slide image from Selwyn Hageraats presentation on Bart van der Leck's The Woodcutters 1928. The results of a synchrotron-based multispectral photoluminescence micro-imaging technique shows that the uniform colour of the work's zinc white-containing paint has actually degraded and is anything but homogeneous.**

Jaap J. Boon reported that the frequent substitution of oil blends for drying oils has occurred since the 1950s and that the presence of semi-drying oils accounts for more fatty acids and mobile fractions being present. These fractions can seep out of paint films. Some paints can be affected by changes in volume, which can cause them to pull away from underlying layers. Microscopic examination has also shown that different types of deterioration, such exudates and crystal formations, can co-existence on some paintings.

Frequently, the complex challenges presented by affected works preclude the success of traditional or even new methods of treatment. The condition of Pierre Soulages' Peinture (1960) from the Sara Hildén Art Museum is a case in point. Not only did consolidation adhesives not adhere to the priming, but dimensional change also affected the materials. After flattening paint layers, the underlying white layer appeared to have elongated, whereas the black paint lost volume.

Cleaning systems surveyed encompassed the use of hydrogels, pH adjusted water, water/oil micro emulsions, silicone-based Pickering-type emulsions, Evolon microfibre cloth, an integrated liquid-dispensing and micro-aspiration system, monoatomic oxygen and more. Here, ethics too formed an important aspect of the discussion. Aviva Burnstock stressed the need for making thorough assessments to make informed decisions. Ultimately, undertaking a partial cleaning – or not cleaning the work at all – could be the best choice.

*John Gayer obtained his Master of Art Conservation (MAC) degree from Queen's University in Canada. Trained in paintings conservation, he currently works at Helsinki Art Museum (HAM).*