

# DIAGNOSIS

## BEFORE, DURING, AFTER

*DIAGNOSIS: Before, During, After. Edited by Anna Vila and Alison Murray. Conservation 360° (2022)*  
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Reviewed by Laura Romání

Diagnosis in conservation is rarely straightforward; it is a nuanced journey that demands adaptability, interdisciplinarity and clear intentionality. The second volume of the *Conservation 360°* series, *Diagnosis: Before, During, After*, brings together insightful reflections from leading voices in conservation science, academia, museums, and private practice, each contributing uniquely to a rich and comprehensive overview of diagnostic methodologies. Rooted in a panel discussion, the book explores critical theoretical frameworks and integrates them with compelling practical examples, illuminating the intricate relationship between diagnostic approaches and conservation outcomes.

The preface by Jørgen Wadum offers a compelling starting point. He revisits the history of key institutions and laboratories in Europe and North America and reminds us that the notion of conservation science is far from new, having been mentioned over a century

ago. His emphasis on the [FAIC Oral History Project](#) is particularly inspiring, offering a powerful reminder of the value of preserving the memories and testimonies of experienced conservators. As an emerging professional myself, this has inspired me to start planning interviews with retired conservators in my region, which I think would be an enriching activity that could both honour their legacy and contribute to the collective memory of our field.

Wadum also stresses the vital interplay between conservators, scientists, and art historians in achieving comprehensive diagnoses. Building on that idea, I often wonder whether there is also room for practitioners from the fine arts. Artists having deep, hands-on experience with materials can offer a nuanced understanding of mixtures, additives, and behaviours that might otherwise be difficult to interpret. I was reminded of this during the *Conserving Canvas* initiative at the Museo de América in Madrid where,



in 2023, I had the privilege of participating and observing academically trained painters contribute valuable insights into historical materials and techniques. Their perspectives not only complemented technical art studies but also opened up possibilities for interpreting analytical results.

Starting with the panel discussion under the book's 'Fundamentals' section, Aviva Burnstock initiates the dialogue from an educational perspective, emphasising the balance between theory and practice. She argues for clear, targeted inquiry and interdisciplinary collaboration, suggesting that training should include projects modelling comprehensive diagnostic thinking. In the following chapter, Noëlle Streeton deepens the philosophical dimension, warning against overly analytical approaches that neglect the broader biographical and aesthetic narratives of objects. She reframes diagnostics as an ethical and interpretative process, one that reveals an object's historical trajectory and considers the relative values to which Burnstock referred.

Kate Helwig and Kamila Bladek complement this stance by outlining analytical techniques commonly employed in the characterisation of cultural objects. While the technical descriptions may feel dense to those outside the field, the authors mitigate this by offering a well-structured protocol based on sample types and optimal sequencing. From personal experience, the first time I transitioned from theoretical learning to practical use of analytical instruments, it felt like I was starting from scratch. For many, especially those without prior laboratory experience, this can be a daunting leap.

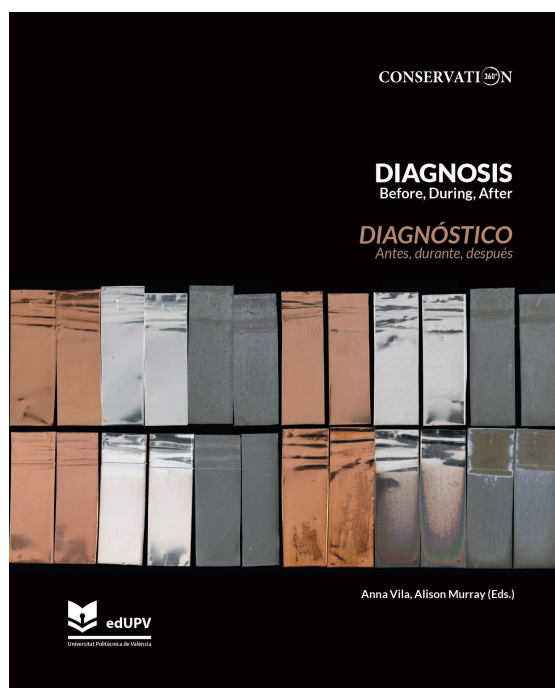
Francesca Casadio, et al. offer an optimistic view from the museum perspective, noting the growing integration of science and the humanities. Focusing on the NU-ACCESS Centre, they demonstrate how portable laboratories can foster collaboration and make diagnostics more accessible, even on a large scale. Still, this chapter prompted me to reflect on a

