

# Uncovering the artist behind the painting: Anthony Poon's materials, techniques and inspirations

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During the course of preparation for the Anthony Poon exhibition *Light and Movement Portrayed* at SAM, the Heritage Conservation Centre's (HCC) Department of Painting conservators had the opportunity to get a close and personal view of his paintings owned by the museum. This section is a reflection of the journey in uncovering the materials and techniques of the late Anthony Poon through his artworks in the national collection, and in documenting interviews with the late artist's family members.

## Introduction

The multihued paintings by Anthony Poon present a bright wash of colours, transporting viewers into a transcendental state of colour euphoria. Through his artworks, we can see traces of the artist's personality. At the same time, when we move beyond the viewing aesthetics of the work, the selection of materials, such as the palette of colours and canvases used, also reveal much about Poon's sources of inspiration, and connect his works with the vibrant developments of his time and surroundings.

Poon's artworks first entered the national art collection in 1999. To date, there are 32 Anthony Poon paintings and 8 sculptures in the collection. A major portion of this collection of works was generously donated by the artist's family in 2007 after the passing away of the artist, while the remainder consists of donations from various institutions and collectors, and acquisitions made by the museum. Seen together, this collection of work provides an insight into the stylistic changes taking place across the length of Poon's artistic career from the 1960s to the 2000s.

During the preparation for the Anthony Poon exhibition *Light and Movement Portrayed* at SAM, the Paintings Conservators from the Heritage Conservation Centre (HCC) had the opportunity to get a close and personal view of his paintings owned by the museum. This essay is a reflection on the journey of uncovering the materials and techniques of the late artist through his artworks in the national collection, and in documenting interviews with the late artist's family members.

Poon's biography and stylistic changes in art are discussed in detail by other authors included in this catalogue. As such, the focus of this essay is on Poon's choice of materials, technique and style of painting, focusing in particular on the period *after* his return from the UK. As the strength of the museum collection of Anthony Poon's paintings lies largely in this period of his artistic career, more substantial evidence and information can be derived from the direct study of these works. The collected information is also supported by accounts from his family members, Mrs. Poon Lee Lee and Ms. Poon Siew-Win, together with further information gathered from relevant material suppliers.

## Anthony Poon: Man of Perfection

On the surface, Anthony Poon's works always appear impeccably executed, displaying a highly sophisticated finish and the elimination of all human marks. However, concealed by the paint and canvas, the complex construction of each work can be glimpsed from the back and in the inner recesses of the work, revealing the skillful nature and careful planning involved in his art making.

From fully realised paintings down to even his basic sketches and maquettes, Poon constantly and meticulously planned his artworks. He took time to painstakingly make miniatures, on which he would test and select the exact colours to use. This information was then noted down on his sketches, prior to executing the bigger-scaled versions (see Fig.1). Many of his maquettes and miniature artworks were used as proposal models for his commissioned works. If not for the apparent size difference, it is often not easy to ascertain the difference between the actual artworks and the preparatory models, so similar are they in their detailed and precise executions.

Upon examining the development of Poon's artworks and sketches, his stylistic progression appears to be systematic and of an almost sequential-like evolution.

