

# When an Artwork Needs a New Coat of Paint

## SPEAKERS

Paul Amaral, Don Urquhart, Rachel Rivenc, Samantha Springer, Julie Wolfe

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Samantha Springer 00:05

This is the Portland Art Museum podcast, a channel between the Museum and you. Our goal is to amplify community voices through conversations and personal stories. And we're here to facilitate respectful dialogue, debate and the free exchange of ideas. To participate, submit your idea at [pam.to/podcast](https://pam.to/podcast) idea. We invite you to connect with art through your own experience, voice and personal journey. relevant links and transcripts for each episode are available at [portlandartmuseum.org/podcast](https://portlandartmuseum.org/podcast). I'm Samantha Springer, the museum's conservator. Not only do I ensure that the art that comes through the museum is safe from light and other natural elements but I also analyze and treat art that has been damaged. Sometimes we acquire pieces that are quite old, or maybe human interference calls for repair. On this episode, we're going to talk about Roy Lichtenstein's brushstrokes, an outdoor sculpture that was given to the Portland Art Museum in 2004, to commemorate the opening of the Museum's Mark building, which is home to the Jubitz center of contemporary art, the Crumpacker family library, our two ballrooms and administrative offices. To tell us a little more about brushstrokes and its arrival at the museum in 2005. Here's Don Urquhart, our Director of collections and exhibitions.



Don Urquhart 01:36

For 15 years, Roy Lichtenstein's "Brushstrokes" has been a symbol for the museum, a beacon, an invitation and a landmark. I can't tell you how many times people have said I'll

meet you at "Brushstrokes" . And I'm excited to see the Rothko Pavilion take shape, knowing that "Brushstrokes" will continue to do that job for us and all of our visitors. The sculpture was made and lived in New York, upstate New York before it came here and moving it across country was a major effort. Some states had requirements that made us ship it during the night. Some had us ship it only during the day. Some required a wide load escort truck and some didn't. So just moving it state by state incrementally from the East Coast to Portland was one effort. Working with the builders and the tradesmen the concrete pourers, working with city to permit this... I recall the sculpture needed an address. It was so monumental that it needed to be situated on the city records as an address in Portland, Oregon. We had to crane it into position, all while the Mark building was still under construction. We had to draw new plans and excavate the ground around it and get structural engineers to weigh in on the safety and the security of this installation. It's a really deep and thick concrete pad with rebar spread all throughout it. And we had to coordinate lighting and drainage. It's a very complex piece to install.

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Samantha Springer 03:16

When "Brushstrokes" was installed back in 2005, the footings were covered in cement. So in order to increase flexibility, especially leading up to construction of the Rothko Pavilion, we recently removed it from the cement structure and bolted it to the top of the cement surface. This also gave us the opportunity to treat the entire piece with a fresh coat of paint. So every painted outdoor sculpture typically requires a very specific paint. This is where things get a little bit nerdy. Originally, Lichtenstein was working with DuPont's Imron paints, which are a marine grade industrial high solids polyurethane coating. One of the colors that he wanted wasn't available in the Imron line and so the light blue is actually an all-grip paint made by AkzoNobel. This was back in 1996 and paint technologies have actually come a long way since then. So luckily, we're not the first museum to treat a piece like this. And we are able to draw on the good work of a lot of other institutions. Colleagues in the conservation fields are typically really open to sharing and collaboration, as we are all working towards the greater goal of preserving cultural heritage of humankind. So one of the projects that was most helpful to us was one that took place in 2011 at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles. This is Julie Wolfe, conservator of Decorative Arts and Sculpture at the Getty Museum, who spearheaded that work.

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Julie Wolfe 04:45

The Getty Museum acquired a painted outdoor sculpture by Roy Lichtenstein called "Three Brushstrokes." The only conservation that I did prior to his installation was to touch up paint failures locally. There was some blanching the clear coat that I sanded and recoated, or corrosion, making the paint blister that I excavated, filled and painted over to

blend. After a couple of years, we took a closer look at the sculpture, and I was immediately drawn into researching the artist's sculptural process. Lichtenstein's fundamental use of color was in primary shades, and his palette was remarkably consistent. Knowing that, we felt the colors on three brushstrokes were not typical for Lichtenstein, and that the light yellow appeared too dark and warm, and the red was also too dark and low in saturation. That observation was made based on curatorial wisdom from our Getty Research Institute colleagues, and prompted me to seek out the opinion of the Roy Lichtenstein foundation. They agreed and it turned out that the sculpture had been restored in 1994 by sanding down the original paint, which has started to flake and chalk, and applying restoration paint on top. The final color mixing from that restoration was not representative of the original appearance. From this premise, my research with the scientists at the Getty Conservation Institute, and collaborations with the estate and Foundation have resulted in a thorough survey and documentation of Lichtenstein's materials and process for outdoor sculpture.

