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Would You Like That With or Without Mayo? How Interdisciplinary Collaboration Slows the Spread of Popular Misconceptions in Modern Art

There is no evidence that Willem de Kooning added mayonnaise to his paints, and E.I. du Pont de Nemours did not customize paints for Jackson Pollock. In both cases, misinterpretations or faulty transcriptions have become accepted—albeit unsubstantiated—truth. The collaboration of scholars and conservators is essential to avoid such misdirection and support scholarship that enhances our understanding of modern art.

The experimental materials and practices employed by mid-20th century artists are key factors in the materiality of modern art, and published or broadcast misinformation entrenched in the academic canon is difficult to dislodge from the mythology of the artist or period. Existing documentation obfuscated by loose terminology and theatrical language diverts attention and resources from proper examination of individual artworks and interpretation of an artist's oeuvre. Utilizing archival and research resources from the Smithsonian Institution and building on the author's research on the manufacture, use, and physical behavior of mid-20th century art materials, this talk will debunk some commonly held beliefs about the materials and practices of well-known Abstract Expressionist artists, reveal the overlooked (and more interesting) practices underlying the myths, and explain how the combined resources of scholar and conservator finally placed the physical evidence in historical context.