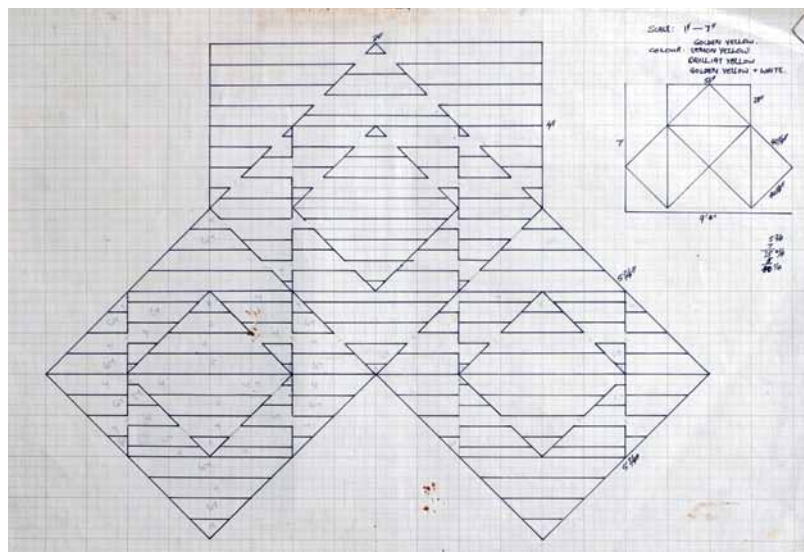


Fig.1 Anthony Poon's sketch for "Inverted Y" painting

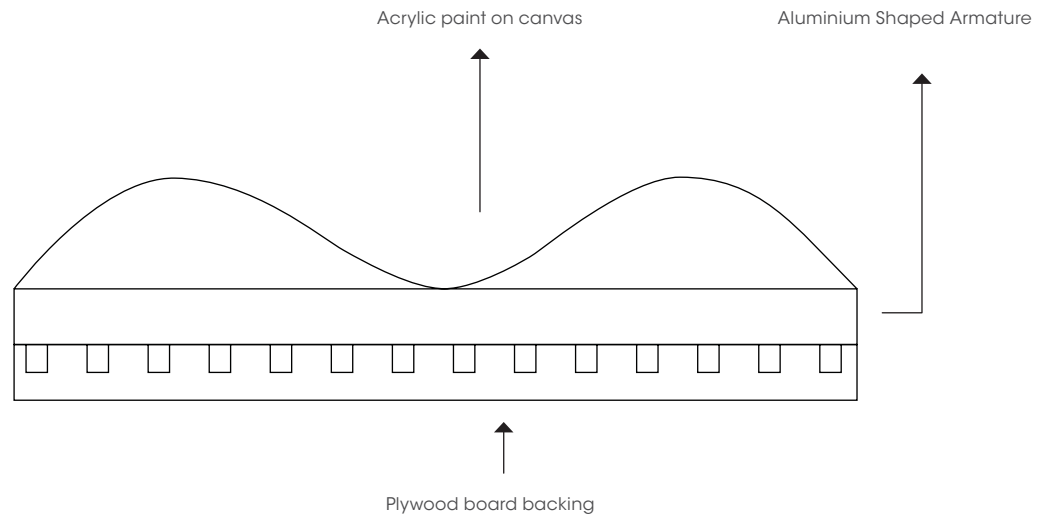


Fig.2 Side view construction of Anthony Poon's Wave paintings

The changes in his style are never abrupt or radical, and even in change, he continued to stay true to his obsession with the following traits: balance and harmony between colour, tone, shape, movement and form. Indeed, the artist himself testified regarding his stylistic 'identity' development, and was once quoted in an interview: "I do not believe in hopping from one style to another...To be serious in a kind of expression, you must do it in a manner progressively". He went on to describe how in developing each series, he believed that "every series solves its own problems and one leads into the next".<sup>1</sup>

One example of this approach can be seen in the evolution of his Wave series. Poon first explored the wave motif in the 1970s, starting with two-dimensional paintings such as *Red Frequency Waves*. However, the late 1980s to early 1990s marked a shift in his experimentation of relief painting. This shift was accomplished through the addition of a sculptural element, by means of a shaped aluminum armature structure on plywood board over which a canvas is stretched to provide a new dimension (see Fig.2).<sup>2</sup> The three-dimensional Wave relief series became his signature creation, and the artist gradually perfected his craftsmanship through continuous and constant production of artworks. He made numerous experimental works, to develop and master the skill of custom-making his own stretchers (Fig. 3a, 4), based on the unusual three-dimensional wave form (Fig.3b).



