

# Property Casualty 360

## The case of the ship lost in a fog

Did steam really damage a masterpiece beyond repair?

BY TOM KIRKPATRICK  
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The British barque Duneam at sea under full sail and calling for a pilot by Antonio Jacobsen

The owner's concern was apparent: the painting had developed a white haze or "fog" over its entire surface from the steam exposure. He said his wife had tried to clean the painting to remove the "fog" but it would not come off. The owner believed the painting was obviously ruined and claimed a total loss of \$30,000.

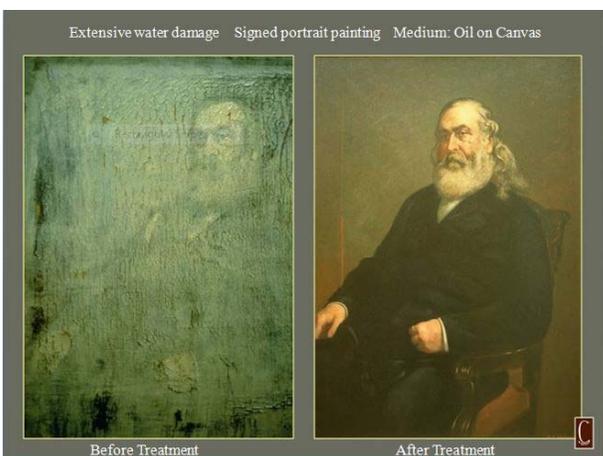
The \$30,000 valuation by the owner was not unrealistic based on Jacobsen's market value, but the bigger question was: Did the fog truly ruin the painting?

The artist had applied a varnish coat over the oil painting upon its completion. This is very common with oil paintings. Artists apply a varnish coat to achieve an enhanced level of color saturation. In addition, the varnish coat provides a degree of protection to the painting. This added protection is a very good thing, particularly when an owner tries to clean a painting with household cleaners which may include damaging chemicals.

When the painting was subjected to the steam, water vapor penetrated the painting and became trapped between the varnish layer and the oil paint. This trapped water, created the fogging the owner was seeing. This "fogging" is technically referred to as "bloom." The blooming seen on this painting is very similar to the white rings found on wood furniture that are formed when someone sets down a wet glass directly on its surface.

Although the painting outwardly appeared ruined to an untrained eye, the fact that the varnish coat and the oil paints are chemically different, allows an expert conservator to use a solvent which removes only the varnish coat, while having no ill effect on the actual oil paint. When the varnish coat was removed, so too was the bloom.

Would the varnish coat replacement trigger any diminution of value to this 100-year old painting? No, replacing the varnish coat is not seen as a negative. A fresh varnish coat will often improve a painting's appearance, replacing varnish which may have yellowed with age and restoring the painting to its original color appearance. The painting may actually be enhanced if the original varnish was badly yellowed, or if there had been significant surface dirt, nicotine stains or accretion, all of which may wipe away with the removal of the old varnish.



The cost for the varnish coat replacement is relatively inexpensive, running \$850 in this instance.

Because of privacy concerns, the actual painting cannot be shown here, however the Conservation Center in Chicago has provided these images of a painting before and after it was treated for bloom to better illustrate the issue.

Now, would you have made the mistake of throwing this painting in the dumpster? What about that spectacular gilded frame? That's a discussion for another day.

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