

THE SAFETY CURTAIN, ROYAL THEATRE, NORTHAMPTON

In 2023 **Chroma Conservation** undertook the Heritage Lottery Funded conservation treatment of the Safety Curtain in the Royal Theatre, Northampton. The wonderfully eccentric painted depiction on the safety curtain was created in 1978 by Henry Bird and is known as *Sipario Dipinto* or *Separator Painted*. This important feature was inspired by sources such as *Commedia dell'Arte* and *Hamlet's mirror*. It depicts a series of vignette portraits including the artists' wife and muse, the actress Freda Jackson and most notably Errol Flynn who was a member of the Northampton Repertory Players in the early 1930s.

The curtain is formed of 29 canvas panels which are attached to a thick supporting lining canvas and are adhered to it with an adhesive and steel staples, some of which bridge the joints between the individual panels. The frame on which the curtain is constructed is made of metal. Environmental fluctuations were the trigger for loss of cohesion at joint lines of the individual canvasses and corrosion of the previously used staples. Many staples had started to corrode contributing to staining of the decoration and became weak, these had to be carefully removed and replaced. The artwork visually benefited from the removal of corroded staples and reattachment of the edges using a combination of conservation grade adhesive and new stainless-steel staples.

The safety curtain acts as a fire prevention measure and is operated by a new modern electric winch, there were several points where the metal construction had previously rubbed against the canvas surface resulting in losses of paint in the material fabric itself. The losses in fabric were filled using silk and painted to match the area around it.

The *Sipario Dipinto* is painted in casein distemper on a primed ground. Distempers are soluble in water therefore the surface couldn't be cleaned with water without removing the decoration. Distemper paints are generally unaffected by humidity and temperature and are quick to dry and so therefore were suitable for the theatre environment. However, the canvas on which they are painted



Above and opposite, work on the curtain

had been affected negatively, especially due the curtain being exposed from the warmth and humidity of a packed theatre to being lifted into the cold dark void above thus being exposed to another environmental scenario altogether.

The safety curtain was lightly brushed and carefully vacuumed to remove surface dust and then dry cleaned using Akapad (Wishab) sponges which are made of vulcanized latex and by gently rubbing the surface remove the soiling and revive the soft chalky distemper layer of paint. All areas of flaking paint were then consolidated and paint losses were retouched.

Previous crude repairs were removed and replaced whilst areas of missing decoration were reconstructed using casein paints to reintegrate the illustration. The paint system used ensures that the treatment is reversible and stable and the corrections to the mechanism mean that the surface of the painting no longer rubs on the wall above.

It was a real privilege for the conservators at Chroma Conservation to work on this exuberant and incredibly precious work of art, painted by a very talented son of Northampton. It is unique to the beautiful Royal Theatre and has been thoughtfully conserved for future generations and performances.

*Below, details of the curtain
Opposite, paint palette*

Chroma Conservation Ltd. specialises in the care and conservation of decorative painted surfaces from fine art wall painting, easel painting, architectural polychromatic and gilded surfaces, stone and plaster as well as decorative objects.

We are passionate about preserving the painted past and are fortunate to work in the finest historic interiors from the early Mediaeval to the splendid Georgian styles of the Baroque, Neo Classical and Regency leading to Victorian Neo Gothic and right up to 20th Century Bloomsbury Set, Art Deco and that of the Modernists.

We also operate in an advisory role and offer expert consultation that includes condition surveys and documentation. Should your project require laboratory or environmental investigation to provide an informed conservation strategy, we have excellent relationships with leading complimentary investigators to fulfil such requirements.





Above, safety curtain



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