

FRIABLE

Valorisation and Preservation of friable medium on paper. Case Study on the collection of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium

DURATION
15/12/2020 - 15/03/2025

BUDGET
896 555 €

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The FRIABLE project investigates the vulnerability of modern works on paper with powdery materials such as pastel, charcoal and chalk. Its aim is to develop a protocol for the conservation and management of these types of collections and to train professionals in preventive conservation of these works.

The collection of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium comprises more than 1,000 works on paper in brittle material (from c. 1800 to the present day). This collection mainly includes sketches and sketchbooks, but also many independent works. A considerable part of this collection can be dated between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. This period brought a revival in the use of pastels and other powdery materials, often in combination with other media. The Belgian artistic landscape also made eager use of this renewed interest in materials such as pastel, chalk and charcoal. Both for preparatory studies and for large autonomous works, artists such as Fernand Khnopff, James Ensor, Alix d'Anethan, William Degouve de Nuncques, Jules Schmalzigaug, Léon Spilliaert, Félicien Rops and Constantin Meunier turned to these materials. Due to the weak adhesion of these types of media to the support, these drawings are considered the most fragile objects in the collection.

Despite the ever-growing interest in the artistic period of the fin-de-siècle, a lack of data makes it difficult to determine the risks associated with the conservation of the drawings in brittle material. Collection managers also face fundamental and recurring questions about the borrowing, preparation, handling and transport of drawings due to the lack of precise standards. To answer these questions, the FRIABLE project wants to investigate the fragility of modern works with powdery materials on paper. In addition, it wants to develop a protocol to guarantee the conservation of these fragile works and thus train professionals for better conservation.

FRIABLE is an interdisciplinary research project that brings together knowledge from (technical) art history, conservation, engineering and collection management. To this end, the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium (RMFAB) are joining forces with the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KU Leuven), the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA), the École Nationale Supérieur des Arts Visuels (ENSAV, La Cambre) and the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.

A first step in the research is to characterise and catalogue the wide range of works on paper in the collection of the RMFAB. Part of this is the reconstruction of the past lives of each of the works in the research corpus, the techniques and materials used by the artist and the place of the work in the broader fin-de-siècle context. This step in the research is completed by a condition analysis and the development of a technical vocabulary. This phase forms the basis for an extensive risk and value analysis, which is followed by an in-depth technical study of the works by means of imaging and analytical methods. Essential to the research is the constant feedback between the different phases and results.



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The project will lead to the development of preventive conservation strategies for works on paper, more specifically for works in powdery materials such as pastel, charcoal and chalk. In the short term, FRIABLE wants to offer concrete scientific and technical tools to professionals. These will help in identifying risks and making decisions regarding the preservation, exhibition and transport of a collection. In this way, it aims to guarantee the accessibility and conservation of collections. In addition, in the long term, FRIABLE forms a basis for further research on other collections. Results are shared in the form of articles, workshops and practical guidelines, aimed at professionals and the wider public.

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LINKS

<https://fine-arts-museum.be/nl/onderzoek/onderzoeksprojecten/friable>