Old Friends, New Places: Relocation and conservation of two decorated doors by Australian artist, Donald Friend and Balinese carver, I Made Jojol

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Abstract

Decorated doors painted by Donald Friend, including one carved by Balinese artist, I Made Jojol have since come into the collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. From once having a functional role in architecturally designed buildings to now being displayed in a Gallery as art objects, the history of each door is unique. The results of different approaches to treatment and presentation, carried out at different times by different conservation specialists are obvious. This review demonstrates the subjective nature of conservation decision making and shows there can be many valid approaches to conservation and display.

Keywords

conservation, art, paint, gilt, wood, x-ray, XRF

In 1988 the AGNSW acquired an unusual artwork by Australian artist Donald Friend. An exotic garden viewed at different levels (1957) [Fig.1] was painted on a set of antique French doors. Years later, the gallery acquired a related work, Self portrait on Balinese door; Jungle motif with devotional figure [Fig.2 & 3] painted by Friend and intricately carved by Indonesian artist, I Made Jojol. These doors once enjoyed a functional place in architecturally designed buildings. Now, displayed together with two of Friend’s paintings in an intimate space in the Gallery, the results of different approaches to treatment and presentation, carried out at different times by different conservation specialists are obvious.

Donald Friend was born in Sydney in 1915. At age 15 he wrote
‘Thus I have decided that my school life shall be the “common or garden” life that I should lead, and my home life shall be the life of artistic ease and loving of the Quaint and beautiful which help so much to inspire and uphold my writing and drawing: which I propose to take as a profession in later life...’

[Peirce, 1990]

His father disapproved of him becoming an artist so at age 17 Donald Friend left home to roam the world, studying art in Sydney and London and immersing himself in cultural life. He was fascinated by people he saw as exotic. During his travels he befriended young men in particular and became emotionally attached to many. In his own early assessment of himself, Friend wrote that he had ‘the tastes of a savant and the morals of a louse’. [Marr, 2010]

Friend continued to draw, paint, exhibit and write throughout his life. In 2006 his personal diaries were published by the Australian National Library. They provide useful insights into his thinking which are of great assistance in planning conservation treatments and display.

In 1951 Friend won the Flotta Lauro Travelling Art Prize for his mural Australiana, with the prize being a trip to Italy. He worked on a number of pictures in the Byzantine manner based on icons he had been collecting. Ex Voto (c 1952) on display next to An exotic garden viewed at different levels is a tempera, gouache, gold leaf on plywood painting that he most likely painted whilst in Florence. Before he died, Friend remarked that he’d been thinking of making fake icons in Italy. At that time he experimented with artificially cracking and distressing his work [1].

Searching for an exotic life, Friend moved to Sri Lanka in 1957. Staying with Bevis Bawa, whom he’d met many years previously, Friend built himself a studio in Bawa’s garden where he painted two sets of doors. ‘Done (I may boast) very skilfully with light-hearted trompe l’oeuil motifs ....’ Friend described his view into Bevis Bawa’s garden, which relates to his painting An exotic garden viewed at different levels. [Pearce, 1990] The painting created an illusion of panels on the door, and also depicted the garden, imagined through the panes of glass.

By 1962 an exotic garden viewed at different levels was installed in the home of Bevis’ brother, the architect Geoffrey Bawa. This is the
set of doors that the AGNSW acquired. Both the Gallery’s curator and the artist considered it to be one of the finest examples of his work in the area of applied and decorative arts. Our curator stated ‘the doors retain the wit and decorative inventiveness of the artist at his very best...’ and ‘have an important place in the context of his relationship with South-East Asia’ [2]

