

What to do when disaster strikes



By Unity Norwak

with BAFRA

Specialist restorers gather to impart professional advice

Specialist masterclasses run by the BDMA (British Damage Management Association) have featured on the calendars of insurers, loss adjusters and risk managers for a number of years. Ironically, the latest such event, held in the grounds of 15th century Kentwell Hall in Long Melford, Suffolk, was postponed from last year due to the unprecedented increase in workload experienced by candidates as a result of extensive floods sweeping the country. Climatic conditions did nothing, however, to deter the BDMA re-organising this latest event in April which was sponsored by The Persian Carpet Studio, one of the UK's leading restoration workshops.

Wide range of specialisms represented

Representation came from a broad range of specialists, all of whom were responding to the BDMA's call to raise awareness of the potential for recovery and restoration of valuable, historic and unusual works of art – items that might otherwise be classified as irrecoverable. Among the nine specialists were Robert Entwistle, Senior Collections Care Officer for Colchester and Ipswich Museum Service, Christine Sitwell, Paintings Conservation Adviser for the National Trust and Judith Gowland, a former immunologist who is now a renowned paper conservator and whose clients include the Royal Horticultural Society and the Historic Chapels Trust. BAFRA was represented by Lenka Bashford, Bill Pigeon, Ludovic Potts and Michael Goater.



Lenka Bashford



Ludovic Potts



Michael Goater

As Lenka, a carpet restorer for The Persian Carpet Studio and speaker at the event said, “The principal idea behind this particular BDMA Masterclass is to highlight the restoration options that are available for specialist artefacts. Currently fine art is being lost because, in some instances, disaster management technicians may enter a disaster site and not be fully aware as to what is worth salvaging. In addition, they may not have the expertise safely to salvage specialist items from the site which can result in further extensive damage. It is imperative, for example, that, following a fire or flood, a handmade Oriental rug is not treated in the same way as a manufactured, synthetic carpet.”

Dust 'explosions' and a devastating fire

Following an introduction and welcome by Bob Spencer, Chairman of the BDMA, each speaker regaled the audience with tales of disasters and provided detailed and informed accounts of how they responded on each occasion. Drawing attention to dangers other than fire and flooding, Robert Entwistle recounted the scene of a dust 'explosion' caused by builders working in Ipswich Museum. "The other dangers, such as insect damage, mould, roof falls or dust explosions that are created by building work are insidious and may not be noticed until it is too late," he stressed. Extensive damage, he recalled, was caused to artefacts in the museum due to contractors not covering up or sealing off the area in which they were working before beginning demolition and drilling. The result, he concurred, was "dramatic, not to say disastrous" with large areas and items covered in a thick layer of abrasive brick dust.

The painstaking work that followed involved the careful removal of the dust by vacuum cleaner and a soft brush and the warning that specimens be covered or preferably removed prior to the commencement of any building work. As an expert in natural history he was keen to emphasise the need for specialists to work on damaged items: "I would seriously advise anyone to contact a trained conservator and, if possible, one specialising in the material you are dealing with before attempting any remedial restoration work," he said.

The devastating fire that swept through Uppark, the National Trust's 17th century property in West Sussex in 1989 resulted in the Trust putting into place very stringent regulations to control 'hot working' by contractors. The day of the fire was vividly recalled by painting specialist Christine Sitwell, as was the work conducted the following day during which time a substantial amount of items were safely removed from the house prior to being recorded and stored. Prompt action by the Fire Service and their co-operation



Fire damage in The Saloon following the fire at Uppark, the National Trust's 17th property in West Sussex

with the National Trust team resulted in approximately 95 per cent of the contents in the public rooms being saved and, significantly, only a few paintings were lost from the scores that adorned the property's walls.



“The fire at Uppark reinforced the need to have a really good disaster plan in place, as well as a continual training programme,” said Christine. “We also now have very detailed room plans, work even closer with the Fire Service and have regular training. As a result, our staff are so much better equipped. We are also continually trying to improve the way in which we hang our

Fire at Uppark in 1989

paintings so that they can be removed with the utmost speed.”

Staff at the Trust’s properties regularly carry out disaster planning exercises



to ensure that their teams are accustomed to removing items quickly and safely and, following the fire at Uppark, a major training exercise involving staff from throughout the country, is held once year in one of its regional properties.

