

The Conservation of Rauschenberg's *Collection*

SFMOMA restores a forty-year-old artwork using new material

In the early 1950s, Robert Rauschenberg created an unusual work of art using oil paint, printed fabric, newspaper clippings, art reproductions, and metal, all collaged onto canvas stretched on a geometric scaffold. Nearly twenty years later Rauschenberg's *Collection*, 1953–54, entered the SFMOMA collection through a gift of Mr. and Mrs. Harry W. Anderson.

In November 1972, a museum conservator noticed that a piece of the fabric had become disengaged from the painting and had fallen to the gallery floor. This disembodied remnant had once been a significant element of the artwork, veiling a mirrored oculus that now sat exposed.

The silk fragment was so small and frayed that there was no way it could ever be re-attached to the painting, however it was kept for archival reference. And thus *Collection* was shown for twenty years with an element missing, until the combined efforts of the

artist and the SFMOMA conservation crew undertook an unusual project: re-creating a new swatch of fabric to re-cover the element of the painting that had been left uncovered for decades.

The project began when Robert Rauschenberg visited the Museum shortly after SFMOMA acquired fourteen works from his collection last year. During a tour of the galleries, the Museum staff directed the artist's attention to *Collection*, indicating where the fabric had previously been attached. Rauschenberg remembered in detail creating the work forty years previous, and he pointed out how and where the fabric should be positioned. With the consultation and expertise of the artist, it was decided that the painting should be restored as close to its original state as possible.

Rauschenberg returned to his studio, and there he concocted a mixture of instant powdered diet tea, Napa Valley Merlot, and Far Niente Cabernet Sauvignon with which he dyed two pieces of diaphanous silk. From these silk swatches the SFMOMA conservation crew carefully cut a replacement piece of fabric, gluing it carefully in as close to the original position as they could, always aware that any conservation effort must be nearly invisible and wholly reversible—two basic tenets of museum conservation.

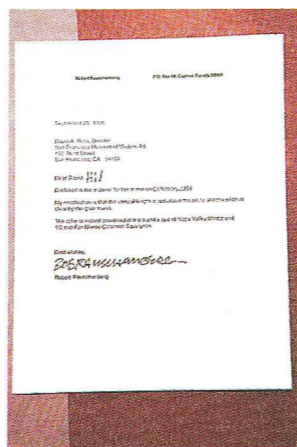
The post-conservation *Collection* now hangs in the Museum's galleries, with the mirrored oculus again discreetly veiled by sheer fabric, as originally intended by the artist.



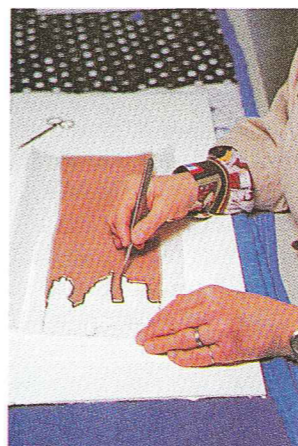
▲ Since 1972, the shaving mirror in the middle of *Collection* has been fully exposed. In this detail of the painting, one can see the glued remnants of the original silk veil.



▲ This fragment of original silk, found on the gallery floor in 1972, was saved by conservators and shown to the artist for reproduction.



▲ Robert Rauschenberg happily consented to the project and provided new silk samples, shown under the letter, dyed in his studio to match the original as closely as possible.



▲ Following the outline of the silk remnant on the painting, SFMOMA Paintings Conservator Paula DeCristofaro carefully crafted a pattern for the new silk. A non-permanent adhesive was placed along the jagged edge of the new silk.



▲ With the new silk held in place by blue low-tack tape, DeCristofaro "irons" the silk onto the painting with a heated spatula that activates the adhesive on the fabric.



▲ By lining up the new silk with the old silk, the artistic effect of the veiled mirror is reinstated, even though the new silk never precisely matched the exact color and tone of the forty-five-year-old painting. In the interest of future conservation efforts or adjustments, this process is completely reversible.

(photos: Ian Reeves; except far right, courtesy of SFMOMA Conservation Studio)