



Sveučilište u Zagrebu  
Akademija likovnih umjetnosti  
Odsjek za konzerviranje i restauriranje umjetnina

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# How to handle Mr. Bean

## – treatment of the besmeared painting *Portrait of Grandmother* by Vlado Jakelić

### GENERAL INFORMATION

Title: *Portrait of Grandmother*  
Author: Vlado Jakelić  
Date: 1981  
Technique: oil on canvas  
Dimensions: painting 81.5 x 67 cm, decorative frame 92.5 x 78 cm  
Owner: Anić family private collection, Zagreb  
Inventory number OKIRU: 464

Course: *Conservation and Restoration of Easel Paintings 2*  
Mentors: Tamara Ukrainčik, MA Full Prof., Barbara Horvat Kavazović, MA Assoc. Prof.  
Team members: Paulina Pilić, Ana Vincek, 4<sup>th</sup> year students  
End of project: 2024

### INTRODUCTION

The painting *Portrait of Grandmother* by artist Vlado Jakelić from a private collection arrived at the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb for assessment and treatment. During house renovations, in the absence of the owners, the painting had been accidentally stained, and then intentionally smeared with industrial wood varnish in an attempt to remedy the situation. The obvious predicament the unknown perpetrator had found themselves in immediately evokes the famously stressful movie scene every conservator-restorer dreads, leading us to affectionately refer to the painting as ‘The Mr. Bean Grandma’.

According to the owner's wishes, the painting needed to be restored to its original condition. The sensitivity of the relatively fresh paint, and the absence of varnish proved to be particular challenges. The treatment included careful cleaning and minor reintegration, and the painting was successfully restored to its former appearance.

### SHORT ART HISTORICAL REVIEW

The painting was created by Vlado Jakelić, a well known Croatian painter born in Prugovo, near Split, in 1943. He graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb in 1966, in the class of Antun Mezdjić. From 1967 to 1972, he was an associate of the Master Workshop of Krsto Hegeđušić, and from 1972 to 1974 a member of the Biafra group. Since 1975, he has worked as a set painter for TV Zagreb, and since 1978, he has been a freelance artist, continuing to work in Zagreb. After a brief surrealist phase, Jakelić turned to gesture painting, art informel, and expressionism.

He primarily works in oil and sand, occasionally incorporating collage. Since 1971, he has been developing a form of realistic figuration that combines photographic objectivity and with a personal approach, evoking intimate atmospheres and psychological narratives. He depicts scenes from everyday life in Zagreb – especially those featuring ordinary people – in an expressive yet realistic manner. His works are characterized by a bright color palette, an emphasis on diffuse light, and a focus on structure and detail.

### ORIGINAL MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES

The painting is executed on a medium density, plain-weave linen canvas, brown in color, stretched on a wooden strainer with nails. The white ground layer extends to the edges of the canvas. The paint layer, applied with a brush in oil medium, is of medium thickness with areas of *impasto*. The artist's signature, also applied with a brush, is subtly concealed among the headlines on the newspaper's front page. The decorative frame is made from gilded wood.

### THE CONDITION BEFORE TREATMENTS

The canvas is in good and stable condition, with a small dent visible in the upper right area. Dust has crept in between the canvas and the subframe on the reverse. Stains on the back are likely due to variations in the application of oil during painting. The strainer, secured with nails, is stable and sturdy. The ground layer is well-preserved and adheres firmly to the canvas. The painted layer is generally stable, adheres well to the ground and is overall in a good state of preservation. Minor areas of damage were observed in both the paint layer and ground. The overpaint is visible on the face, hands, as well as parts of the background and table. The surface shows widespread dust and yellowish deposits, most likely caused by prolonged exposure to an environment with nicotine smoking, heating and cooking activities. The thickest application of overpaint occurs on the face, leading to slight cracking and some instability in the paint layer. Examination under UV light confirmed that the painting was not originally varnished. The decorative gilded frame is in good condition.

### THE CONSERVATION-RESTORATION TREATMENT

The primary goal was to remove the unacceptable overpaint in order to restore the painting to its original appearance. As there was no varnish separating the painted layer from the overpaint, it was uncertain whether removal could be achieved without damaging the original.

