A typical postwar workshop: Insights into Simon Hantaï's oil paint palette

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Simon Hantaï (1922–2008) was a highly influential postwar painter in Paris whose innovative serial practice, creative curiosity and theoretical convictions inspired a number of his contemporaries. His art media are typical of the period, consisting of commercial artists' products, sold in tubes and cans, which were available to artists in Europe and beyond. We have studied a series of samples from the brands Lefebvre-Foinet, Lefranc & Bourgeois and Valor using a combination of optical and electron microscopy, accelerator-mass spectrometry carbon-14 dating, infrared spectroscopy, structural analysis, chromatographic and mass spectrometry techniques. Of particular interest is the rare access to a coherent artist's studio collection and its dating in relation to the painter's works. We gained precise information on paint formulations, including main binders and pigments, as well as additives, such as free metal soaps, beeswax and pine resin. This suggests the value of further research into paint formulations and their identification in paintings from the second half of the 20th century. These materials were studied for their capacity as possible references for future analysis of the painter's artworks. The high degree of hydrolysis of the oil binder and alteration, notably by saponification, leads us to question the significance of these materials and the handling of the data generated towards comparative studies. These samples have a history; considering them as pristine references for comparative studies with the works of artists of the period cannot be done at the expense of their own materiality — and in particular their physico-chemical evolution over time in their specific environment