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Banners Prior to 1500

SUMMARY

The congress was organized by the Association of Swiss Museums (VMS), the Swiss National Chapter of ICOM-Suisse, and the Swiss Association for Conservation and Restoration (SKR), in conjunction with the National Office for the Preservation of Cultural Landmarks (NIKE) and the Abegg Foundation. The purpose of the meeting was to inform professionals about a joint project.

Point of Departure

Upon the instigation of the Old Armory Museum of Solothurn and the Historical Museum in Lucerne, a study group of five specialists met one and a half years ago to discuss the possibility of a project involving the preservation of banners. The resulting outline for its implementation was presented at this two-day meeting.

Swiss banners were inventoried in a definitive, foundation study by A. and B. Bruckner in 1942, which did not, however, deal with material or technical aspects nor with issues of historical restoration. Working with the Bruckner list, the study group contacted Swiss Museums and inventoried the stock of medieval banners – 208 in all. Preliminary contact with other European countries and the United States indicate the existence of isolated samples but no such collection as that in Switzerland.

History of the Collection

Basic issues were explored on the first day. Following an overview of the medieval flags preserved in Switzerland, the banners preserved at the Swiss National Museum served to illustrate a collection that has grown historically.

Methods of Conservation

One of the keynote talks examined the concept of conservation.

Conservation means: implementation of all measures necessary to preserve and protect an object in the sense of extending its life by optimizing the environmental conditions (storage, etc.).

Restoration means: direct treatment of the object itself in order to preserve its substance and authenticity. Special attention is directed today toward preventive conservation, that is, issues such as storage space, modes of storing, climate control, and materials used for protection.

Information on earlier restoration, the techniques and substances that were used, is of great significance. Historical and current methods of restoration were the subject of another detailed paper. This was followed by a discussion on the potential conservation and restoration of certain original banners in the collections of Lucerne, Solothurn and Zurich.

Questions and Projects

The papers read on the second day dealt with a national project and the focus of the different specialties involved. The museum director would like to have a comprehensive inventory, conducted by an art historian in collaboration with a restorer-conservator. It would contain all technical data (analysis of pigments, materials, age of the fabric, images depicted on the banner, description of current condition), a photographic documentation, historical investigation (heraldry, style, etc.). The restorer emphasizes that only the condition of the banner shall determine whether and how it can be put on view. The restorer's top priority is preservation and preventive conservation of the object. Knowledge of how banners were made in the Middle Ages is still very limited. In particular, little is known about their excellent weatherproof painting methods. For the historian, restriction to flags prior to 1500 is arbitrary and justified only if the project is officially treated as the first stage in a comprehensive inventorialization of all banners up to the present.

Project Proposed by the Study Group

Phase I: Meeting to finalize project description
Scheduling: by the end of 1994

Museums must be contacted for their binding agreement to support the project; questions of organization and personnel must be solved; those responsible for various aspects of the project must be designated.

Phase II: Conservation of the banners
Scheduling: 1995–1999

Of the 208 banners before 1500, some 100 have been conserved or restored to date. The history of their restoration must be researched and recorded. The condition of these objects must be examined, and modern methods of restoring banners, as practiced in Switzerland and abroad, must be studied. On the basis of these findings, directives for the conservation of the Swiss inventory must be worked out. 108 banners have not been restored; this requires materials research such as analysis of the pigments, of the fabrics, etc.

A. and B. Bruckner's publication of 1942 needs revision which – given the framework of this particular project – would apply only to banners prior to 1500. The history of the textiles and their restoration as well as the military historical context of the objects also requires research.

Phase III: Exhibition as a long-term goal
Scheduling: 1999 or later

Both parts of the project: "physical conservation" and "research and study" are prerequisites for the preparation of an exhibition of the entire stock of pre-1500 banners. Such an exhibition would show the origins of the objects, their use and the history of their preservation

through the centuries. Methods of restoration and conserving textiles, problems of storage, museum presentation (the transition from free-floating banner to flat, framed picture), and the use of copies could also be presented.

In the closing discussion, it was emphasized that a detailed report on the current condition of the flags must precede questions of conservation and further investigation.