

Guys who say old is gold

A Thane couple is offering professional museum quality conservation and restoration services to institutes and individuals



A traditional Chinese vase, before and after restoration



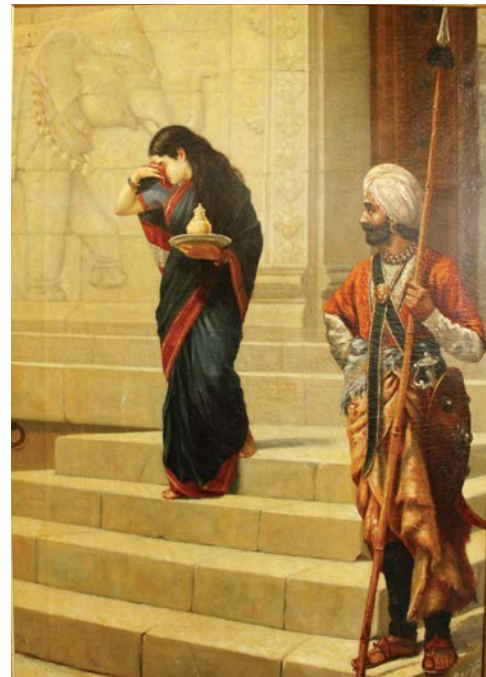
CYNERA RODRICKS

NO matter how hard you try to preserve those treasured heirlooms, with time many become brittle and crack easily. Poor storage can also result in mold growth or grime and dirt build-up. This is where professional conservationists come in. Madhura and Anant Shelke say it's not just museums and cultural institutions that should seek out the service of restoration professionals, but individuals too.

Conservation is the practice of preserving and extending the life of an actively deteriorating artwork while restoration involves renovating and returning the artefact to its original condition. Madhura Shelke says that when she and her husband Anant decided to study restoration and conservation, there were no colleges in Mumbai offering these courses. They went to the National Research Laboratory for Conservation of Cultural Property in Lucknow and then, to the INTACH Conservation Institute in Bhubaneswar to specialise in the conservation of paper and palm leaf manuscripts.

After their return to Mumbai, they got in touch with galleries and collectors, worked at INTACH Mumbai and then at the Dr Bhau Daji Lad Museum as senior conservators till 2015. During this time, they had frequent restoration requests from clients, which ultimately led them to start the AMS Fine Art Conservation in Thane in 2011. "Art and artefacts have the power to teach, inspire, enlighten, and evoke emotion. Without their protection and preservation, we will lose our inheritance," says Madhura.

While the Thane outpost has allowed the Shelkes to work on bigger conservation projects in government museums and corporate collections, they have also been able to service individuals. They have conserved oil and acrylic paintings, ceramics, metals, stones, cinema posters, textiles, sculptures, wooden objects, lacquerware, frames and tapestries, among other items. "The conservator and restorer's



job is to keep the art object as close to its original state as possible for as long as possible, using experience, skill, and scientific knowledge," explains Anant. The results of good restoration, he says, often seem miraculous, especially as the owner of a painting may have never seen it in its original state. So, depending on the needs of the artefact, culturally appropriate and historically accurate materials are specially ordered to complete the treatment.

There are various techniques, depending on the material of the artwork and the damages it has gone through. Each material must be handled in a unique manner, and the selected treatment has to be compatible and reversible in the long run. Paintings and their frames, says Anant, form a complex structure that is easily damaged if knocked over. The materials are also sensitive to and can be damaged by environmental extremes and changes in humidity and heat, as well as by light, dust, dirt and pollution. "How well a painting survives over the years depends on keeping it in a good environment and on sensible handling, storage and display."

The Shelkes have attended several conservation seminars, workshops and conferences abroad and have been honoured with the UNESCO Asia Pacific Heritage Award in 2005 as team members who conserved artefacts at Byculla's Dr Bhau Daji Lad Museum.

The Shelkes now plan to venture into designing displays for museums in India. They also conserve and restore paintings and antiques for private clients, corporate collections and institutions. The time taken to conserve or restore an artefact, along with the charges, depend on the extent of its damages. A project can take anywhere from a week to four months to complete. The materials used for restoration are of international standards, and are purchased from suppliers abroad.

A client must share an image of the art piece that needs repair, along with details of the damage and the size of the artwork. If necessary, they may visit the location to inspect it. The price of conserving objects and artefacts starts at ₹7,000.

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MADHURA AND ANANT SHELKE



Anant Shelke at work on an original Raja Ravi Varma painting

WHAT: Restoring and conserving damaged artefacts

WHERE: AMS Fine Art Conservation

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(Left) A 200-year-old Garud statue from the temple of Nira Narsingpur, Solapur, before and after restoration, and (below) a Raja Ravi Varma painting