

HIDDEN LAYERS

Painting and Process in Europe, 1500–1800



Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

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Painting and Process in Europe, 1500–1800

To mark the opening of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Center for Conservation, we are highlighting in this exhibition some recent technical findings relating to European paintings in the Blaffer and Museum collections. In all these cases, preparatory layers or underlying changes have been revealed by the imaging techniques of x-radiography or infrared reflectography. In some instances, we witness major transformations, revealing entirely different compositions below a painting's surface. In others, we see the brilliance of an artist's underdrawing or the subtle alterations of line as the design was refined and developed. In all of them, details of the artists' working methods and clues to original and changing artistic intentions are made clearer by discovering what lies in the hidden layers.



Hans Collaert II; after Johannes Stradanus; published by Joan Galle, *Oil Paint (Color Oliui)*, c. 1590, engraving, Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, Houston, 1998.9.14.

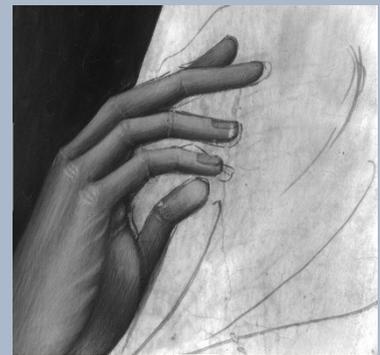
Imaging the Invisible

Techniques for imaging parts of the spectrum that our eyes cannot see expand our knowledge about the structure and condition of paintings. Special cameras and film or digital technology capture an image created by the varied responses of materials as they absorb or reflect wavelengths in the invisible parts of the electromagnetic spectrum.

Infrared Images



Infrared reflectograms or digital infrared reflectance photography show the pattern of contrasting absorption and reflection of layers just below the visible surface. In this infrared image of



St. John the Baptist, we see dark lines where the infrared energy has been absorbed by the materials of the carbon black underdrawing, which the artist used to delineate his composition. In the light areas, the same wavelengths are reflected from the light ground. With close-up examination, we can even distinguish between lines made with a dry charcoal-like drawing point, used by the artist for the first rough sketch on the panel, and subsequent careful development of the composition with a brush and a fluid medium.

Giovanni di Paolo, Italian (Sienese), c. 1399–c. 1482, *Saint John the Baptist*, c. 1435–1440, tempera and gold leaf on wood, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 53.2

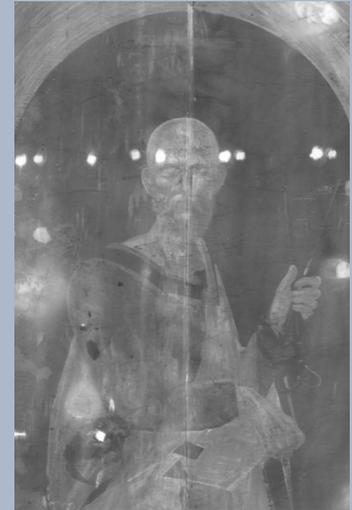
X-radiography



Master of Palanchinos, Spanish, 15th century, *Saint Peter*, 15th century, oil and gold leaf on wood, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 36.17.

X-rays have much shorter wavelengths and higher energy than visible light and are powerful enough to penetrate through the materials of a painting's structure, including the wood supports often used in the early European schools. X-rays pass easily through materials of low atomic weight, such as carbon-based pigments and other organic materials, and make dark areas on the x-ray film. Higher atomic weight materials, like lead white pigment, block the x-rays and appear white on the film. The image we see is a pattern of the relative opacity—the ability to stop x-rays—of the different materials throughout the entire thickness of the painting.

The x-radiograph of *St. Peter* is easy to interpret and shows us fine lines made with a stylus to establish the composition on the grounded panel (area of arm holding keys); the flesh areas with white lead are clearly legible, and even fibers used in the preparation of the panel appear as slightly dark



irregular linear areas throughout. The large white circles correspond to metal fixings in the reverse of the wooden panel, and the vertical dark line shows where the ground and paint have been disrupted by a split in the panel (now repaired).



