

“An Artwork is Never Finished”: One Artist’s Story of Restoration Done Right



David Paul Kay in his NYC studio. Photo by Steven Gabriel Bosque.

If a painting can be slashed while hanging in a museum, it’s obviously even more at risk when loaned to a friend. This is the case of a painting entitled *Scream* by [David Paul Kay](#), a New York City-based artist, who received a call from an art restorer after his work was delivered for repair with a massive X slashed through the center of the canvas.

The collector who had purchased the piece had apparently loaned it to a friend to hang in his new apartment, out of sheer kindness and by no means permanently. Unfortunately, that friend subsequently suffered a nervous breakdown and attacked the work in his own home. (This all took place during the pandemic, an exceptionally stressful time for everyone, but especially for people with pre-existing psychiatric conditions.)

As horrible as this all sounds, however, David found a certain cosmic beauty in this chain of events, tragic as they were, and was able to empathize with his work’s attacker. According to David, the painting was originally created at a time in his life when his own mental health was suffering, hence the title (and the subject matter). In David’s eyes, this synergy added a new layer of emotional symbolism and meta-history to the artwork.

“Was I upset when I learned of the damage? No, not really,” he says. “I approached it the same way I approach everything in my life — with curiosity. I was actually really happy that the restorer reached out to me directly. As long as I’m alive, I want to help preserve my own work and contribute to its longevity.”



David restoring his painting *Scream*. Photo courtesy of David Paul Kay.

David and the restorer, Andrei Givotovsky, worked together to complete the repair and the painting was returned to the original (and rightful) owner.

David says the situation actually brought him and the collector closer together in a way — a silver lining of sorts. That collector had been a long-standing supporter of David’s art career and is someone David considers a friend, now even more so than before the incident.

The experience cemented certain convictions he already had about an artwork’s lifecycle. “I believe that an artwork is never finished,” David explains, “It lives on and it evolves.”



David Paul Kay's painting *Scream*, pre- and post-restoration.

What To Do If Your Artwork is Damaged

These stories illuminate certain undeniable truths about the nature of fine art restoration and highlight important things to consider when having art from your own collection restored.

Artworks are not impervious to human error, and that includes anytime an artwork is shipped, de-/re-installed, cleaned or put on view to the general public.

Accidents are a part of life and mistakes happen. That being said, there are some general rules to follow when caring for an artwork that has suffered any type of damage, from minor scrapes to major tears. Artwork Archive reached out to Andrei Givotovsky, proprietor of [Art Restoration NYC](#) (and the restorer who helped David Paul Kay bring his painting back to life), to learn more about the restoration process and what to do if your artwork is damaged.

Document the damage. Then document it some more.

You will need to take extensive photos of the damage and recount how the damage took place with as much detail as possible, in writing. A database like [Artwork Archive](#) will help you keep detailed condition reports, images of any damage, and all other related documents in order, providing a comprehensive overview of an artwork’s entire history.

You will need to send photos of the damage to any restorer you ultimately hire (many require such documentation prior to providing an estimate), as well as to your insurance company if you intend to file a claim.

According to Andrei, “Most people want estimates before they bring in painting. I ask for photos of the front and back of the artwork and its measurements. Billing for me is by the job. But that fee has been established by past experience which is the hours and level of difficulty.”

“I also need to know who the owner of the painting is — sometimes a contractor wants to bring a painting they damaged while working in an apartment. They may not want the owner to know. This would be a legal and ethical problem.”

“I also ask for general information about the artworks and the materials used: Do they know if it is oil paint or acrylic, for example? I need to know who the artist is/was (if known) and, if possible, the date/year the artwork was created.”