Fig. 2 Donald Friend, I Made Jojol, recto: Self portrait on Balinese door (Donald Friend) 1978; oil, gold leaf on wooden door with carved frame, 158.5 x 51.8cm sight (painted door); 203.0 x 93.8 x 24.5cm door overall
Purchased with funds provided by Carole Muller and the Pissarro Dinner Fund 2005, Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales
©Reproduced with permission of the Estate of Donald Friend
photograph: Jenni Carter
In contrast to the quality of the painting on the doors, Friend wrote about a painted chest he used when departing Italy, and which he subsequently created a painting of in 1956. ‘… all this in startling rather rude colours. To use them so freely is a joy. I wish I could paint my serious works so unrestrainedly, but...’
I cannot. Good taste and craftsmanship and a dozen more weighty spoilsport considerations creep in, while spontaneity flees out.’ [Pearce, 1990]

When Friend settled in Bali in 1968 his artistic focus began to change. He became more involved with the local people, their traditions and material culture. He continued to paint but his work was more carefree.

Together with a local businessman he created the region’s first boutique hotel ‘Tandjung Sari’. Friend encouraged the owner to buy old doors and windows for the hotel and to decorate the rooms with local art. Friend bought land nearby where he built a house and studio. ‘Here he held court, surrounded by a platoon of servants, entertaining celebrities from every corner of the world, and painting furiously in order to finance his outrageous lifestyle.’ [Robson, 2007]

In 1970 Friend and the hotel owner built a house inspired by the design of a traditional village wantilan, yet incorporating a foreign element – a spiral staircase [3]. Construction difficulties were overcome when a drawing done by Friend while in Florence in 1949 was translated into a scale model.

With the possibility of making money and controlling the quality of developments along the beach, Friend embarked on a larger property development called Batujimbar. He engaged Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa, whom he considered to be the best architect in Asia, to create an exclusive estate of 15 beach villas in a 500 meter strip of beachfront. Bawa conceived the overall plan including a museum to house Friend’s collection. The design was inspired by 19th c. palaces and included traditional elements such as antique doors, windows, carved figures in stone and wood and painted panels.

Due to a number of problems, only the museum pavilion with its moat and stone terracing, and two houses were built to Bawa’s designs. The museum was a highlight of the architect’s career and is considered one of Bali’s most significant modern buildings. It has a delicate thatched roof and a heavy red brick base with openings framed in severely cut paras (volcanic) stone. [Robson, 2007]

Four carved doors by I Made Jojol were installed in the museum. Two panels described the ‘Legend of Batujimbar’ and were located on inner walls. The door acquired by the AGNSW in 2005 was installed on the ground level of the museum. Most likely, this door was used to secure Friend’s valuable purchases in the Collection room under the grand staircase. With the door closed, Jungle motif with devotional figure would have been seen from inside the museum, while Self portrait on Balinese door was viewed from within the Collection room [4].

Self portrait on Balinese door portrays Friend as a regal and somewhat mocking Balinese prince. In a classical Hindu pose he holds a wine glass in his left hand. His royal status is highlighted by a burnished gold leaf background also reminiscent of Byzantine icons which had intrigued him so much when he was in Italy.

The lower image is of a Balinese ship with a tree of life rising from the deck [5]. Also included on the deck is a thatched pavilion and stick figures with their arms in the same pose as the figure above. Plants, birds and animals complete the decorations around the border and between the two painted scenes. An antique door frame, carved with floral meanders surrounds the painting.

The verso, Jungle motif with devotional figure was skilfully carved by I Made Jojol, in traditional Balinese technique using wood of the jackfruit tree, regarded as an appropriate material for temples and sacred buildings. The image includes a standing princely figure in a doorway holding his palms together in the Balinese gesture of respect. This calm central figure is surrounded by a mass of whimsical, asymmetrical animals and foliage. The carved panel is contained in a wooden frame matching that on the other side. The two halves are securely joined to make a complete two sided door.

The two doors, now belonging to the AGNSW, have very different histories which have informed our approach to conservation and display. An exotic garden viewed from different levels was extremely
fragile, requiring conservation treatment prior to Donald Friend’s retrospective in 1990. It’s location on the architect’s veranda in Sri Lanka, exposed to full sun and uncontrolled, high relative humidity would have caused the paints to fade, wood to crack and warp and the metal parts to corrode. Abrasions and gouges would also be expected after three decades. Not to mention the doors themselves were not new at that time of painting. Friend created this work over an already stained and deteriorated surface.

