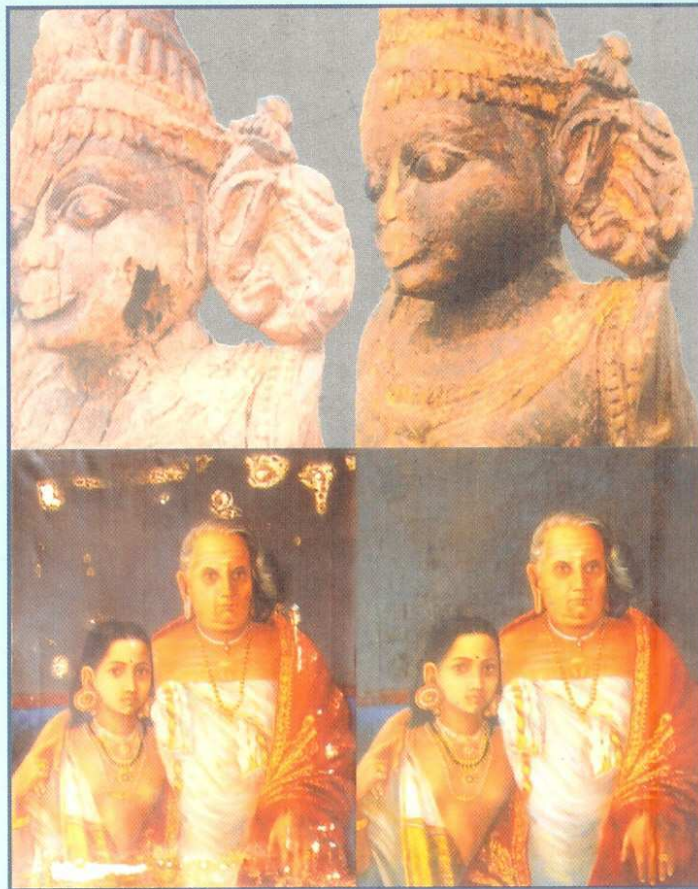


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Conservation of M.F.Hussain's Mural- oil painting on canvas – A case study

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Introduction

M. F. Husain (b. 1915) was born at Pandharpur, Maharashtra in 1916 and was a prominent member of 'progressive artist's group' in Bombay [1]. Dr. Homi Babha (1909-1966), responsible for the creation of TIFR and a great art connoisseur and an amateur artist himself, initiated a competition for the finest young artists in India to commission the work of 'Mural'. M. F. Husain was finally selected to paint the mural in 1963 [2]. Titled 'mural', executed with oil medium on a canvas in situ at the mezzanine floor in front of the library, painting consists of thick and bold impasto work. Due to the large size of the mural, about 274 cm in height and 1322 cm in length in dimension, since the completion of the painting by the artist in the year 1964, it remained to be displayed in its current location. Except some minor restoration intended to hide some areas of paint loss, in the form of over-painting, no major treatment was imparted to the painting in the past, Figure 1. Delamination of paint layer from the



Fig.1. 'Mural' on display at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research.

support was one of the major problems that had to be addressed while conserving the painting. But with no possibility of moving the painting from its location, without any loss to the paint layer, the paint layer has to be consolidated while it was on display. Condition of the verso of the canvas, strainer the process of fixing/stretching the canvas and the condition of the wall behind the canvas could not be examined prior to the consolidation of paint layer. The painting was removed from the wall with the help of trolleys with lot of working hands. The wall was found to be in a good condition without any evidence of seepage of water which was otherwise visible on the adjacent wall. The painting was then hung back to its original position after conservation. The treatment of a large sized canvas

painting with thick impasto in which the whole process have to be done insitu was an experience with some innovation in consolidation treatments and choice of consolidants.

Painting consists of three parts, the main painting being 1321.8 cm in length and 273.4 cm in height, and other two parts (referred to as panels in the remainder of the paper) one above the lift and other to the left side of the lift. The panel above the lift is 389.8 cm in length and 63 cm in height and panel to the left of the lift is 57 cm in length and 274.7 cm in height. Auxiliary support of the main painting is made of 9 strainers, with a horizontal member at the center, of an average length of 134 and height of 273.4 cm joined together with nuts & bolts to make a large strainer of the size of the painting. Auxiliary support of the panel above lift is a strainer with three vertical members and that of the panel to the left of the lift is a strainer with two horizontal members, Figure 2. The support of the main



Fig.2. Graphical representation of the support, strainer and position of wooden blocks on wall as seen from verso

painting is made by stitching together 9 pieces of canvases, support of the panel above the lift is made by stitching together two pieces of canvas and the support of the panel to the left of the lift is made by stitching together three pieces of canvas. The main painting was hung by resting the top member on nine wooden blocks, tapered towards the edge screwed to the wall. Similarly panel above the lift was hung on three wooden blocks and panel to the left of the lift is hung by one wooden block. The canvas used by the artist was imported as evident from the seal of Winsor & Newton on the verso of the canvases, Figure 3. A white ground layer was applied on the canvas that was visible on the areas of the losses. Thick impasto with application



Fig.3. Verso of 'Mural' after removal from the wall. Wooden blocks used for hanging the painting can be seen on top of the wall.

using spatula were visible in various portions of the main painting whereas the panels were executed with thin paint layer. Painting is signed at the bottom right corner in Hindi in green and date "1964" in Brown colour. Another signature, "Maqbool Hussain" in Hindi, is present on panel above the lift at bottom right corner, which was over-painted by yellowish brown colour, most probably by the artist himself.