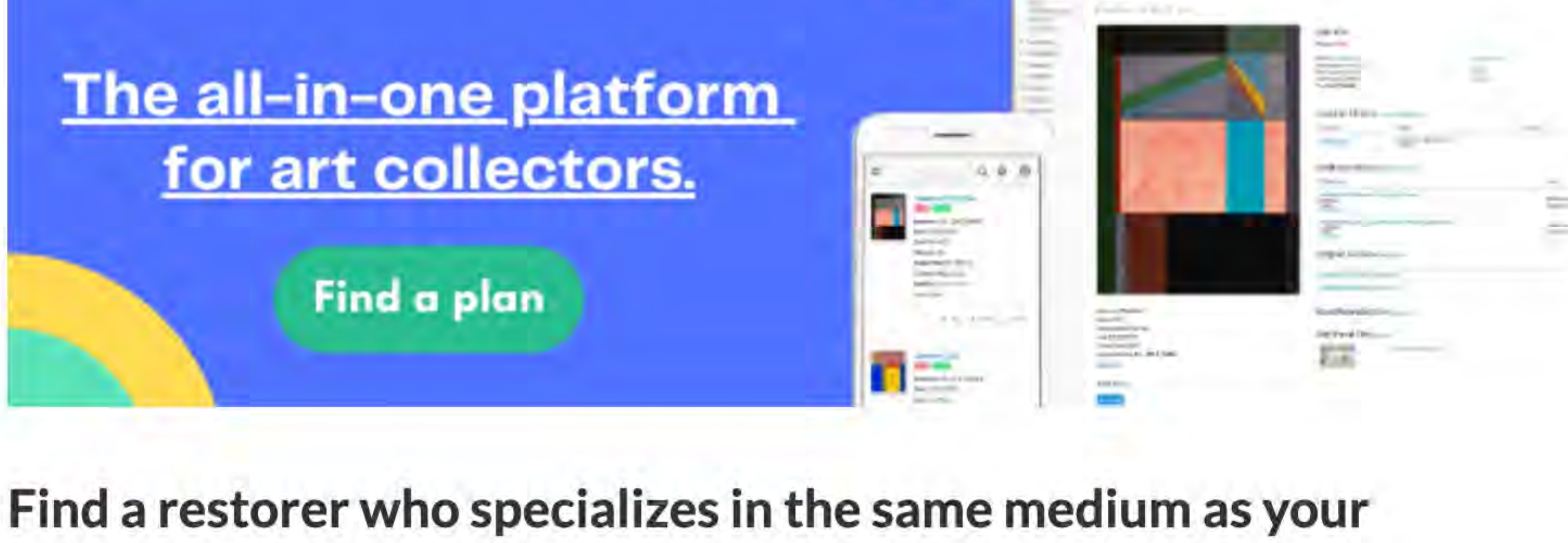
Submit any documentation to your insurance company ASAP — the sooner after the incident, the better — and determine if restoration even makes sense.

As soon as you know that you want to file an insurance claim, it’s best to reach out to your insurer immediately.

Andrei concurs, “It is up to the client or insurance company to determine if a restoration is worth it. Sometimes I recommend against a restoration because I don’t think the client will be happy with the results achievable within a reasonable period of time and fee. A museum can spend years working on an important painting.”

“I generally ask: What is the purpose of the restoration? Prepare for auction sale? After auction purchase to hang on their wall? An insurance settlement, or a claim? An inheritance?”

“A portrait of an ancestor probably has no resale value, but is always worth restoring. Even minor works that the owner has been living with their whole life can achieve the status of a family member.”



Find a restorer who specializes in the same medium as your damaged artwork.

A painting restorer is obviously not the person to call if your Ming vase is damaged and vice versa. Do your homework on nearby restorers who specialize in the type of art you’re hoping to have repaired. The closer in proximity to you, the better, as additional transport might only exacerbate the delicate condition of your artwork.

Andrei explains, “Generally speaking, I only restore easel paintings on canvas or board. Paper based watercolors or prints are outside my specialty.”

*“There are professional standards such as using reversible treatments and not overpainting original paint, but **restoration is a humanistic activity and is subject to interpretation.** I generally would tell clients that I greatly improve the looks of paintings in need of treatment. However, I am not a magician.”*

Consider contacting the gallery and/or artist directly.

The artist who created the artwork in question, as well as the gallery that initially sold it, will likely know details about how the work was produced that the restorer will need to know to perform their job to the best of their ability. Some artists, like David Paul Kay, may even offer to help restore the painting as much as they can themselves, or be amenable to working together with a restorer. It’s a case-by-case situation, but it’s usually worth a try.

Don’t despair!

Sometimes, a damaged artwork can actually accrue in value and/or significant despite the damage (and sometimes, because of it!). Steve Wynn ultimately sold the Picasso he put his elbow through for \$155 million to hedge fund manager and art collector Steve Cohen. That’s an astounding \$16 million more than it was reportedly worth at the time of the incident, which took place seven years prior.

And those viral Spanish restoration fails? They have actually increased tourism to the area, significantly. Two years after the memes of *Ecce Homo* made the internet rounds, [The New York Times](#) reported that 150,000 tourists flocked to Borja, Spain, to see the updated work of biblical art with their own eyes. What was once considered disastrous, proved, in the end, to be a kind of god-send for the tiny Spanish town.

So, don’t lose hope! Your damaged artwork —and any ensuing restoration — could be a blessing in disguise.

After all, everyone loves a great story.