Workshop of Joos van Cleve
South Netherlandish, 1485–1541/2
The Holy Family

Oil on wood

The Edith A. and Percy S. Straus Collection, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 44.528

A master of the Antwerp Guild from 1511 to 1512, Joos van Cleve ran a large workshop with numerous assistants, producing many small devotional paintings for ecclesiastical and private patrons. A number of standard compositions were repeated

with minor variations, and these vary enormously in quality. The Houston *Holy Family* is one of several similar works in which the Christ Child is shown either standing or lying in his mother's lap. In the version in the National Gallery, London, the Child's position was changed during painting from lying to standing. The Houston painting differs from the London one in several significant ways: the Child turns toward the viewer; the Virgin's ear is covered, and her hand is raised with a flower; and Saint Joseph does not wear a straw hat or spectacles.



Workshop of Joos van Cleve, *The Holy Family*, c. 1525, oil on panel, National Gallery, London.

Despite the differences between versions, it is likely that basic templates were used in the workshop for repeating compositions: some have very clear pricked outlines from a full-size preparatory drawing or cartoon. In the Houston painting, the infrared image shows distinct dots along the main underdrawing lines, indicating use of a cartoon,



Workshop of Joos van Cleve, *The Holy Family* (detail).

followed by a rather hesitant joining-up to complete the preliminary drawing. The quality of the underdrawing and the painting on top is somewhat pedestrian, and it could well be that we are looking at a replica produced by a junior assistant, providing a fascinating glimpse of life in a busy 16th-century painter's workshop.



Pieter Claeissens I

Netherlandish, c. 1499–1576

The Mass of Saint Gregory, after 1530

Oil on panel

Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, 1979.107

With the long signature appearing in Latin at the bottom right of *The Mass of Saint Gregory*, this is one of only a few works that is securely documented as being by the hand of Pieter Claeissens I. The attribution of

other paintings to the artist has long presented a challenge, since the sizeable Claeissens family—consisting of seven artists over three generations—was heavily involved in art production in Bruges during the 16th and 17th centuries, and different family members closely collaborated.

Examination of the painting by infrared reflectography reveals extensive underdrawing, much of which is visible to the naked eye. The fluid qualities of the lines and pooling at the end of the strokes, ending in differently sized loops or hooks, indicate a freehand drawing done in a liquid medium with a brush. Shading is indicated by hatching with parallel lines, which, as the shadow darkens, are drawn closer and closer together. The figures in the background and above the altar are also underdrawn but are less heavily hatched. Architectural perspective lines have been drawn with a straight edge. It is possible that the artist was working from a fully developed compositional drawing and then embellished details directly on the panel.



The majority of the painting closely follows the underdrawing. However, some alterations are evident, particularly among the details above the altar. Judas, with his bag of silver around his neck, was first placed higher and farther to the right; the flagellation column was initially also more to the right; and the ladder was originally on the other side of Christ.



Italian (Central Italian)

Portrait of a Boy Holding a Book, 1560s

Oil on wood

The Samuel H. Kress Collection, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 61.58

Infrared reflectography and x-radiography may help to settle a decades-long debate about the authorship of this mid-16th-century portrait, which has been attributed variously to Spanish painter Sanchez Coello (1531–1588) and Italians Francesco Salviati (1510–1563) and Alessandro Allori (1535–1607).

Another larger, seemingly adult figure was discovered beneath the surface through the use of infrared imaging: the eyes of this figure are clearly visible through the lower part of the boy's face. Indications of long hair at the right and the spreading outlines of a draped form in the lower part of the painting suggest it might be a portrait of a woman. This hidden figure may explain why the artist used a thick, uneven gesso as a preparation layer, in order to cover the underlying image.



X-radiography—difficult to read because of the grid-like framework on the back of the panel—also reveals a flatter, winged collar without the lace details of the boy's collar below and to the right of the two superimposed heads. It does not appear to belong to either of them and might indicate the presence of a rudimentary third figure, although it is difficult to be sure at which level it lies.



Lavinia Fontana, *Young Man at His Table*, 1581, oil on canvas, private collection.

The handling of the face and collar on the boy, the eyes of the hidden figure, and what can be perceived from the collar visible in the x-ray may suggest an attribution to Bolognese portraitist Lavinia Fontana (1552–1614), whose signed and dated portrait *Young Man at His Table* shows significant similarities. Continued technical investigations of other works by this important female artist may reveal a similar practice of reusing panels.