Fig.3a  
Back view of Poon's *Wave* relief painting

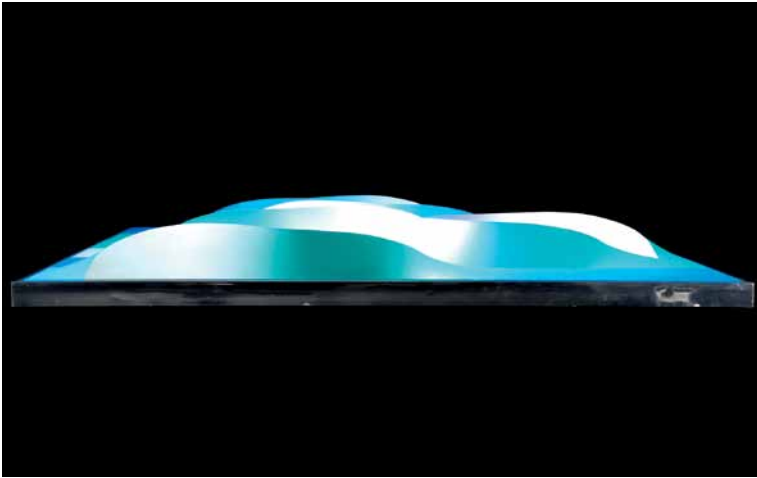


Fig.3b  
Side view of Poon's *Wave* relief painting



Fig.4a  
Back view of Poon's shaped canvas painting (*Kife* Series)



Fig.4b  
Front view of Poon's shaped canvas painting (*Kife* Series)

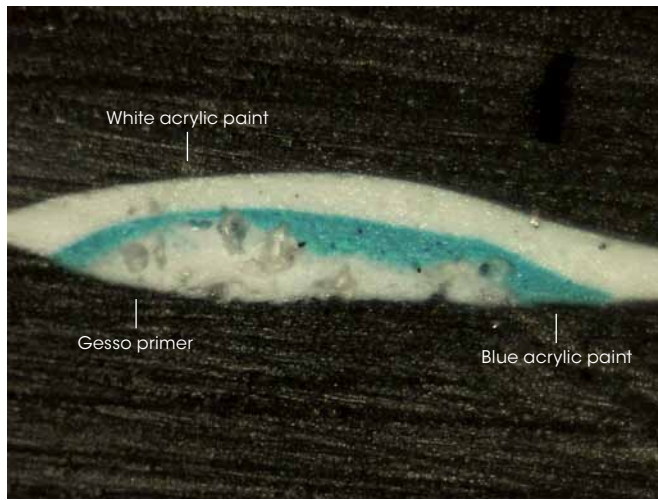


Fig.4C W-on White 2 P paint cross-section<sup>1</sup> 40x magnification<sup>1</sup>

- i A paint cross-section sample is typically taken from a discreet area of a painting, no less than the size of a full-stop. The paint sample is then embedded on a resin to be analysed under the microscope to study the artist's materials and application technique. The picture above shows what a typical cross-section looks like side-ways, without the canvas layer.
- ii Gesso primer is a layer typically made up of chalk (calcium carbonate), white pigments and/or transparent bulking pigments (i.e., barium sulphate, silicate). It is either traditionally bound in oil, or in modern synthetic binder such as acrylic. Anthony Poon is most likely to have used the latter, due to his use of acrylic paint. A layer of gesso primer is commonly applied on the canvas to seal the canvas before the application of subsequent paint layers and for the paints to 'grip' on to.

One interesting finding was unearthed by the conservators during the cleaning process of the three-dimensional *Wave* series. During Poon's experimentation with the multihued three-dimensional *Wave* series, he also produced a small set of white *Wave* paintings in the 1990s. A microscopic observation on the paint cross-section of the work *W on White 2P* showed an unusual detail, not seen in his other paintings.

The image of the paint cross-section (Fig. 4C) was taken from the edge of Poon's *W-on White 2P*, and shows that the artist initially applied a layer of blue acrylic paint on top of the gesso primer.<sup>ii</sup> Subsequently he applied another layer of white acrylic paint on top of it. Samples taken from different areas of the painting showed a consistent result. However, this result was not found in a similar white *Wave* series work *W-White on 2P Waves*, where only the gesso primer and white paint layer exist. Similar examination of his other paintings also showed a strong application of paint layers applied following the artist's original plan, with no obvious change of paint colour.

It is probable that the artist changed an originally blue painting to white, while retaining the wave-like structure of *W on White 2P*. This change marks the increasing awareness on the part of the artist, and his subtle change in experimentation, from colour hues to tonal values utilising the impact of light and shadow on the canvas to produce the relief effect.

## The Latex Liberation

The development of acrylic latex paint – among many other forms of modern synthetic media – came about as a new alternative art medium to the traditional oil paint, and is widely considered a major invention in the mid-1950s and early 1960s.<sup>3</sup> The company Liquitex was the first to produce waterborne acrylic emulsion paint in jars, and later in 1965 in tubes.<sup>4</sup> The new medium was slowly accepted by artists at the time; it was only in the 1980s that it gained in popularity and became widely used.<sup>5</sup> Anthony Poon embraced this new medium during his study in the U.K. in the late 1960s, thus making him one of the earliest users of acrylic paints. From that point on, he was a devoted fan of waterborne acrylic paint and brought its painting techniques back with him to Singapore (see Fig.5).