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Samantha Springer 06:26

One thing that's important to note is that the Getty's "Three Brushstrokes" was painted by Roy Lichtenstein's assistant James De Pasquale in 1984. Portland Art Museum's "Brushstrokes" wasn't actually fabricated until 2004, after his passing in 1997. When the artist's hand is involved in the making of a physical work of art, different questions are raised in the approach to treatment than when the paint surface appears mechanically applied, as in the "Brushstroke" sculpture that is here in Portland. Some of the primary tenants to approaching conservation treatment are for our interventions to be reversible, to preserve original surfaces, and also to use long lasting materials. However, for outdoor sculpture that are not protected from the environment, partial or even complete repainting is an accepted fate as part of a long term preservation plan, especially when the paint is sprayed on consistently as in a commercial or industrial application. So in the case of "Three Brushstrokes" Roy Lichtenstein and James De Pasquale were physically involved in the process. And there was evidence that they had actually hand applied paint to the surface, which brought up the question for the staff at the Getty as to whether or not the original paint should be preserved.

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Julie Wolfe 07:56

Lichtenstein's painting was distinctive, in that he developed his own homemade paint system so that the quality and color of his painted surface could more closely resemble his easel paintings on canvas. Later on in his career, after about 1994, he transitioned to using only commercial systems and even abandoned the brush to have fabricators apply the automotive type paints with an air spraying technique. The main reason for this shift

and painting techniques was because the artists saw paint systems starting to fail, and assumed that the commercial products alone would likely be more durable over time. The decision that needed to be made with the restoration of "Three Brushstrokes" at the Getty in 2011 wasn't whether to repaint or not, but with what type of paint. The trending in conservation at the time was to repaint his sculptures regardless of what period it was made using his later industrial coatings manufactured by DuPont or AkzoNobel. We took a step back and thought about how so few original paint systems on his early works remain due to restorations over the years. We were sensitive to how the memory of the studio's hand-painted surfaces were being lost.

**S** Samantha Springer 09:20

The original application of paint was very different between our piece and the one at the Getty. And although the application was different, one constant is the color palette. So since the initial investigation into "Three Brushstrokes" in 2011, the Getty Conservation Institute has been working closely with the Roy Lichtenstein foundation to develop an approved palette of improved paints for future conservation treatments of painted outdoor sculptures by Lichtenstein. This is Rachel Rivenc, the head of Conservation and Preservation at the Getty Conservation Institute to talk more about that work.

**R** Rachel Rivenc 10:00

The Getty Conservation Institute is an institution that's dedicated to advancing conservation in the visual arts very broadly. We don't have a collection. We do collaborate with the Getty Museum. But that's only a small part of what we do. So we come up with our own research agenda. And outdoor painting sculpture came up quite early on as a problematic area of conservation because of the extreme challenges of being outdoors, obviously, extreme environment, sunshine, rain, snow. Also, the public interaction can be quite damaging, because it's not like an object in the museum where people feel a distance, they get climbed upon, touched, skateboarded on sometimes. So they're faced with extreme challenges. And then there's these extreme treatment of, you know, stripping the existing paint, and then repainting them that are very expensive. So you want to minimize them. And then when you have to do them, it's crucial that you have a mechanism in place to ensure that you are faithful to the original. You know, we have a few extreme cases where we know sculptures have been repainted the wrong color or the wrong level of gloss. One of the aspects of the outdoor painting sculpture project at the GCI, the Getty Conservation Institute, has been to create a repository of approved coupons. When I say approved, it means approved by artists, their studios, foundations or estates. And the idea is that these sculptures, because they are outdoors, the paint deteriorates quite rapidly, and they need to be repainted, which is a treatment that would

be considered very extreme in other areas of conservation, but it's routine for outdoor painted sculpture because, you know, it needs to look good, and also the paint needs to protect the substrates. So they get repainted. But then the problem is how do you make sure that they are repainted in a way that is faithful to the original paints. So we realized that paint codes change, composition of paints change, so you can't rely on that kind of documentation. So the idea that we came up with in consultation with artist estates, foundations, conservators was to have physical coupons, documenting the appearance of sculpture. And these coupons will be approved again by the artists if they are alive or otherwise by their foundations, their estates, and that they would be capped at the GCI in a very secure environment that where they will age as little as possible. So that even in 200 years if someone wants to know what the actual Lichtenstein green look like the concert that coupon and match it with whatever paint will be available 200 years from now. So that's what we did. And Roy Lichtenstein has used a large number of colors on his outdoor sculptures almost as many as for his easel paintings. So I think we got about 322 coupons, and all the coupons were made by Amaral which is a fabricator and paint applicator. And every coupon has been approved individually by James De Pasquale who was Roy Lichtenstein's assistant.