Packing damaged pictures: only a few were lost in the fire from the scores that adorned the walls at Uppark

Speed is of the essence

With fire and flood acknowledged as the most commonplace disaster scenarios, emphasis was also given on the need for technicians to contact specialist restorers at the earliest stage possible. Timescale, it was unanimously agreed, was a major issue and one over-riding concern that emanated from the podium was that many insurance companies were unable to supply an answer quick enough for the disaster technicians to salvage items. In many instances, it was stated, time was of the essence and a delay in communicating essential information could often result in the difference between an item being saved for restoration or being destroyed. Delay in the treatment of water damaged items such as textiles, for example, would lead to mould forming which would subsequently result in irreversible embrittlement of fibres.

Instantaneous advice on the safe removal and subsequent treatment of an item damaged by water or soot was now accessible to all technicians via a mobile phone, said Lenka Bashford. If, she continued, images of items were emailed to restorers by insurers, loss adjusters or risk managers at the scene of the disaster, they could have instant access to an informed decision as to whether the item was worth salvaging, what the restoration possibilities were and whether excess water and debris could be removed prior to the item being relocated. Equally important was the practical advice relating to whether or not there was sufficient manpower to actually carry an artefact safely, avoiding damage to both the item and, indeed, the technician himself. She did stress, however, that it was more beneficial for a restorer or conservator to

assess items in person as soon as possible following the disaster, but if this was not possible, emailed images would help in the process.

The importance of good communication at the disaster scene



A restorer at work in Bill Pigeon's workshop

Swift communication between all parties was one vital aspect of the work recently undertaken by Bill Pigeon, furniture restorer and BAFRA member, who described the scene following a major fire at Hampnet Manor in Gloucestershire. "I was contacted shortly after the fire and worked closely with the assessor Samuel Balcombe (Assessment Direct) who was liaising with Hiscox's loss adjustor," he said. "We worked very closely as a team and, as a result, we were able to salvage and restore around 20 per cent of the items in the house which had practically burnt to the ground. It was a good example of disaster management and also, thanks to the restoration network that exists between us all, I was able to liaise with other specialists over the best options available to the customer. In this particular instance, it was about

getting the right people in to do the job – early on. As a result, we were able to safely salvage and store damaged furniture promptly and that certainly accounted for a greater percentage of artefacts being restored for the customer.

Making the right insurance choices

The successful outcome of this particular case was, in part, down to the customer who was using a specialist insurance broker, thereby ensuring a rapid, well managed response to a potentially disastrous scenario. As former art historian Clare Pardy from insurers Ecclesiastical and a delegate at the BDMA Masterclass said, "We tend to have clients that are very demanding and when there is a loss we have to be able to solve it quickly, amicably and with the requisite specialist knowledge. Our approach therefore is that if an Old Master is damaged then it needs to be restored or conserved by a specialist Old Master restorer rather than by someone more familiar with 20th century pictures." She also acknowledged the fact that insurance was often way down on the list of people's priorities so that they often took the simplest option available in the marketplace. "What they really need to do though is to look at all the factors to see if the policy includes depreciation following loss, for instance, because if it's a standard contents policy, they won't be covered. I must admit though it is a bit of a minefield out there: people think that they can get a Rolls Royce product for a Mini Cooper price and clearly they can't."

Where fine art insurance companies have not been used, however, customers have still contacted restoration specialists to work for them. "Quite often," said Lenka Bashford, "we have customers who have had a disaster

and are inadequately covered but they still come to us to restore their Oriental carpets because they do not want them to be dealt with by companies who are ill-prepared to care for these precious artefacts.”

Raising customers’ awareness of the options available

The fact that customers were becoming more aware of the value of their items was, continued Lenka, a step in the right direction. “But,” she said, “there needs to be more emphasis on the recognition and safe salvaging of art works to ensure that more items are restored for the nation, rather than destroyed. The more awareness-raising events, like the BDMA Masterclasses, which are carefully targeted and which address the pressing needs of both the insurance companies and the restoration specialists, the greater the likelihood of change happening.” This sentiment was echoed by Bill Pigeon who stated that, “The BDMA, like BAFRA and AMU (Association of Master Upholsterers), are seen as vehicles for making sure that standards are maintained. These standards have to be there so that items that are deemed write-offs are actually redeemed.”

Specialist network

The value to professionals of attending restoration masterclasses such as this latest BDMA event in Suffolk was apparent by the number of delegates applying for places – the event was oversubscribed by 100 per cent. “We are clearly looking at a situation where the demand is there for informed advice on the safe retrieval and subsequent care of fine art following a disaster,” said Sara Barber, BAFRA member and founder of The Persian Carpet Studio. “One of the other great benefits of such an event is that all the specialists are networking for the same cause – the conservation and restoration of fine art.”

For further information on the BDMA telephone 07000 843 2362/www.bdma.org.uk

For further information on Uppark House, Petersfield, West Sussex telephone the National Trust infoline on 01730 825857.

