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FUTURE TALKS 017. INVESTIGATING THE COLOURFUL WORLD OF ALESSANDRO MENDINI

Investigating the colourful world of Alessandro Mendini: Conserving Nigritella Nigra, a unique chest of drawers

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This paper discusses the decision-making process and the conservation treatment of Nigritella Nigra (1993), designed by Alessandro Mendini (Milan, 1931). Rijksmuseum accepted this chest of drawers from the heir of a famous Dutch museum director in 2016. The top-drawer case was in poor condition.

Nigritella Nigra is composed of five different encased drawers, stacked on a base, the smallest at the top. The plywood construction is decorated with paint, wood, metal leaf, High Pressure Laminate (HPL), glass mosaic, paper, grease crayon, and varnish. The production of the handmade chest has been limited to two series of twelve numbered pieces each. Some of them have been traced and are used for comparative studies. The chests appear identical within their series, except for the top-drawer case, which makes each object in this series unique. The top-drawer case is decorated with colourful abstract crayon drawings made by Lucio Giudici, a young man with Down syndrome. The drawings are glued directly onto the plywood and the drawer case has been finished with a transparent varnish. Py-GC/MS analysis indicated the use of grease crayon and FTIR-ATR analysis revealed that the varnish is a nitrocellulose lacquer. This varnish was peeling off, locally lifting the grease crayon off the paper substrate, resulting in considerable loss of material in the pictorial area.

This study discusses the challenges met by the combination of different materials that characterise the object when it comes to consolidating and retouching the deteriorated areas. Apart from investigating the technical possibilities, this study looks closely at decision-making about what contributes best to a sound conservation treatment of Nigritella Nigra, from aesthetical, historical, and ethical perspectives. The artist interview has enriched these deliberations significantly. Finally, this study aims to make a start with art technological research into the other objects from the series in order to clarify the art making process of both series and to learn more about the differences in material behaviour by drawing up their biographies in comparative studies.