



FACTVM  
FOUNDAION  
FOR DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY  
IN CONSERVATION

Read all about it! 15,000,000 m<sup>2</sup> of paintings preserved!

18-11-2013

A great deal of newsprint columns (and social media texts) were devoted over the last few days to the extraordinary prices achieved at auction by the Bacon and Warhol paintings - and the prices are truly extraordinary if one uses any reference in the real world. But that is why it is so beyond the normal, extraordinary. These are unique and iconic works that can never be re-created by the now dead artists - they represent a time, state, culture, taste and society that we can only experience through objects like this. They carry the code.



Also quite prominent but less dramatic was the story about Lost Works (not the bottom drawers of an architect's plan chest - for they are also called 'lost works', but then it's un-capitalised) - the story was by Professor Noah Charney about the apparently two thirds of our physical artistic heritage that is no longer with us, lost to us, for whatever reason - crime, war, flood, aggression, absentmindedness. And this story was catalysed (or made more relevant) by the Augsburg loot - the 1,400 paintings that were discovered, pristine, in a darkened flat in Germany - almost untouched since the Second World War Nazi criminals stole them - except for a little culling by their custodian to pay the bills.

There are some numbers attached to all this and they make an interesting little story in themselves (numbers always do, they are so clean) - the Bacon triptych was sold for \$142 million (the same price footballer Bale was 'sold' for in September), the Warhol for \$105 million (I have used \$US as that is the auction standard). That was the first course. Then the Charney lost works had values imputed (though I would suggest that these will now be reviewed in the light of the new auction records achieved) - Phidias' statue of Athena that has been a fantasy for many - \$160 million, the Amber Room from the Catherine Palace (though we don't know if this still exists - but it is certainly lost) at \$320million. Poor Henry Moore only scores a paltry \$16 million. And as a final course - the Augsburg paintings have been valued at about \$1.25 billion.

Well, the natural reaction is Wow! But mine - and I hope yours might be - what about our heritage, the totality of all the things we treasure? If these things are valued by some so incredibly highly (I mean economically) then why don't we care about preserving them as much. Think of how much recording and monitoring and preserving could be done with a Bacon, sorry, \$142 million. I am delighted to see wonderful, important and iconic objects are being valued so in money terms as that says something about our values but those values should surely extend to the less public, the less dramatic, the less press hungry, less celebrity, the less about ownership and to the mundane and relatively easy process of digital preservation - \$142 million would buy 7,000 Lucida scanners and their operation for a year and at four hours a square metre (it takes about that to scan in high resolution, I am ignoring the processing as then it gets technical) that's 15,000,000 m<sup>2</sup> of paintings in a year, recorded and preserved digitally - for ever.

The Bacon will surely age (it's well known that Bacon was painting in oil on un-primed canvas) and it needs to be scanned - but then the surface of every important painting needs to be finely documented. The Lucida Scanner was built specifically to do this and it does it beautifully. It may seem unrealistic to record fifteen million square metres of painted surface every year - but in 1992, when Bacon died in Madrid, he could not have foreseen that the sale of one of his paintings would generate \$142 million. What is realistic?