In contrast, the Balinese door *Self portrait on Balinese door; Jungle motif with devotional figure* was installed in an indoor setting in Friend’s museum, and hence was protected from extreme environmental fluctuations. Friend applied his paint to a smooth sheet of wood approximately 4mm thick. Cracks were repaired prior to painting, although a few vertical cracks have since developed and are mirrored on the opposite side of the door. The burnished gilding was intentionally distressed to reveal the red colour below. Surface crazing may have developed due to quick drying paint applied to a still wet or drying layer below. Matt areas in the glossy varnish may be due to restoration prior to acquisition. Only the frame appears weathered and genuinely old.

Friend completely painted over the aged wood, glass and metal surfaces on one side of a set of French doors when creating *An exotic garden viewed at different levels*. On arrival at the AGNSW the paintings conservators described the artwork as having severe cleavage, tenting, flaking and loss of paint. Their report included detailed photographs documenting the condition. There were vertical cracks in the wooden panels. The six glass panels were fragile, being held in place with painted and corroded nails. Scratches and missing paint flakes had damaged all glass panels. The surface was dirty and dusty. There were small black spots in areas of high media, and areas of white frosting, possibly due to old mould. The large iron lock had areas of exposed metal, covered in brown/red iron oxide. Corrosion had caused paint loss. The major concern for treatment was to find a way to consolidate the paint while also stabilising the wooden substrate in time for the Retrospective exhibition.

In 1989 a support frame was made for *An exotic garden viewed from different levels*. After careful brush/vacuuming, it was placed in a humidified tent at 80% relative humidity, as this environment was considered comparable to conditions in Sri Lanka. The loose pigment was consolidated onto the humidified wood support using sturgeon’s glue diluted in ethanol and water. It was applied by brush to relax the surface tension around the tented paint. Cotton buds dampened with saliva were used to press the consolidant onto areas of raised paint, and also to remove excess adhesive. Microcrystalline wax paste was applied as a final protective layer. The wax saturated the colours and enhanced the 3D trompe l’oeuil at the same time.

After treatment the doors were secured under a Perspex® lid with Artsorb® sheets adhered to a wooden backing board. Foam seals were fitted and the Perspex® was screwed into place. A few years after, some further consolidation was applied using gelatine. The Artsorb® sheets were reattached with staples, the backing board was sealed with tyvek® tape and the Perspex® was cleaned.

Twenty years later, the display system remains essentially the same. By now *An exotic garden viewed at different levels* will have stabilised to Gallery conditions. Some paint is lifting, particularly off the glass panels and there are minor paint flakes in the bottom of the display frame. Consolidation experiments with softening agents to set the paint down will most likely produce a ridged surface or broken flakes of paint as has already occurred in the lower right, but may save the paint from being completely lost. Also the role of Artsorb® is in question, as in a stable museum environment there should be little need for a humidity buffer. If by chance the relative humidity changes dramatically then Artsorb® might hinder a return to optimum conditions [6].

As long as the curators and conservators agree that this work is too fragile to travel, its deterioration is expected to be gradual.

The painted surface on *Self portrait on Balinese door* appears stable. *Jungle motif with devotional figure* has a major crack down the proper left side which was repaired sometime prior to acquisition. Hair line cracks extend from the ends of the major crack. Jojol’s carving, the wooden frame and base are covered.
with a thin wash of titanium dioxide [7]. There are numerous longitudinal cracks and some repairs in the antique frame. The frame includes nail holes and small areas of loss. Two bent nails are imbedded in the top of the door, possibly used for hanging previously.

Obviously this door was altered prior to its arrival at the AGNSW. Since its removal from the museum at Batujimbar, the lock and hinges were removed and a heavy teakwood base was added. The door is now self supporting, visible from both sides and clearly meant to be viewed in the round. Although this base was sufficient for display in a private house, the tongue and groove fittings have proved inadequate for display in a public museum.