In comparison to solvent-soluble oil paint, the water solvent, fast-drying nature of this type of acrylic paint allowed him to produce bigger-scaled artworks in a shorter amount of time<sup>6</sup>, and in a less toxic, safer environment. These super-sized artworks are displayed in his earlier *Kite* series, during his experimentation with geometric shapes (between early to mid 1970s). The acrylic paint film is also more flexible, allowing him to produce the shaped canvas surfaces of the three-dimensional *Wave* relief series. Poon's meticulous and planned application of the acrylic paint provided a distinctive flat finish and flawless appearance. He strove to omit evidence of the artist's brush strokes on his paintings to achieve the kind of flawless finish that Piet Mondrian tried to achieve in his later artworks, but he struggled with the limitations of oil paint.

An interview with Poon's local art material supplier in Singapore, Straits Art Commercial Pte. Ltd., revealed that the artist remained loyal to the use of Liquitex acrylic paint throughout his career. He experimented continuously with the paint colour ranges available at the time, and occasionally used several other paint colours from brands such as Hyplar-Grumbacher and Daler-Rowney (see Fig.5). He even collected a Liquitex colour chart (see Fig.6) which later appeared to be one source of inspiration for his artwork titles, particularly for the late 1980s *Wave* series.



Fig. 5  
Anthony Poon's materials from his studio, donated to HCC in 2007 by his family.



Fig.6  
Liquitex Acrylic Colour Chart from the artist's house.

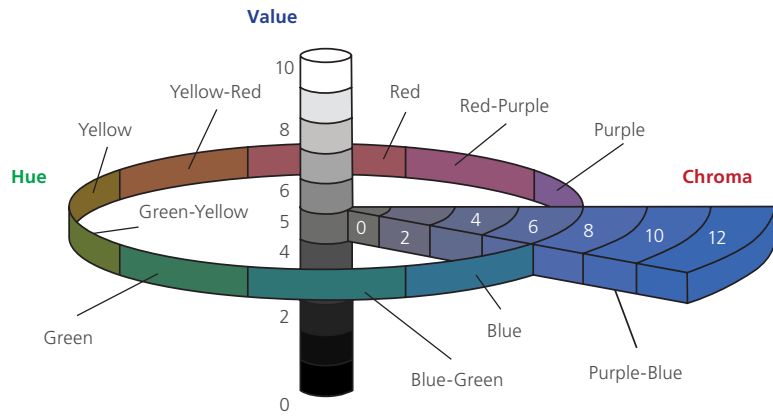


Fig.7  
The Munsell Colour System

The Liquitex Colour Chart is an adaptation from the Munsell colour system (see Fig.7) (Liquitex, 2007). Subsequently, all Liquitex products are labeled according to the Munsell notation for each colour, following categories such as *Hue*, *Value* and *Chroma*. The Munsell colour system was developed in 1905 by Prof. Albert H. Munsell, following the rapid development and interest in the science of space mapping and visual perception of colour. On the Munsell colour system, colours are arranged in 12 different *hues* according to the flow or spectral family names within the colour wheel. The same can be found on the Liquitex Colour Chart, as seen from left to right: Red Purple (RP), Red (R), Red Orange (RO), Orange (O), Yellow Orange (YO), Yellow (Y), Yellow Green (YG), Green (G), Blue Green (BG), Blue (B), Blue Purple (BP), and Purple (P). *Value* is the range from light to dark. In the Munsell Colour system, *Value* is assigned between 0 (pure black) to 10 (pure white). On the Liquitex Colour Chart (read from top to bottom), the Value range taken into account is only between 2 to 9, omitting the extreme ends. Meanwhile, *Chroma* denotes the relative brightness or intensity of colours. On the Munsell colour system, *Chroma* rating ranges between 0 (neutral gray, no trace of chroma or hue) to 12. Although the Chroma rating on the Liquitex Colour Chart is not noted with numbers, there are three chroma colours shown for each colour (bright colour, + gray and + neutral gray).

