

Renewing a Masterwork

Nevelson Chapel Art Conservation

Louise Nevelson originally constructed the sculptural elements in the *Chapel of the Good Shepherd* from cut wood nailed and screwed together. Boxes and individual sculpture sections were assembled in her cabinetmaker's studio, then delivered to the chapel and installed. Smaller, detailed elements, such as strips of wood, were added on site in situ. She applied all-covering white alkyd paint to the elements in a variety of ways; some elements were dipped before assembly, some were painted by brush, and some by spray application. Differential drip marks show each element's orientation at the time of paint application, before installation on the chapel walls. However, because she did not prepare the wood before paint application, the original paint is also poorly adhered to the substrate in many areas, adding to the conservation challenges.

Starting in the 1980s, a restorer regularly applied a water-based, poly (vinyl acetate) (PVA) house paint (similar to latex house paints today) to all white surfaces in Nevelson Chapel. The restoration paint was applied by brush and by roller, with thick, uneven distribution, significantly different from the generally smooth, homogeneous original paint application. Applied in uneven, continuous layers, the PVA paint, after years of repeated applications, eventually covered the entire sculpture surface and the surrounding walls.

After 40 years, the restoration paint was degrading, flaking, powdering, and highly soluble. Even water applied with cotton wool disrupts the restoration paint. It is discolored brown in many areas, and flaking off the surface, often pulling up the original paint beneath. Conservation is addressing all of these challenges for generations to come.

Once treatment is complete, the sculptures in the *Chapel of the Good Shepherd* will be the only Louise Nevelson white installation with the original presentation surface.

2018 Grant Recipient Henry Luce Foundation Program in American Art