Bartolomeo Veneto

Italian, active 1502–1531, died 1531

Portrait of a Lady, c. 1518–20

Oil on panel

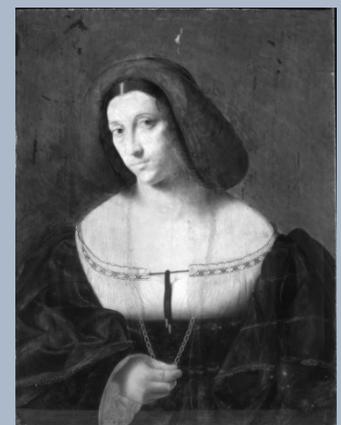
Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, 1984.26

Though a highly skilled and evocative portraitist and painter of private devotional pictures, Bartolomeo Veneto was ignored by writers on art in the 16th century and “rediscovered” only in the mid- 19th century. Bartolomeo was probably born in either Venice or Cremona by 1480. Details of his life and career remain obscure, and the identities of most of his sitters are unknown. He worked in several cities

in Northern Italy in addition to Venice, almost certainly including Milan, where the Blaffer *Portrait of a Lady* was probably painted.

The *Portrait of a Lady* is consistent in format and pose with Bartolomeo’s other portraits, most of which show the sitter in bust- or half-length, the upper body generally parallel to the picture plane. The face is generally angled toward the viewer’s left, from which direction light falls on the subject, casting the other side of the face in shadow but allowing for reflected light along the jawline. On the right side of the parapet in the *Portrait of a Lady* sits a small jar, which probably indicates that the painting portrays the sitter in the guise of Saint Mary Magdalene, whose attribute is an alabaster jar from which she poured perfume on Jesus’s head or feet, as recounted in all four of the Gospels.

Infrared imaging of the painting makes it clear that the figure was painted in its entirety before the parapet and the jar were added; the veil may have been added at this time as well. The artist may have found it simpler not to reserve areas for the jar and parapet, which could have been quickly painted over a completed portrait, or he may have added these details to transform a straightforward portrait into a representation of the Magdalene.





Unknown painter from the Southern
Netherlandish School

The Baptism of Christ, 1520s

Oil on panel

Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, 1978.2

The meticulous painting technique of *The Baptism of Christ* contrasts with the energetic freedom of the black chalk or charcoal underdrawing with which the artist initially set out the composition on

a white ground. He made several changes from the underdrawing during the process of painting.

The head of the crouching figure, who wears a white robe with red stockings and removes a shoe, perhaps in preparation for baptism, was originally higher and at a different angle and was executed with the eyes open. Significant changes were also made to the raised arm and hand of the red-capped man at right and to the figures to the left of Saint John, where the fingers of the hands extend beyond the original reserve planned for them: the newly extended fingers direct the gaze toward the baptism.



Trees and landscape details were sketched with a spirited shorthand. When the large tree at the upper right was painted, the leafless branches of the underdrawing were reduced to an even simpler network. In contrast, only summary strokes indicate the mountain contours in the underdrawing, which are then more carefully detailed in paint. The complex picture is of exceptionally high quality, and it has been suggested that the artist is from the circle of Jan de Beer (c. 1475–1528), one of the greatest of the so-called Antwerp Mannerists, artists who broke with the tradition of early 15th-century Netherlandish art by introducing figures in expressive poses and setting them in elaborate landscapes or architectural spaces.



Michele Tosini

Italian (Florentine), 1503–1577

Saint Mary Magdalene, 1560s

Oil on wood

The Samuel H. Kress Collection, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 61.67

The underdrawing hidden beneath this sumptuous depiction of the biblical figure Mary Magdalene reveals clues about the complicated relationship between Michele Tosini and the artist and historian Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574), for whom Tosini worked from the mid-1550s. Infrared reflectography has revealed a brilliant, extensive freehand underdrawing on the white gesso ground, done very quickly and finely with metal point or black chalk throughout the work. The freedom of the drawing is remarkable, defining the figure and draperies in sweeping curves, with tighter loops for the features and hair. The drawing of the right hand, holding the book, is fairly detailed, although shifted somewhat at the painting stage; the left hand, holding the jar, is much more summary and roughly indicated. The right breast that appears in the underdrawing would have aided the artist's treatment of pose, drapery, and proportion and may suggest an original study from the nude. There are some small adjustments between the drawing and painting stages: the pupil in the Magdalene's left eye was lowered, and the position of the medallion on her chest was slightly changed.

