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*Tricks of the trade*

*What's the best way to restore an old painting?*

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Restoring paintings covers both restoring and conserving. Conservation work aims to stop a work from deteriorating more than it is already, and that can encompass atmospheric conditions.

I often advise people on humidity fluctuations. Humidity changes have wrecked more of our cultural assets in the past hundred years than in a thousand years before that. Restoration, as it implies, is about restoring things back to how they looked more or less.

It has changed over generations. We are now much more in tune with having art in a state that shows its history, its wrinkles. At the beginning of the last century everything had to look absolutely pristine.

If a painting is ripped, we will reform the rip and join up the ragged edges and try to join up each thread so there are no lumps and bumps. It's time consuming and painstaking. When you've got a large rip through a canvas you have to virtually go from one end to the other in one go, you can't really stop, so it can be quite painful.

Some of the best things I've restored are self-portraits, or portraits of an artist's family. Those are the most insightful bits of painting you can come across because the artist understands the subject of the painting and has an interaction with it. I adore seeing the technique of how an artist works and seeing where an artist changed his mind. In portraiture, the eyes change. A technique called infra-red picks up the underlying drawing. Cleaning is the most tricky part of it, and it takes a lot of investigation to make sure what you're doing is correct.

I love getting involved with the collectors who are normally terribly enthusiastic and sometimes quite bizarre, there's one collector who has all of the windows of his house

blacked out because he wants to protect his paintings and he doesn't want anybody to know he's got them either.

I sometimes sit in front of a picture in the evening when no one else is around. I put on a nice piece of music and pour a glass of wine and sit there, and you can be in exactly the same position as that artist was. It's the closest thing to time travel when you're there with your arm raised, trying to recreate the lost eye. You're back there with that man and you know what he's thinking about. It's so exhilarating. It makes the hairs go up on the back of your head.