We were faced with a conundrum. The Balinese door was made by Friend and Jojol to be used as a decorative and functional element of Friend’s private museum. Later it was sold and displayed in a private home, mounted on a new teakwood base. Now it is part of the AGNSW’s collection in Sydney.

How can this artwork be converted from one circumstance to another without damaging its integrity? How can it be made to comply with the needs of a public museum? And what would Donald Friend think of all of our interferences?

Our immediate concern was the lack of rigidity between the Balinese door and its new base. Installed in the middle of the exhibition space, occasionally visitors would push it either accidentally or deliberately. Following reports from the Gallery Services Officers regarding its safety, the curator’s approached the objects conservation section for advice. The curators wanted the artwork fitted securely into its base. They also wanted a plinth made that would isolate the artwork from the public and provide a safe method for transport around the gallery.

External clamping devices were considered and rejected as they would detract from the object. To fit internal supports would require drilling vertically through the base and into the door frame for 50cm. Before proceeding with this radical intervention, x-rays were taken to check the soundness of the wood and to ensure no obstructive hardware was present [8] It was decided to drill through the newer wooden frame surrounding I Made Jojol’s carving and to insert two 16mm diameter stainless steel locating pins. Metal plates fitted into the bottom of the base were used for fastening to the plinth.

**Conclusion:**

Doors are a universal symbol of transition and change. These two artworks, decorated by Donald Friend and I Made Jojol have most certainly undergone many changes during their history. Each is an amalgamation of old doors and new interpretations: first being functional room dividers, then becoming artistic architectural features, and now regarded solely as art objects. From a conservation perspective they certainly have undergone transition and change.

With regard to display, *An exotic garden viewed from different levels* is hung on a white wall beside the opening to the adjacent room and window beyond. An uninformed visitor may not appreciate the three dimensional quality of this work, yet the display is sympathetic to the photo taken at Geoffrey Bawa’s home in Sri Lanka. In contrast *Self portrait on Balinese door; Jungle motif with devotional figure* is displayed as a three dimensional object. It has been installed on a large plinth and base, rather than being hinged into a door frame. Various factors have influenced the conservation and display of each object. Our job as conservators has been to make them safe for public display without changing their appearance any further than necessary.

I believe both interpretations are in keeping with Friend’s early vision of creating a life of artistic ease and loving of the quaint and beautiful.

No matter how methodical we try to be in our approach to conservation, ultimately our decisions are largely subjective. As Thomas Learner stated in the recent Getty publication *Conservation Perspectives, ‘it depends’* is a valid response when asked how to best conserve and exhibit art.
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Notes:
[1] Personal communication with Paula Dredge, Senior Painting Conservator, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia.
[3] Wantilan refers to a traditional Balinese village hall
[6] Personal communication with Paula Dredge, Senior Painting Conservator, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia.
[8] X-ray photography completed with Stewart Laidler, Senior Painting Conservator, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, using Tanka X-ray unit Model RTO-125, supplied by Raytek Pty Ltd, Ryde NSW. MA 60; KV 35; 2.5 seconds.

References:
Materials:
Sturgeon’s glue, available from L. Cornelissen & Son, 22 Great Queen St., London, UK
Artsorb ® silica gel, Fuji-Davidson Chemical Ltd, Japan.
Tyvek ®, available from Dupont Australia, Preservation Australia and Zetta Florence.

Donna Hinton, originally from Canada, studied conservation and worked for a number of museums and the Canadian Conservation Institute before spending two years at the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre in Yellowknife, North West Territories. In 1980 Donna moved to sunny Australia to study for her masters in Conservation of Cultural Material at the Canberra College of Advanced Education, now the University of Canberra. Donna completed her internship at the Australian Museum, Sydney and worked for the Hong Kong Museum of History before returning to Australia to take up the inaugural position of Travelling Conservator with the New South Wales government. Since 1987 Donna has been working as a Senior Objects Conservator, Head of Objects Conservation at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Contact details: Art Gallery Road, Sydney 2000, Australia, e-mail: donnah@ag.nsw.gov.au