Tosini's approach to the composition of *Saint Mary Magdalene* is perfectly in line with standard Florentine draftsmanship, as practiced by Vasari and Michelangelo, whom Vasari praised above all other artists. At the time this work was painted, Tosini was also actively adopting the visual vocabulary of Michelangelo, perhaps due to Vasari's influence. Although he worked diligently for Vasari and in a manner that would almost certainly have been approved by him, Tosini received little attention or praise in Vasari's writings, where he was described rather dismissively only as a good instructor.





Giuliano Bugiardini

Italian, c. 1475–1554

The Madonna and Child Seated in a Landscape with Saint John the Baptist, c.1517

Oil on panel

Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, 1984.23

Examination by infrared reflectography reveals subtle aspects of the working process of the Renaissance artist Giuliano Bugiardini, who was influenced by the harmonious compositions of Raphael (1483–1520). Bugiardini first utilized various cartoons to set down the figures, using a dry medium like black chalk. He executed the figures and drapery with smooth contours and then made adjustments to ensure the composition was carefully balanced.

It appears that the cartoon for the Christ Child was shifted at least twice. At one point it was placed farther to the right and tilted at a 30-degree angle, seen in the detail of the proper right ear. Another shift occurs with the outer line of the face, which was eventually moved more to the left. Bugiardini evidently rethought the exact placement and angle of the Child's head before completing the rest of the drawing. He later adjusted the hand holding the book by elongating the forearm and enlarging the hand, while keeping the same upper arm and shoulder line. This more substantial change may have deviated from the cartoon entirely.



The background landscape was drawn freehand, and, while Bugiardini still used a precise touch for details such as an oak tree, he seems less concerned with working out the exact placement. The only change evident during the painting stage is the removal of an angular fold on the Madonna's proper right shoulder—covered with blue sky—to make the slope of the shoulder gentler.

Bugiardini's continuous attention to compositional spacing and angles supports the suggestion that he was carefully studying the innovations in the treatment of space made by Raphael, and he slowly integrated these ideas into his own compositions.



Joachim Wtewael

Netherlandish, 1566–1638

The Annunciation to the Shepherds, 1606

Oil on canvas

Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, 2006.1

The Annunciation to the Shepherds was a common subject in Dutch art around the turn of the 17th century. In his large painting of the subject, Joachim Wtewael shows dark clouds of the night sky split with “the brightness of God” shining on a group of shepherds below, who are pictured in various states between sleep and bewilderment at the heavenly apparition.

Wtewael copied this painting, and the second version, now in Amsterdam, is virtually identical in size and composition to the Blaffer Foundation version but differs in numerous details. The differences are subtle, as in, for example, the left hand of the sleeping shepherd at lower right and the area immediately around it; the form and position of the staff held by the woman next to him, as well as the ribbon of her hat. Most noticeable, perhaps, are the sheep and two reclining figures in the middle ground below the head and neck of the cow in the Amsterdam version, at which point in the Houston painting only a tree trunk and its foliage appear. In addition, there are significant color differences, principally in the garments of most of the foreground figures.