After cleaning tests, a solution of Venetian soap in distilled water (1:6 ratio) proved most effective for removing surface dirt and nicotine deposits. The deposits of cigarette smoke and dust formed a separation layer that limited the penetration of the cleaning agent. Since the overpaint had only recently been applied, it was well bonded to the surface layer and was almost entirely removed using this method. In some areas, further cleaning was necessary with a mixture of acetone and ShellSol T (1:1).

The reverse of the painting was cleaned using a soft wide brush and a vacuum cleaner. The small dent was flattened out using moist, absorbent paper and weights. Minor losses in the ground and paint layers were repaired with Planatol BB filler, which was then isolated using 5% solution of shellac in ethanol.

Retouching was carried out using Lascaux Resonance gouache. Finally, the painting was varnished with a 15% solution of Laropal A81 varnish in ShellSol D 40 and ShellSol A (1:1), with the addition of Tinuvin 292. The decorative frame was cleaned with a dusting brush and white spirit.

### CONCLUSION

The sensitivity of the relatively fresh paint layer, combined with the absence of a protective varnish posed a particular challenge during treatment. Therefore, the cleaning process was approached with great caution, and various methods were tested to ensure minimal impact on the original paint. Interestingly, the layer of surface dirt acted as a mitigating factor, preventing the overpaint from bonding strongly to the underlying paint. Nevertheless, the removal process proved to be delicate and demanding. Although the painting was not originally varnished, it was, in agreement with the owner, coated with a non-intrusive varnish that does not alter the visual characteristics of the work. This final layer will help safeguard from future accumulation of dust and dirt.

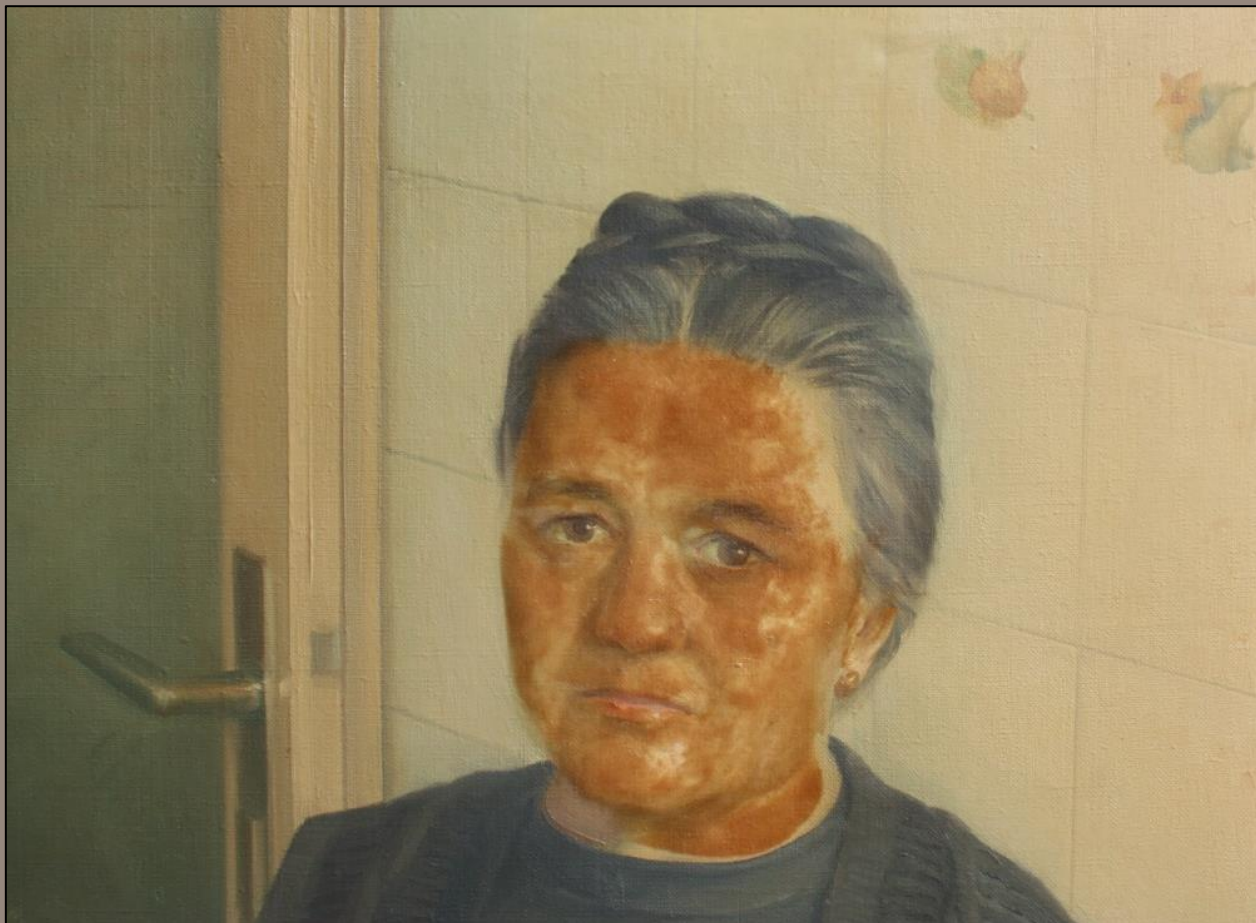
While conservators-restorers often encounter overpaints and previous interventions, this case was the result of an unfortunate accident, and an overly ambitious attempt to repair the damage that ultimately made matters worse. A real-life Mr. Bean example.