A look into his later titles for the *Wave* series paintings, such as “*B-BP-BG on 2P Waves*”, will undoubtedly leave many viewers in a state of confusion regarding the code language used. It is only after studying the Liquitex colour chart that it became apparent that Poon’s use of codes is done in relation to the pigment colour codes used by the Liquitex paint manufacturers. For example, “B” refers to Blue, “BP” is Blue Purple and “BG” is Blue Green – the three colours often used by Poon in painting; whereas “on 2P Waves” means that two canvas panels were used in a work. Poon started using this colour-coding system for the titles of his artworks during his 3-dimensional *Wave* series period, particularly from the late 1980s, showing his significant interest in colour as his source of inspiration. However, Poon did not adhere to this coding system consistently in naming his artworks.

Poon’s earlier experimentation with his three-dimensional *Wave* series shows a play of different hues and balances between ‘cool’ (blue and green) and ‘warm’ (red, pink, yellow, purple) colours. This idea of colour ‘temperature’ also influenced his choice of gold and silver frame colours. Based on the interview with his wife, Poon would choose a silver frame to complement his ‘cool’ coloured painting, and gold for the ‘warm’.





Fig.8  
Interview with Mrs. Poon Lee Lee,  
Poon Siew-Win and curator Ong Zhen Min

## Conserving Anthony Poon's Paintings

The opportunity to treat many of Anthony Poon's artworks allowed the painting conservators at the Singapore Heritage Conservation Centre the exceptional chance to take a closer and more intimate look into his artmaking technique and stylistic development, through the gathering of various paintings from his lifetime career within the permanent collection. Through collaboration with the late artist's wife, Mrs. Poon Lee-Lee, and daughter, Ms. Poon Siew-Win, conservators were able to view the home, private possessions and sketches (see Fig. 8) belonging to the artist. This provided a window into his world, and afforded a rare chance for conservators to understand first-hand how works were constructed by the creator. From the gathered information, an insight was also gained regarding how it was Anthony Poon's personal taste and character which inherently affected the way he created his artworks.

The knowledge of art conservation is ceaselessly evolving, given the rapid development of materials used and explored by artists. As such, close interaction with the artist and the manufacturers of such materials, whenever possible, is crucial in order to understand the inherent properties and degradation process, such as the effects of light, humidity, temperature, and other factors. Such information can provide measures for preventive conservation which can slow down the deterioration process of artworks by means of controlling the exposures of the artworks to the environment. This information is also imperative for conservators in order for them to make better judgments in deciding appropriate treatments for the artworks.

As most of Poon's artworks were stored in an uncontrolled environment prior to their acquisition or donation to the museum, many of them were exposed to many layers of dirt, dust and also prone to animal/insect attacks (see Fig. 9, 10). In understanding Poon's original intention and effort to achieve blemish-free surfaces, it becomes important for conservators to remove elements which may prevent viewers from seeing the artwork as originally intended by the artist, through gentle cleaning and careful removal (see Fig. 11, 12). Conservators also had to in paint<sup>7</sup> small parts of the paintings to disguise any unsightly blemishes and restore their visual integrity. The pictures below show the state of some of the paintings before and during the conservation treatment.