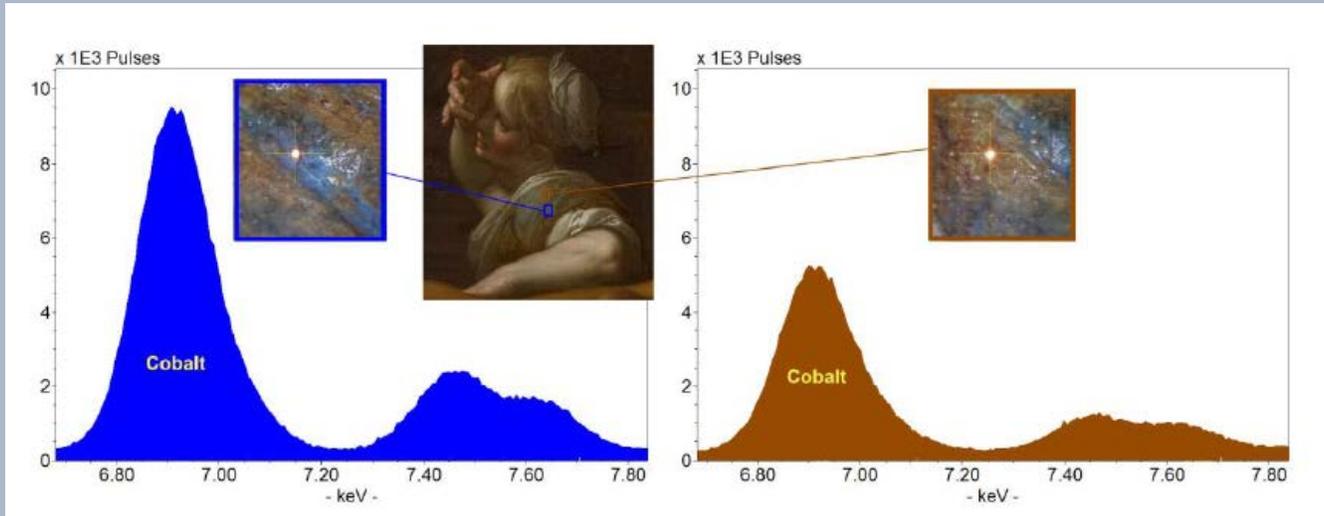


Joachim Wtewael, *Annunciation to the Shepherds*, 1595–1603, oil on canvas, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

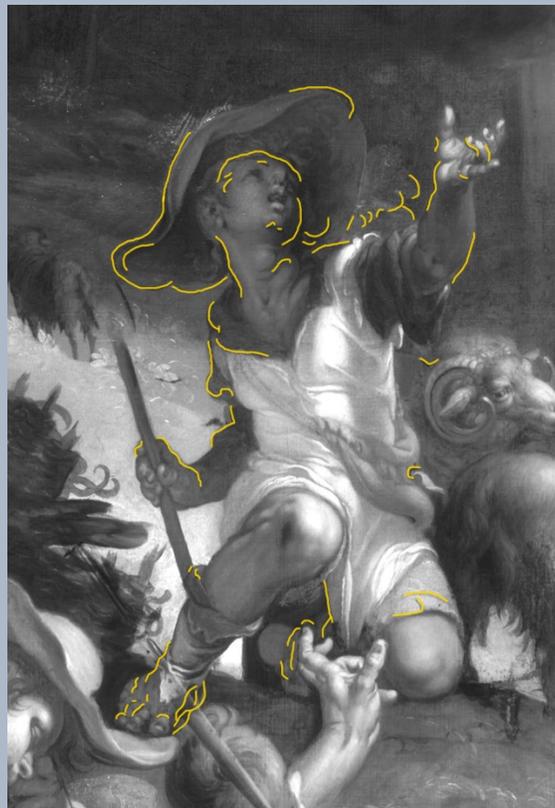
A final compositional drawing may have immediately preceded the painting—there is very little being worked out on the Houston canvas itself—but infrared reflectography reveals that Wtewael applied some underdrawing in paint, especially around the hat of the central shepherd looking up to the angels, and made several changes, especially in the head and tail of the dog at lower right, whose final forms were followed in the Amsterdam painting. Surprisingly, analysis of the Amsterdam painting reveals that it was initially painted more exactly like the Houston version, but then, with the addition of paint in numerous places, the artist created many of the differences in both forms and color now evident.