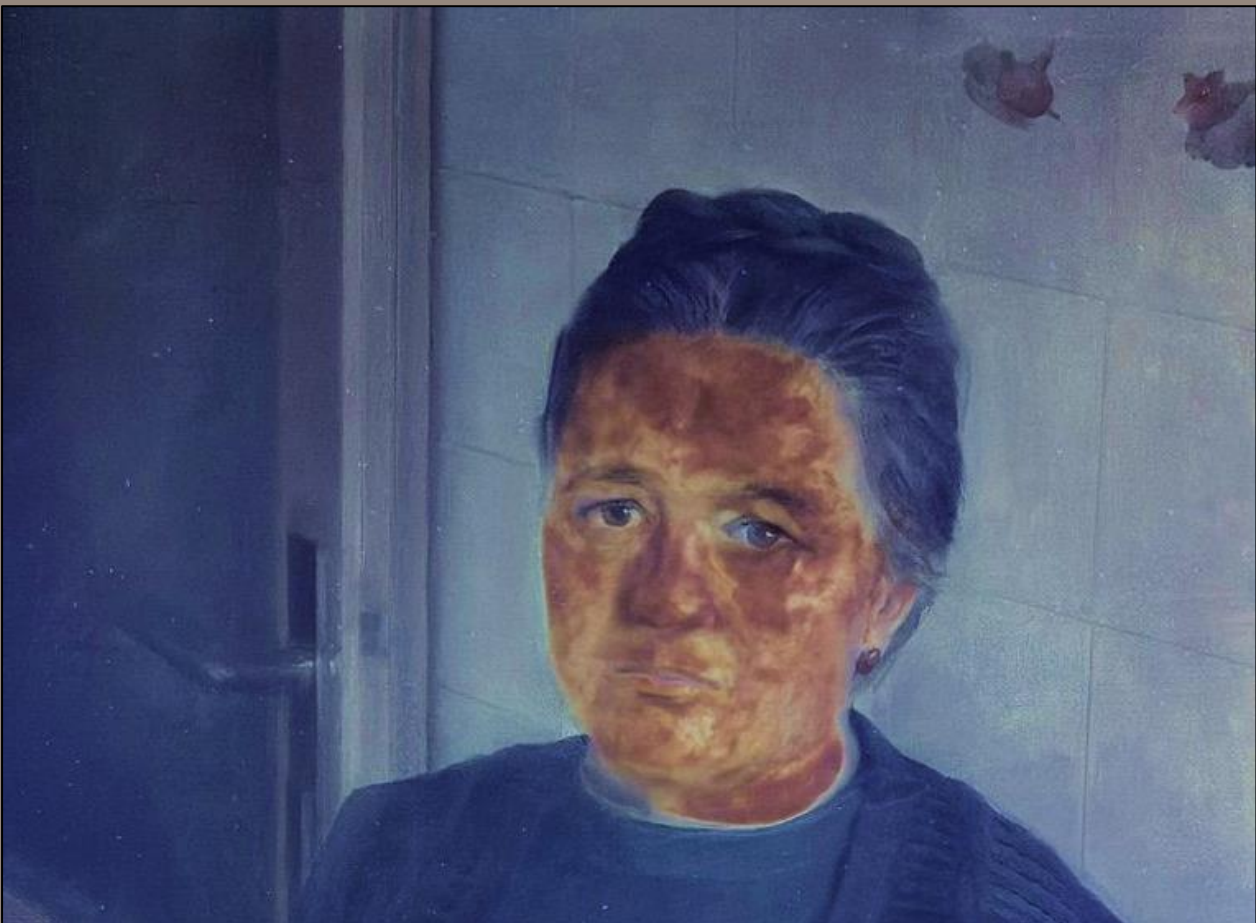
Picture 1 - Vlado Jakelić, *Portrait of Grandmother*, 1981, oil on canvas, painting dimensions 81.5 x 67 cm, decorative frame dimensions 92.5 x 78 cm, private collection, Zagreb, OKIRU 464.  
The painting in its decorative frame, before treatment