Fig.9  
Dirt accumulation on top  
edge of painting

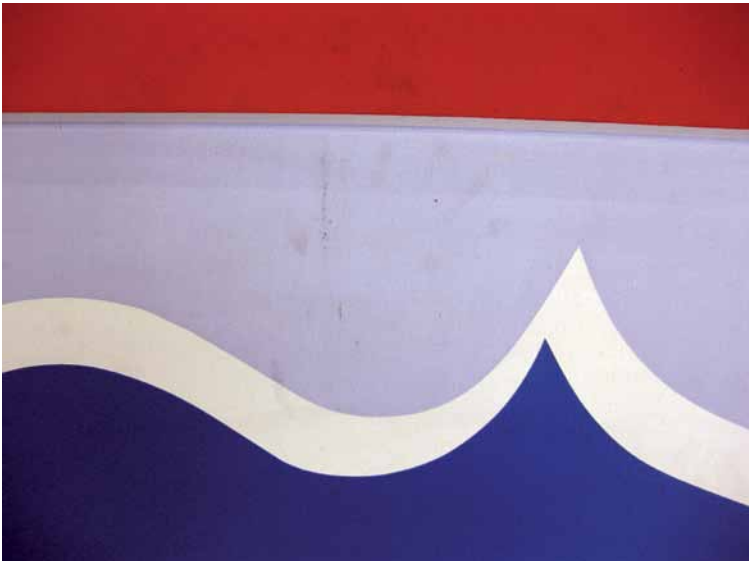


Fig.10  
Handling/finger marks

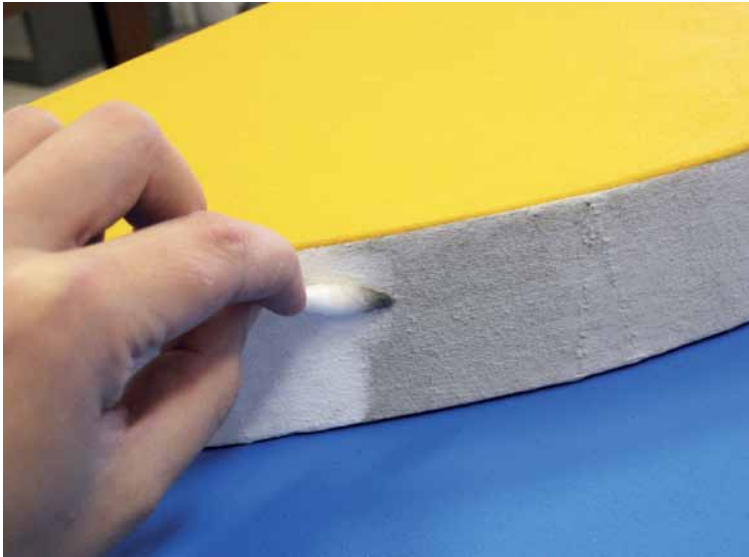


Fig.11  
During cleaning  
treatment



Fig.12  
During cleaning  
treatment

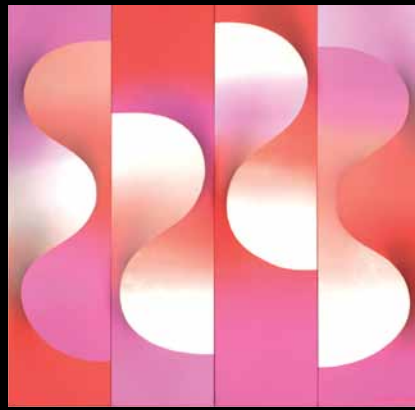


Fig.13  
Untitled (Pink Relief) Before Treatment

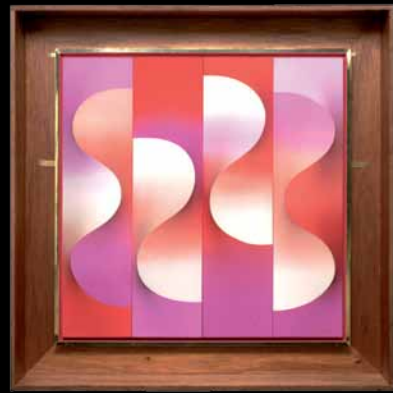


Fig.13a  
After installation of handling/storage frame



Fig.13b  
Side view of handling/storage frame



Fig.13c  
Back of handling/storage frame

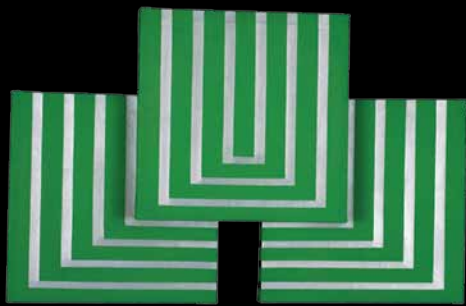


Fig.14  
'Squa-Tri-Uni' Before Treatment

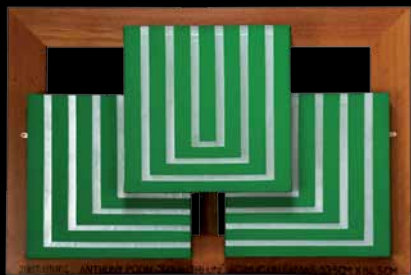


Fig.14a  
After installation of handling/storage stretcher



Fig.14b  
Back view of handling/storage stretcher



Fig.14b  
Side view of handling/storage stretcher

The information gathered from the artist's family, and the collection of varnishes found in the late artist's studio imply that Poon varnished his paintings with a matte varnish, though it is unknown if the artist systematically varnished all his works. The artist may have done so following Liquitex's recommendation; the purpose of a varnish layer in the traditional sense of art making is to provide extra protection for the paint layer from external factors. However, the identification and interaction between acrylic paint and acrylic varnish is still largely unexplored in the current conservation field, and present research continues to be focused primarily on treatments for unvarnished acrylic paintings. This area is thus open for future study, and is currently under research by the HCC painting conservators.<sup>8</sup>