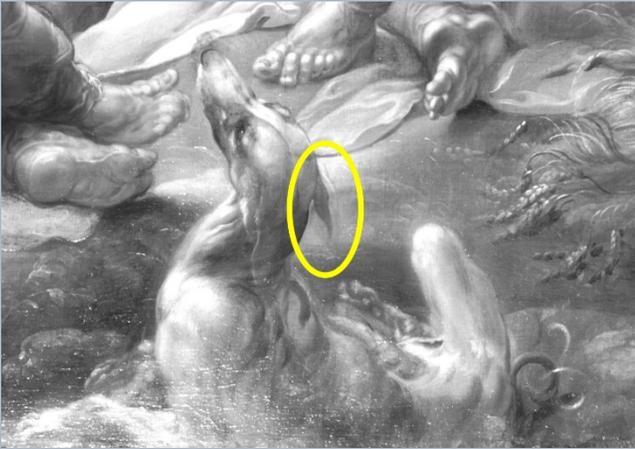
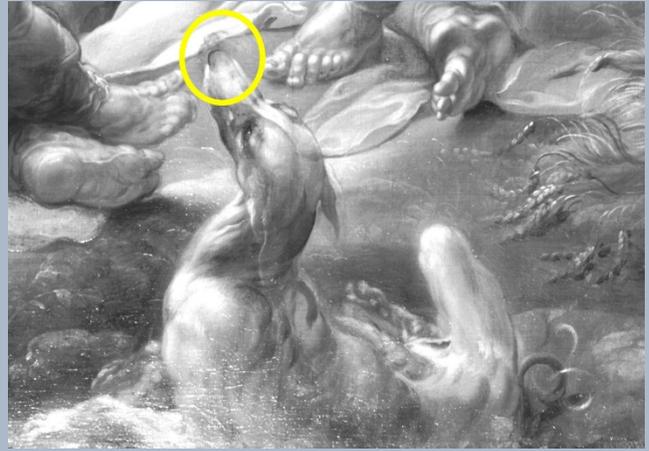
The image above compares the painting as we see it today (left), and a color-corrected version of how it may have appeared when it was first painted (right). Areas of this painting were created with a pigment called smalt that over time may change from a light blue to a dull brown.



The shift from blue to brown in this painting is confirmed by chemical analysis. We see that both a blue and a brown area contain cobalt, the main element in the blue pigment smalt. This tells us that the brown brushstroke was once blue.



Infrared imaging of the painting shows fluid underdrawing in dark paint. This type of underdrawing can be difficult to see. The image above highlights the central shepherd's underdrawing in yellow.



Also visible in the underdrawing are several subtle changes the artist made while painting the dog at the bottom of the canvas.



Sir Thomas Lawrence

English, 1769–1830

Portrait of Joseph Henry, c. 1805

Oil on canvas

Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, 1985.15

A figure hidden beneath the surface of this painting sheds new light on the artistic practice of the celebrated English portraitist Sir Thomas Lawrence. Infrared reflectography reveals a sketch of a male head in a carbon-based material, probably black chalk or charcoal, underneath the paint layer and upside-down in relation to the painted picture. Lawrence sketched his first sitter before abandoning that project and re-using the

canvas for the *Portrait of Joseph Henry*. No other examples of Lawrence re-using his canvases have been discovered up to now.

The presence of the initial drawing suggests that the artist first sketched his sitters directly onto the canvas. Contemporary anecdotal evidence supports this notion: one of the artist's female sitters expressed her dismay that the "perfect" preliminary sketch Lawrence made for her portrait was to be covered with paint. Lawrence himself wrote about the importance of drawing on the canvas, explaining that the process could help an artist to remember the contours of his figures accurately and to paint them precisely.



The use of such a thorough preparatory sketch set Lawrence apart from other British portraitists of his era. In fact, similarly detailed underdrawing is present corresponding with the figure of Joseph Henry but is so closely mimicked in the painted layers that it is difficult to discern. The abandoned portrait therefore provides a unique opportunity to observe Lawrence's preparatory drawing before it could be obscured by the painted image. This gives us a clearer sense of the highly finished sketches on canvas that his contemporaries report as being the first step in Lawrence's process of composing the Romantic portraits for which he was so greatly acclaimed.



Possibly French, active in Rome
Saint Paul Writing His Epistles,

c. 1618 – 20

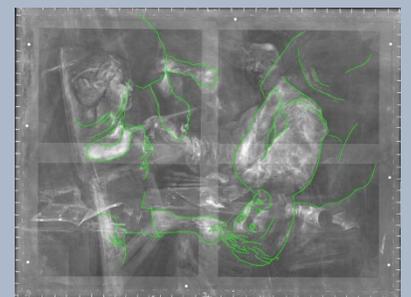
Oil on canvas

Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation,
1991.4

Saint Paul shows the apostle seated at a table, writing the letters to various churches that came to form part of the Bible. The composition and the strong contrast of light and shadow

derive from paintings by Caravaggio (1571–1610). This painting—unsigned, undated, and undocumented—has been attributed to various artists working in Rome in the early 17th century, including the Frenchmen Valentin de Boulogne (1591–1632) and Nicolas Tournier (1590–1639).

