

by Joan Altabe

QUESTION:

Who's Afraid of Red,
Yellow and Blue?

ANSWER:

Those Green
with Envy

Conflicts are a natural state of affairs. But some loose-lipped conservators in Holland have abused the privilege.

In the spring of 1986, unknown Dutch realist Gerard Jan van Bladeren, armed with a box cutter, sliced up a Barnett Newman abstraction as it hung in Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum. Called *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue III*, the painting, valued at \$1.3 million, shows an all-over red monochrome, except for a blue stripe on one end and a yellow stripe on the other. The conservation community declared the

painting beyond repair.

Enter art restorer Daniel Goldreyer. Newman's widow, Anna Lee Newman, recommended Goldreyer to the museum. He had already restored 15 other of works by her husband. The artist himself wrote in 1969, "Mr. Goldreyer is the only one who has the facilities, the experience and the ability to conserve my painting properly."

Goldreyer got the job and on completion was paid \$285,000. Then came accusations that he botched the job. Newspapers and magazines around the world reported the

accusation. “Take the Money and Run,” was a headline in London’s international *The Art Newspaper*. *Time* magazine asked if the work had been murdered. *Art News* magazine quoted “a highly respected expert on conservation,” Ernst van de Wetering, an Amsterdam art historian, who said Goldreyer lied about the technique he used.

The accusations surprised Goldreyer, whose restoration credits ranged from Rembrandt and Rubens to Rothko and Rauschenberg. Goldreyer is also founder of the international code of ethics for restorers. As he told me, “For many years I had led the efforts to carry out a set of ethical standards in the field of conservation of art. Suddenly I was portrayed as a villainous fraud.”

He sued the city of Amsterdam, which funds the museum, for defamation of character.

After a five-year battle, Goldreyer won a \$100,000 settlement in exchange for dropping his lawsuit. The legal settlement with Amsterdam, “justifies my belief that an honest craftsman can maintain his integrity,” he said. “It came as close as you can get

to being an apology. It was an admission that they attacked my honorable intent – to perform a task that no one in the art world would undertake – to preserve this masterpiece for future generations. In our contract museum officials were obliged to make regular visits to observe the progress of the work. They knew the intricate details. They saw it in each stage. When it was finished the museum director came to my Long Island City studio for final approval. They accepted the work, they paid in full for satisfactory completion.”

In fact, *Art in America* magazine reported at the time that the museum director, Wim Beeren, said the painting’s “esthetic function has been recaptured.”

The criticism came mainly from Elizabeth Bracht, chief conservator of the museum, who had been overlooked in the restoration process, and Van de Wetering, who also is a conservation expert in Amsterdam. Obviously, he was left out of the process, too.

Their complaints had to do with so-called nuances of Newman’s color, which were said to be lost to Goldreyer’s supposed use of acrylic house

paint and a roller. Newman was known to have used a brush and oil-based paint. If acrylic paint and a roller were used, went the nay-saying, anyone could have done the restoration and for far less money. A Dutch laboratory confirmed the use of acrylics, which Goldreyer explained was simply a protective alkyd “seal.” He stood by his restoration as faithful to the original.

Not that legitimate questions weren’t raised in the Goldreyer restoration. But they’re the ones that dog many restorations; i.e. should a damaged work be returned to its original state or be left visible as a historical record?

Beeren opted to conceal the slashes against the advice of his own restoration expert (presumably Bracht) and several other specialists. He explained that leaving the amount of damage that the Newman painting showed would have spoiled the view..

Meanwhile, the criticisms continued. The *International Herald Tribune* reported that one Dutch expert, Ijsbrand Hummelen, a member of a commission that examined the painting after the attack, said that Goldreyer’s protective

acrylic coat on Newman's oil took place without consulting the museum. Hummelen said the restoration had destroyed a shimmering, silky effect that the artist had achieved with subtle juxtaposition of magenta and sienna. He also said the repair had violated the first rule of restoration in that it is not reversible and was not confined only to the damaged parts.

In the end, Beeren rejected the notion that Goldreyer used a roller with red paint to patch up the canvas. "It was an enormous job," he said. "I am convinced that it brings back the value of the painting."

Today, a barrier and alarm system keeps visitors away from the painting. Some complain that the museum is trying to keep people from seeing the repairs too closely. But Beeren said he erected the barriers to keep attacks from happening again. He may have been remembering that in 1982 a veterinary medicine student attacked Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue IV*. And, not five years after Van Bladeren knifed *Who's Afraid...III*, he entered the Stedelijk Museum aiming again for the restored painting. Unable to get close enough,

he went for another Newman painting, called *Cathedra*, and slashed it five times.

Commenting on the restoration fracas, the *International Herald Tribune* allowed that the Dutch generally are a "critical bunch." Adding fuel to the conflagration is the fact that the museum is publicly-owned, which means that tax-payer money was used for the restoration. Likely the very purchase of the Newman painting, also made with public money, didn't go down well. *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III* is of the Minimalist school, a style that is not the most popular in the world.

Chiming in on the uproar over Goldreyer's restoration was Abigail Esman, co-author of a book (in Dutch) on contemporary art:

"Few countries take to art-world controversy like the Netherlands. In America, such matters tend to stay within limited art circles, but here in Holland virtually everyone knows about the scandal surrounding Daniel Goldreyer's disastrous restoration of Barnett Newman's 1967 *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III*, belonging to Amsterdam's

Stedelijk Museum.

Note her bit of editorializing, calling the restoration "disastrous." She concluded, "In the Netherlands, art speak is something of a national pastime, second perhaps only to soccer."

Newman fans may take from her that art in Holland is liable to get a kick in the head. Restorers from elsewhere best learn to duck. 🐓