Major portion of the paint layer was in bad condition with excessive amount of flaking and unstable cracks visible in the white paint layer at the centre left, centre right portion and top left portion. Flaking and considerable amount of paint loss were also visible in the blue and green areas, at the top left, top right and bottom left portion of the canvas. Major losses in the paint layer were visible in the joints of the canvas, at the center right portion and along the stitched area at the centre of the canvas. There was fungus infection in some areas of paint layer with major deposition found at the bottom center image of an elephant and present all over the yellow color. Past restoration efforts in the form of retouching of the lost paint layer were also visible. Support and auxiliary support of the painting were in good condition except for some small pin holes in the canvas and accumulation of dust, dirt and cobwebs, Figures 4-5.



Fig.4. Delamination and loss of paint layer (detail)



Fig.5. Loss of paint layer along the joints of canvas (detail)

Treatment

Consolidation of the paint layer had to be carried out with painting in standing condition. Since paint layer was thick and area of flaking was major, there was a requirement of a stronger adhesive that could be applied in vertical condition. Beva 371 gel was found to be ideal for the purpose due to its adhesive strength, its property of consolidation by re-activation and other tested properties like high durability and compatibility for oil paintings on canvas. Prepared Beva 371 gel was applied with a temperature of about 60°C in the areas of delamination of paint layer using fine brushes and allowed to cool down. After that the adhesive is reactivated with heat there by settling the delaminating paint layer and adhering it to the support. Dust and dirt deposit in the paint layer was removed by dry brushing. It was then decided to get the painting down from the wall so as to have a clear picture of the condition of the verso of the painting. Padding was given on the four trolleys that were to be utilized to move the painting and to the projection on the opposite wall to provide cushioning to the painting when painting would be resting on it after removal from the wall. Figures 6-7.



Fig.6. A padded trolley used for supporting the painting.

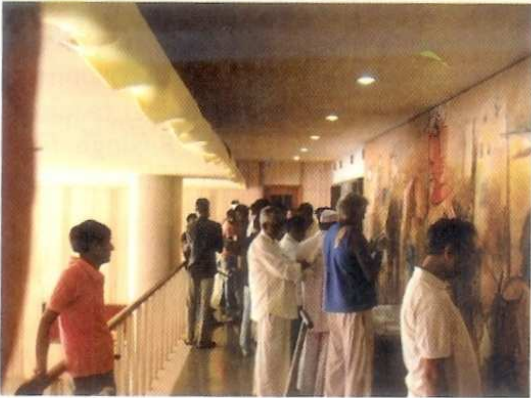


Fig.7. Padding given to the projection on the opposite wall for resting the painting after removal.

Four tables were arranged and set accordingly at regular intervals so that the top of the painting can be accessed while removal. Small pieces of masking tapes were pasted on the paint layer in the areas of crossbars of the strainer to act as markers so that in case of emergency the painting can be supported at these points. Skilled labours were arranged to move the trolleys and four conservators and 5 laborers stood on the tables to release the painting/strainer from wooden blocks. The skilled laborers and conservators were also organized to move to the verso of the painting once the painting is released from the wall.

There was a gap of about 3-4 inches above the top bar of the strainer and the ceiling. Base of the trolleys were placed below the bottom bar of the strainer. The base of the painting was lifted and pulled away from the wall by simultaneous movement of the trolleys. This gave space for the conservators and laborers to move into the gap between the painting and the wall and carry out a detailed inspection. The strainer was then pushed from the verso of the canvas so that the painting was released from the wooden blocks. The trolleys were then lowered to rest the painting on the wall. The tables and other hindrances were removed from the front of the painting and thereafter painting were moved forward away from the wall with the help of trolleys and painting supported by conservators and skilled labours and was kept slanting with painted surface supported on the padded projection on the opposite wall. Trolleys were then locked to avoid any further movement.

Cleaning of the dust and dirt from the verso of the canvas was carried out by simple dry brushing and simultaneously collecting the loose dust with vacuum cleaner. Then the verso was further cleaned with dry micro glass fibre cloth. Small pin holes were mended with thin nylon cloth using Beva 371® film (Beva 371 dry resin mix: Tala, 330 Morgan Ave, Brooklyn, New York). Verso of the painting was covered with 2 pieces of canvas stitched together to

protect accumulation of dust and dirt. Nine slits in the canvas, were made along the top edge, where the nine wooden blocks (screwed to the wall) were supposed to hold the top bar of the painting. The painting was then moved back and fixed back to the wall by repeating the removal process (in the reverse manner) with the help of trolleys and man power.

Superficial cleaning of dust and dirt deposit in the paint layer was then carried out with ethanol water mixture (40 ml ethanol and 60 ml water). Excess Beva wherever present over the paint layer was removed using acetone. Areas of loss in the paint layer was filled with a putty of French chalk & kaolin putty (1:1) using dilute PVAc emulsion (Fevicol-SH®) in water. Final inpainting of losses was carried out with Schmincke® pigments(figures 8-11).The small panels could be removed easily and similar conservation treatments imparted and panels were fixed back to the wall.



Fig.8. Major Delamination of paint layer – Before Conservation (Detail)



Fig.9. Area of Delamination of paint layer – During Conservation (Detail)



Fig.10. Fungus deposition on paint layer - Before Conservation (Detail)



Fig.11. Area of fungus deposition on paint layer During Conservation (Detail)

Conclusion

Conservation treatment of a large size painting executed as a single piece is a challenging process, and it doesn't make it any easier when the said painting is an early master piece of M. F. Hussain, one of the most celebrated painters of India. A great amount of planning and training of personnel were involved while undertaking the work. After two years of the treatment, the painting doesn't show any further deterioration problem is itself one of the best rewards for an art conservator.

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