persistent gap: access to such tools remains limited in private practice. While new grants and infrastructures such as E-RIHS aim to narrow this divide, I believe that simplifying and democratising technology is equally important. Developments in compact, low-cost diagnostic tools point towards a more equitable future in which even modest studios can conduct meaningful research and engage more deeply with the diagnostic process.

Eleonora Nagy introduces a vital perspective from private conservation practice, highlighting the dynamic, context-sensitive nature of diagnosis. She underscores its role in shaping both the technical and economic sustainability of private practitioners, showing through vivid examples how empirical expertise and instrumental analysis must work in tandem. Bronwyn Ormsby, et al. build on this with a compelling case study of the restoration of Rothko's *Black on Maroon* after vandalism, illustrating the need for exhaustive, adaptive diagnostics that combine advanced analyses, reproductions, and meticulous documentation. Their chapter brings to light the ethical tension between reversibility and long-term stability. Bruno Brunetti, et al. further enrich the discussion by emphasising the value of non-invasive portable techniques such as FTIR and unilateral NMR, particularly in delicate cleaning scenarios. Mobile labs such as MOLAB emerge as exemplary tools

for reducing risk. Similarly, Katherine Sanderson, et al. advocate for non-invasive diagnostics in the care of fragile silver-based photographs, demonstrating how techniques such as XRF, Raman, and microfade testing can inform safer exhibition and storage decisions.

While the 'Fundamentals' chapters form the book's conceptual core, the 'Case Studies' section vividly illustrates these principles in action. Sofia Hennen Rodriguez, et al. present a compelling model of professionalisation at MASP, where interdisciplinary diagnostics uphold both ethical and technical standards. Christian Degryny, et al. introduce MiCorr, an



Above: Book cover. Previous page (43): features cropped detail from the book cover. courtesy of Conservation 360°

*“Developments in compact, low-cost diagnostic tools point towards a more equitable future in which even modest studios can conduct meaningful research...”*

innovative digital platform that transforms collaborative diagnostics in the preventive care of metal heritage. Contributions from Evangelia Kyriazi; Fiona Beckett and Gregory Smith; Christina Theodoropoulou, et al.; and Thea Burns further highlight the diversity and complexity of diagnostic practice. Each case study champions a tailored, holistic approach drawing attention to the nuanced decision-making required to navigate real-world ethical and technical challenges.

*Diagnosis: Before, During, After* is an essential read for conservators, researchers, and students alike. While its

accessibility may depend on the reader's familiarity with certain technical concepts, the tone remains engaging and thought-provoking. The book presents a nuanced vision of diagnosis as an adaptive, interdisciplinary, and reflective process. It bridges theory and practice, reaffirming diagnostics as central to meaningful conservation. For emerging professionals like myself, it reframes diagnosis not as a fixed method but as an evolving dialogue between disciplines, approaches, and perspectives. The more we foster this open exchange, the closer we move toward a fuller, shared understanding of cultural heritage.



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**Laura Romani** is an early-career paintings conservator based in Barcelona. She holds a BA in conservation and restoration of cultural heritage (2023), with a specialisation in easel paintings, and a MSc in the diagnosis of cultural heritage. During her studies, she gained practical experience with analytical techniques such as XRD, Raman, and FTIR. In 2024 she took on the role of administrative officer at the Conservadors-Restauradors Associats de Catalunya (CRAC). She is currently a fellow at the Museo Nacional del Prado in Madrid, specialising in the conservation and research of 19<sup>th</sup>-century paintings.