Picture 2 - Vlado Jakelić, *Portrait of Grandmother*, 1981, Zagreb, OKIRU 464  
The reverse of the painting, before treatment



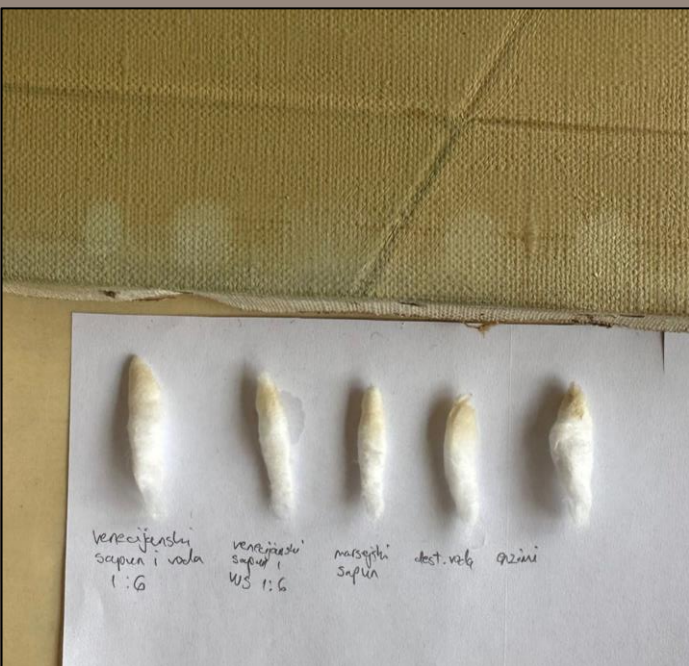
Picture 3 - Vlado Jakelić, *Portrait of Grandmother*, 1981, Zagreb, OKIRU 464  
Detail of the grandmother's face with visible overpaint



Picture 4 - Vlado Jakelić, *Portrait of Grandmother*, 1981, Zagreb, OKIRU 464  
Detail of the grandmother's face with overpaint, under UV light, before treatment



Picture 5 - Vlado Jakelić, *Portrait of Grandmother*, 1981, Zagreb, OKIRU 464  
Detail of the grandmother's hand on the newspaper with the artist's signature



Picture 6 - Vlado Jakelić, *Portrait of Grandmother*, 1981, Zagreb, OKIRU 464  
Cleaning tests



Picture 7 - Vlado Jakelić, *Portrait of Grandmother*, 1981, Zagreb, OKIRU 464  
Cleaning of the overpaint on the grandmother's face



Picture 8 - Vlado Jakelić, *Portrait of Grandmother*, 1981, Zagreb, OKIRU 464  
The painting, partially cleaned from surface dirt and overpaint



Picture 9 - Vlado Jakelić, *Portrait of Grandmother*, 1981, Zagreb, OKIRU 464  
The painting after treatment