



She Aids Unusual 'Victims' Of January's Disaster

By BARBARA BURKLO
Sentinel Staff Writer

Debra Fox of Ben Lomond is working closely with some very delicate survivors of January's rains, floods and mud slides.

As a professional conservator and restorer of artistic and historic works on paper, she is kept busy these days, working on water-stained and mud-spattered paintings, prints and documents.

"You want to preserve the original intention of the artist and the integrity of the object," she says.

There is an almost surgical quality about the work Debra does.

And the training is arduous and demanding.

Debra holds a B.A. degree in studio art from UC, Davis, and an M.A. in art conservation from Queen's University in Ontario, Canada.

She has done contract work for the California Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco and earlier served as assistant conservator in a Connecticut museum.

She's excited about participating in a Legion of Honor paper lab experiment, in which new cleaning methods will be researched — among them, the use of ultra-sound.

Debra and her assistant-trainee, Laurie Woolworth, demonstrated use of the vacuum table for cleaning work. The table top is of perforated metal and underneath is a vacuum. As a piece is carefully daubed and cleaned on the tabletop, the vacuum constantly pulls the dampness through and onto a blotting paper.

Showing how she painstakingly scrapes the mud off a Calder print, she said, "I kept all the moldy prints from the flood in quarantine."

"I didn't want the spores to land on anything healthy!"

She is currently working on an original pen and ink by the French artist Andre Masson. It was tape-stained and tape, she says, is full of acid.

"Acid is the worst enemy of all," she says, "it discolors and it makes paper brittle."

She brought out a mud-spattered Miro aquatint that went through the flood. Several means will be employed to bring it back to more normal condition.

"The most important thing," she says, "is to stabilize and conserve what is there; to prolong its life."

To that effect, when a piece is restored, Debra's final step is to either immerse or spray it with a magnesium bicarbonate solution she makes herself. "It neutralizes the acids in paper and acts as a buffer," she says.

Old letters, marriage certificates, memorabilia — anything on paper that has sentimental or other value — these are the things that come to a conservator's laboratory.

"It is expensive to have conservation done," she says, "because to do conservation the proper way takes a lot of time. In school, we learn the proper procedures — slow and sure."

Debra's laboratory will soon be moved from the house where she and her husband, John, and small son, Joseph, live, to a more convenient location in Ben Lomond.



"I kept all the moldy prints from the flood in quarantine," says Debra Fox, conservator and restorer of artistic and historic works on paper, "I didn't want the spores to land on anything healthy!" Above right, she carefully scrapes the top layer of mud off an art print. Above, Laurie Woolworth, Debra's assistant, restores a 45-year old photograph display. In photo at top left, Debra works at the vacuum table while Laurie observes her cleaning technique.

It's a booming profession," she says. "and it requires sensitivity, intuition and patience."

She notes that most people in the field specialize, because there is so much to know about each aspect.

Debra is qualified to work with oil paintings, she says, and among her work has been restoration of a small Rembrandt. But she chose to specialize in paper, partly because of her lab space. Much like a surgeon, she is not too impressed by the fame of her 'patients,' preferring rather to concentrate on the treatment necessary to restore them to health.



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