

"The science of art"

Using chemistry and a paint brush, Anne Zanikos breathes new life into tattered masterpieces

San Antonio Business Journal

by B. Lou Guckian

In the early 1980s, Anne Zanikos was completing her graduate studies in marine biology in California when she boarded a sea-bound research vessel but left it feeling it was "limited." So she enrolled in museum studies and took a field trip to the California Palace of the [French] Legion of Honor.

"When we toured the paper conservation lab, I turned to my friend and said, 'This is what I'm going to do!' " Zanikos recalls. "It was like being hit by lightning — I knew this would be my career."

Indeed, that self-revelation proved true. Today, Zanikos is the owner of Anne Zanikos Art Conservation, a fine art restoration and preservation service for private collectors, corporations and museums. The company, located in a small lab in Olmos Park, specializes in the conservation of paintings, frames and polychrome wood objects. Some of San Antonio's art giants like the Witte Museum, San Antonio Museum of Art and the McNay trust their delicate assets with Zanikos. So, too, do a host of undisclosed fine art aficionados and publicly held collections including the Southwestern Bell Collection of American Art.

"We entrust Anne with our precious collections and are particularly happy she is local," says Karen Zelanka Baker, registrar for the San Antonio Museum of Art. "We don't have an art conservator on staff, so Anne's accessibility and dedication play a very important role."

For Zanikos, the satisfaction can be measured in more than monetary payment. When the statues at local San Fernando Cathedral were vandalized in 2004, Zanikos was hired to repair them. She stabilized fragile areas using adhesives, removed extensive over paint with mild solvents and scalpels, shaped new fingers to match the original and more. As she worked, parishioners prayed for her.

"Many times clients are moved to tears when they see their restored art," she says. "It doesn't get better than that."

One-woman show

After Zanikos' grad school epiphany, she launched into a self-designed, 7-year apprenticeship across museums, universities and conservation labs in California and Texas, where she worked as assistant conservator, laboratory assistant, lab technician and assistant paper conservator and interned in manuscripts conservation and museum studies.

In 1989, Zanikos' mentor, art conservator Richard D. White, decided to move back to his hometown of New Orleans. Zanikos took over the business and the lease on White's small studio off of Broadway Ave. — venturing out on her own to restore and preserve the artistic and historic integrity of precious fine art. One year later, she moved her practice to rented space in Carousel Court on North New Braunfels.

"When I started out, it was feast or famine," she recalls. "I was wide open to most work, but I also refused projects for which I lacked expertise. I also learned what was lucrative and what was not."

When her practice reached its 12th year, Zanikos bought her first building in Olmos Park and became more discerning about the types of work she accepted. Today she limits her practice to the conservation of paintings, frames and polychrome wood. The niche has proved profitable: Business has grown steadily to include two full-time lab technicians, an intern and an office manager. She charges clients by the hour, and gives estimates based on the amount of time she expects the work to take. "Charging by the hour is the fairest way," she says. "We don't offer sliding scale fees because I offer the same level of service on that treasure you picked up from the garage sale as on an art house purchase. I give it all my care and attention."

In practice now for 20 years, Zanikos' single most-dreaded task has been telling a client a painting she has been hired to restore is fake or stolen. "It's not fun when you have to make that call," she says.

Training the next generation

Zanikos' employees are students of art history or studio art and skilled in various facets of art conservation and restoration particularly examining, cleaning, repairing tears and estimating market value. They are personally trained by Zanikos and are held to a strict code of ethics as prescribed by the American Institute for the Conservation of Artistic and Historic Works.

On any given day of the workweek, Zanikos is solving problems at her lab in Olmos Park. Art conservation, she says, is about choosing solutions to problems a damaged art object presents. One such story centers on a mural that had been painted on and extracted from the bedroom wall of a 1930s house.

"In order to remove any insecure material, we had to chip away the supporting drywall including the paper coating and then mount the remaining plaster and paint onto an aluminum honeycomb panel," she says. "At one point we had a 10-foot by 16-foot sheet of plaster and paint laying face down on a work table."

Zanikos' advocacy of the art object is fierce. Her business ethics mandate she preserve the original artist's intention and do no harm. "I'm not the preferred person for a project that demands fast turnaround or substandard restoration," she explains.

What she is doing works. The majority of her clients are repeat customers. She remembers her first as the one who kept her business and hope afloat. "He was a private collector who had inherited a painting. Over the next three years, he returned with numerous others and began referring friends. That loyalty and relationship gave me the confidence to keep going," she says. Such word-of-mouth referrals have been pivotal in Zanikos' growing practice, for which her code of ethics prohibits advertising.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, demand for art conservators is expected to rise by 16 percent by 2016. Good news for Zanikos, whose future is already unfolding with plans to purchase a bigger building in the same neighborhood and another lab technician. Meanwhile, one thing will never change: her satisfaction with her career.

"If you can leave work each day knowing you treated people right and did the best you could do, that's the best peace there is. When you've done the opposite, that's when you're up at 2 a.m.," Zanikos says. "There are times I pinch myself because 99 percent of my clients are very appreciative of what I do. They write me a big check but thank me. I'm pretty lucky."

Copyright 03/07/08 San Antonio Business Journal. All contents © American City Business Journals Inc. All rights reserved.