



Valeria working on a glass object at MMA (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

SPECIAL PROJECT REPORTS

Searching for Special Repairs on Porcelain Figurines

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During my work as a self-employed conservator of ceramics, glass and stone, I recently came across an object with some very peculiar old restorations. The object discussed in this article is a porcelain figurine from the German factory *Königliche Porzellan-Manufaktur* (KPM). This year the Berlin factory, founded by Frederick II of Prussia, is celebrating its 250th anniversary.

The figurine depicts a donkey pulling a milk cart with a female farmer (Figure 1). As expected, the damage occurred in all the ‘weaker’ areas; mostly the reins (Figure 2) but also to the tip of one of the donkey’s ears and the farmer’s wife had her head broken off.

What was interesting about this object though, were the old restorations (Figure 3). One was to the farmer’s neck and the other the donkey’s reins. The two restorations were completely different, but both were very unusual.

The farmer’s head had broken off and been bonded back in place by a previous conservator. And, as sometimes occurs, he added something to the figure to hide the break. In this case the break was hidden by adding a little necklace. A small silver chain was glued around the farmer’s neck with the ends meeting at the front of her torso. At this point, a small green stone was added to serve as a pendant, making the break hard to spot.

I found it a heartwarming solution: giving a country girl a beautiful avant-garde necklace in order to hide the fact that she had lost her head.

Restoring the reins must however have been more difficult. How could you make thin strips of porcelain out of something other than porcelain? Observation of the fills under a microscope showed that the ‘conservator’ used paper to make fills for the reins, a material you don’t often find in combination with porcelain. Long strips of paper were bonded over the areas where there were losses and then papier-mâché was added as a bulk material underneath the strips. The whole fill was then covered with a lacquer or other consolidant.



Fig. 1: Porcelain figurine before (upper) and after (lower) treatment (photo: Eva Wolfs)

Close observation of the paper fills exposed how the paper was color-printed, making it appear that the strips were cut from a magazine-cover (Figure 4). Perhaps he chose this type of paper in order to give greater strength to the thin strips?



Fig. 2: Reins before (upper) and after (lower) treatment (photo: Eva Wolfs)

When I told the owner about the quirky inventiveness used to restore the object in the past he quickly realized that the ‘conservator’ must have been his father. The owner’s father had passed away in the early 1980s, so he estimated that the repairs had probably been carried out in the early 1970s. He laughed as I described the necklace and said that such a solution was typical for his father. He told me about an object I had previously restored for this family, also a KPM porcelain figurine: a beautiful maiden carrying a basket of grapes. She was broken in half; with a break line around the waist. This was solved by our ‘past conservator’ by bonding the two halves together and then covering up the break with a cigar-band to represent a beautiful gold belt around her waist. However, when I received the object, the paper had already lost any adhesion to the porcelain and no trace of it could be found.

Because of the emotional value of the restoration, the owner chose to put back the necklace after the treatment was completed.



Fig. 3: Old fill in place (photo: Eva Wolfs)

For the treatment the object was first cleaned with a steam cleaner. Fills were made with Milliput, sanded down to size and then retouched with Golden acrylics and varnishes.

To bond the female farmer’s head, a 50% (w/v) solution of Paraloid B72 in acetone was used. I felt that in this case that Paraloid would be strong enough, since it is a decorative object in a home-environment and gravity would help keep the head in place. To rebond her necklace, a few drops of the same solution were used.



Fig. 4: Old fill removed (photo: Eva Wolfs)

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