Knowledge of the material properties also allows conservators to devise appropriate immediate and preventive conservation treatments for each artwork. Due to its low melting point<sup>9</sup> as well as its complex mix of additives and surfactant content, acrylic paint is susceptible to dirt pick-up from direct contact/handling. This was observable on most of Poon's artworks prior to conservation treatment. In a hot and humid environment, acrylic paint can soften and thus become more vulnerable to dirt being embedded in the paint. Such occurrence may cause difficulty in removing the dirt safely from the paint layer. To reduce such damages, the HCC painting conservators designed a special handling/storage frame and stretcher for Poon's acrylic paintings to reduce direct human contact and to provide necessary additional support (see Fig.14a-c, 15a-c).

The handling/storage frame also serves to protect the three-dimensional relief paintings from being damaged during transport, as they can be vulnerable to damage from any forms of frontal impact. Two examples of the handling/storage frame for his relief paintings and the handling stretcher for his other two-dimensional artworks are seen in Fig.15a-c. Each handling device is custom-made for individual artwork. Such preventive measures are important to reduce the necessity for direct contact treatment in future, a critical aspect in preserving the integrity and blemish-free surface of the artwork.

Knowledge of the particular paint properties also helps to establish a range of optimal temperatures most favorable for the artwork. Thus the storage and display environments are maintained at a temperature and relative humidity range preferable for the artworks, to ensure their stability and longevity.

## Conclusion

This research project has delved far beyond the surface of the objects, and the gathered information on materials and techniques of the artist has enabled greater understanding of the construction of the artwork and, subsequently, the required conservation and preservation needs. The collaboration and close communication between various parties, such as the conservator, curator, the late artist's family members and materials supplier, provide a much needed link to the context and history behind the artworks.

1. (Zi 1981)
2. (Poon, L.L. pers. comm. 2008)
3. (Learner 2007)
4. (Learner 2007)
5. (Liquitex, 2007, pp. 5 and 9)
6. Waterbourne acrylic paint dries by the evaporation of water. A thin layer of the paint can be 'touch-dry' in 10-20 minutes, whilst thicker paint may take from an hour up to several days (Liquitex, 2007).
7. Inpainting in conservation disguises damages, stains or marks which exist on the artworks due to external factors unintended by the artist. It involves the careful and skilful application of appropriate, compatible and removable paint media which returns the original aesthetic of the painting. Inpainting is detectable under ultraviolet light examination.
8. At the time this article was written, on-going research is carried out to analyse and identify the use of varnish on Anthony Poon's artworks. The result of this project, which is carried out in collaboration with a local external research agency using scientific tools, will be shared in due course.
9. The temperature point where the paint softens and becomes tacky.

## Acknowledgements

Gratitude to Mrs. Poon Lee Lee, Ms. Poon Siew-Win and curator Ong Zhen Min for their continuous support, assistance and time given for our research of Anthony Poon's materials and technique. Also to members of the HCC Paintings Conservation team: Claire Lim, Anthony Lau, Chan Xiu Bin, Mar Gomez Lobon, Tan Chuwei and Lawrence Chin [former Senior Conservator (Painting)], Claire d'Aillieres (Intern), Kelvin Yue (Collections Officer) and Lee Chee Keong (Senior Photographer) who were part of this project. Appreciation to Loh Heng Noi (Director of HCC) and Robin Liu (Assistant Director) for their constant support for the project.

## About HCC

The Heritage Conservation Centre (HCC) is an institution which provides conservation support for the national museums under the National Heritage Board, Singapore. It is also an environmentally controlled, secured repository for the Board's national museum collections. Comprising the Collections Services, Conservation Services and Facilities Management Services Departments, HCC's main function is to preserve, protect and manage the NHB museum collections.

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