Samantha Springer 13:40

In repainting "Brushstrokes" the coupons we borrowed from the Getty Conservation Institute were vital to our process. We hired Alex Obney of Fine Art Finishes to perform the repainting and upon our initial examination of the sculpture, we determine the level of gloss on the coupons didn't match the sculpture. So working closely with the Roy Lichtenstein Foundation, we settled on the paint and the gloss level and got to work. Aside from the Getty, and the Portland Art Museum, many other museums have undergone treatment on Lichtenstein's painted outdoor sculptures. After experiencing severe fading and chalking due to direct sunlight for about a decade. "House I" got its turned to be repainted at the Leeum Samsung Museum of Art in Seoul, South Korea. After difficulties arose during the painting process, a great deal of adjustments and compromises were necessary to finish the project. Conservation doesn't always happen after a piece has been on display for a period of time. The fabrication of a piece like "Brushstrokes" includes a consideration of all potential harmful elements, not just skateboarders. And although "Brushstrokes" here in Portland is the only one of its kind. There are about a dozen other variations in the larger series, we spoke about "Three Brushstrokes" at the Getty. Another sculpture worth mentioning is "Brushstrokes in Flight" at the Museo de Arte de Ponce in Puerto Rico. Having been fabricated in 2010, it hasn't quite reached it's time to be treated. But there was certainly a close call in 2017, when Hurricane Maria destroyed much of Puerto Rico. Here to talk about it is the person responsible for its fabrication. Paul Amaral. Rachel mentioned him earlier as the one who

created the coupons for the GCI, and the Roy Lichtenstein foundation.

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Paul Amaral 15:40

What we did in engineering and designing that piece worked. We approached it as though it would be hit by a force five hurricane, at some point in time, it wasn't a probability, it was a certainty that it would be hit, given its location. We really worked the engineering and the design of the interior structure really hard. And our engineer subjected it to the to, I think 175 mile an hour wind load in the analysis. And if you're familiar with the "Brushstrokes in Flight" it has very cantilevered element that's high off the ground. It's a good wind sail with a lot of torque generated by that sail on the main body of the sculpture in the base. So we designed an internal structure to counteract all that torquing, that would occur during the hurricane. And the thing about a hurricane is it's a long duration event, it's hours of high wind, so metals fatigue, and that was considered during the design phase and construction. And again, the materials are straight out the marine industry, marine alloys, wise marine welding technique, marine paint. And the result is that after Hurricane Maria, it proved to us that our design and our process worked. Their were trees down. I have a photograph of the of the Museum shortly after Maria, maybe 24 hours after it happened. And there's a lot of debris, the trees all over the place. And the sculpture is surprisingly untouched. I'm surprised that a piece of metal from somewhere else didn't hit it. But evidently, it survived without any damage whatsoever. So I was thrilled to see that. And it took quite some time after the hurricane to learn of its fate. We know that Puerto Rico was pretty much shut down and all information in and out took forever so I I sweated it out for weeks, and then learned that we succeeded, It is a fantastic feeling.

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Samantha Springer 18:09

Paul wasn't the fabricator of "Brushstrokes," but his experience with "Brushstrokes in Flight" gives us hope in the event of a natural disaster. Although Portland doesn't have the same climate as Puerto Rico and isn't in danger of hurricanes and tropical storms, there is seismic activity and the threat of the impending Cascadia earthquake. And though there are no guarantees serious efforts had been made during the installation of "Brushstrokes" back in 2005. Here's Don Urquhart again to recall that experience,

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Don Urquhart 18:41

Just as the Mark building required major seismic upgrades so too did the outdoor sculptures, or at least certainly Lichtenstein, as big as it is. And so working with structural engineers and the construction team, we designed an installation that could be as safe as

any building or property newly constructed in this town.



Samantha Springer 19:04

We are grateful for the efforts of Paul Amaral, the Getty Conservation Institute, Julie Wolfe, the conservation team at the Leeum Museum, and many others for all of their findings that we have implemented in our treatment. The level of respect for our conservation supported by these collaborations means that the citizens and visitors of Portland will be able to enjoy "Brushstrokes" for generations to come. It's just in front of Portland Art Museum's Mark building, where it can be viewed at all times for free. Thank you for listening to the Portland Art Museum Podcast. For more information about the conservation efforts at the Portland Art Museum, visit [portlandartmuseum.org/conservation](http://portlandartmuseum.org/conservation). This episode is part of our S.A.M. at PAM series, where science and art meet. I'd like to thank Julie Wolfe, Rachel Rivenc, Don Urquhart, and Paul Amaral for lending us their time and voices, and Tim Halbur, for facilitating audio recording at the Getty. I'd especially like to thank the Roy Lichtenstein Foundation, and the Bank of America Art Conservation Project for funding this conservation effort. And lastly, I'd also like to thank you, the listener.