

Obituary: Gustav Berger

Submitted by Graham on 16 Nov 2016

Gustav Berger, paintings conservator known for his innovative approaches to our profession, died on March 5, 2006 at the age of 85. He was born in Vienna on July 28, 1920. He painted when he was young and had an exhibition of his paintings in Vienna when he was only 18 years old. He studied Civil Engineering at the Haifa Technical Institute served with the British Army from 1940 to 1946 and with the Israel Defense Forces from 1947-48. He was trained in photogrammetry and made maps from photographs in Israel. Berger noted in his FAIC oral history interview in 1976, "Photogrammetry is very good training for restoration. As a map maker you must have tremendous control of line drawing; photogrammetry is really perspective." He had grown up with art; his father and grandfather were the presidents of the Art Dealers Association in Austria, and his father had sent him to look at the treatments being carried out by his restorers. His brother, Dr. George Berger, became the president of the Art Critics Association in Australia and taught art at the University of Sydney. Gustav Berger married Mira Kanishtshiker in Naples in 1946; they had met a year earlier at the Palazzo Pitti. Gustav and Mira moved to New York in 1954; and Gustav worked with Julius Lowy for two years, Kress conservator Mario Modestini for eight (1956-1964), and then assisted Frick conservator William Suhr (1964-67). He also spent six weeks helping with the Florence flood rescue activities. Berger built one of the first hot tables in the US for Modestini in 1961 and credited Suhr for suggesting that he invent a new adhesive; Berger noted, "Since I had gained the reputation of a troubleshooter, Suhr asked me to formulate an adhesive that would be stronger than wax, free of the hazards of aqueous glue-paste, stick to oil paint, and be reversible." He opened his own studio and received his first research grant in 1967, and was lining paintings with BEVA 371 by 1969. BEVA (Berger ethylene vinyl acetate) became the most widely used paintings conservation adhesive by 1984, according to a survey conducted by Gerry Hedley at the Courtauld. Berger received at least sixteen additional research grants and published over sixty papers. In 2000, Archetype Books published his major book Conservation of Paintings: Research and Innovations, written with William H. Russell. Berger taught more than twenty years of workshops in Canada, UK, Italy, Austria, Spain, The Netherlands, Brazil, and in locations throughout the US. For his innovative work on the conservation of the Atlanta cyclorama he received the Georgia Governor's Award for Excellence in 1982 and a standing ovation following his paper on the cyclorama treatment at the AIC conference in 1981. He received the Austrian Cross of Honor for Art and Science First Class and additional honors from the Art Restorers Association of the Netherlands, the IIC-Spanish Group, and in Poland following his treatment of the Panorama of Raclawice; Gustav Berger was made an Honorary Member of the American Institute for Conservation in 1991. Berger was known for his courage in accepting challenging "special projects." In addition to designing the complex treatments for the Cyclorama of the Battle of Atlanta (13 x 106 meters) and the Panorama of Raclawice in Wroclaw Poland (14 x 113 m), he also treated two sections of the Vanderlyn Panorama (3.35 x 26 m and 3.35 x 25.3

m) and a theatre curtain painted by Picasso in 1919, glue paint on unprimed canvas (6.3 x 5.8m). In 1957, Alfred H. Barr, Jr. of the Museum of Modern Art in New York had declared that the curtain could not be cleaned or preserved. Gustav Berger cleaned and lined the Picasso curtain eighteen years later in 1975, and he noted in his 2000 book that the piece was in very good condition in the hallway of the Seagram Building in New York when he last inspected it in 1999. Gudmund Vigtel, formerly Director of the High Museum in Atlanta, noted that his search committee "interviewed some of the most prominent American conservators, all of whom backed off from the daunting challenge of the nearly 400-foot, 90-year-old painting of the Battle of Atlanta. It was Gustav's extraordinarily resourceful professionalism that saved this monumental work which 25 years later shows no sign of physical problems." Gustav and his wife Mira always gave their time and resources generously. When I taught the introductory "block," and brought the ten Winterthur/UD first-year students to New York each year, the Bergers would plan their vacation around our visit, give demonstrations, distribute samples and information packets, and serve tea and cakes. Diane Falvey, Eugénie Hélène Knight, and Lambertus Vercouteren remember that visiting professionals were received with similar generosity and welcome and witnessed his passion and great enthusiasm for his work. Peter Fodera said at the funeral service on March 8, "Gustav was passionate about his work and totally fascinated with problems concerning the mechanics and structure of artworks. He was intrepid, tenacious, and sensitive in his quest for solutions." Janet Bridgland remembers working with Gustav for the editing of the '93 and '96 ICOM-CC Preprints. She noted, Mira would call and "lay the groundwork for discussion, then Gustav would take the phone. By phone or in person, they were unfailingly polite and clearly functioned as a team. Always eager to share his latest findings, their enthusiasm was contagious." Gustav trained a number of young conservators and assistants. Jean D. Portell recorded a total of twenty-three students in her FAIC oral history interview with the Bergers on August 3, 1995. Peter Fodera remembers Gustav as his teacher reciting poems, quoting Goethe, or humming along to pieces on the classical radio station. Gloria Giffords remembers his humor and his anecdotes in various accents. (Gustav was fluent in English, German, Italian, and Hebrew.) Boris Sternberg posted on the studio wall "God made Gustav, and Gustav made BEVA." Berger's co-researcher William Russell praised his "uncanny ability to identify fundamental behaviors observed in a variety of contexts." Christopher Stavroudis was first drawn into the field by Berger's 1975 article on BEVA and notes, "From developing BEVA and leading the movement to improve lining techniques, to the foam rubber 'computers' that showed the distribution of stresses at tears, to the vast body of literature he has contributed to the field, he changed the mind set we bring to problem solving in paintings conservation." He is survived by his wife, his sons Ron and Raphael, five grandchildren, and one great granddaughter. *Joyce Hill Stoner, April 21, 2006*