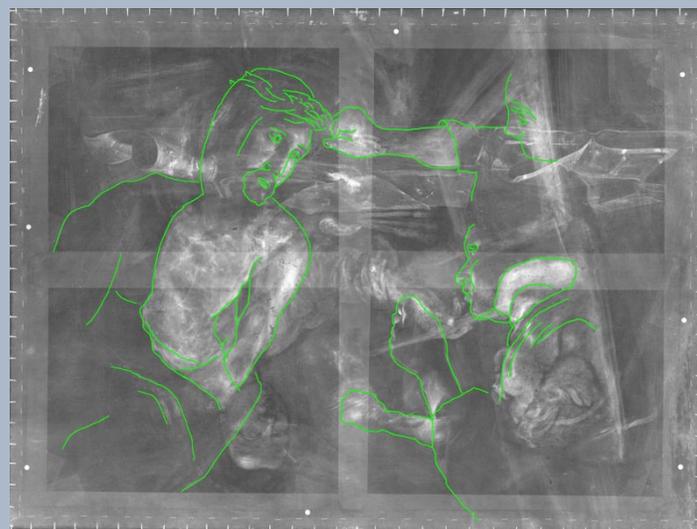
X-radiographs reveal two additional compositions of different subjects below the surface. The painting may be the work of an impoverished artist who, rather than buy a new canvas, simply painted over his unsuccessful compositions, although it cannot be assumed that all three compositions are by the same hand. Directly beneath the *Saint Paul* and upside-down in relation to it is *The Mocking of Christ*, already revealed to the naked eye by the head of Christ appearing in Paul's tabletop, made visible by increased transparency over time of the upper layers of paint in that area. Below that composition is *An Artist at His Easel*. Both the underlying compositions were finished or nearly finished before the artist painted over them; he did not scrape off any of the paint or add a layer of ground between the compositions, but simply rotated the canvas 180 degrees before beginning the next composition. He seems to have used the artist's shirt in the lowest composition as the basis of Christ's body in the composition immediately above it; otherwise, the three compositions are not related to each other.



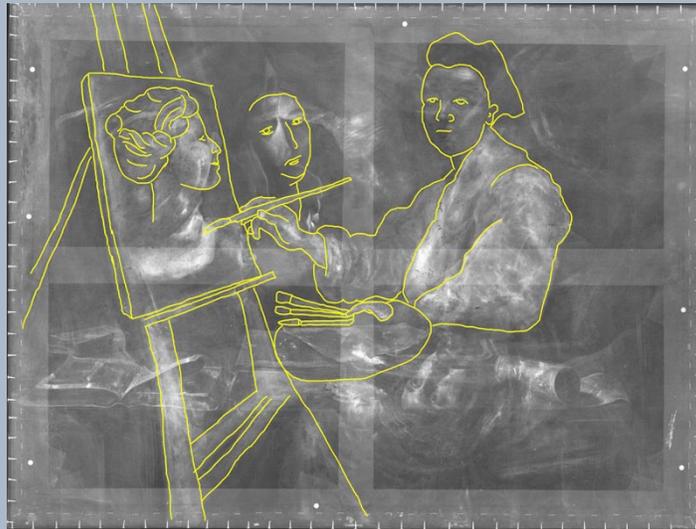
Does knowledge of these underlying compositions help determine the identity of the painter? One motif within *The Mocking of Christ* is suggestive. The glow around the raised fist of Christ's tormentor at the lower right was painted in lead-tin yellow, revealed by recent x-ray fluorescence spectroscopy (XRF), suggesting a torch. Internal light sources were used by several Caravaggesque painters working in Italy, foremost among them the influential Dutchman Gerrit van Honthorst (1592–1656), but, while this device narrows the field of possibilities for the painter, he is still not identified.



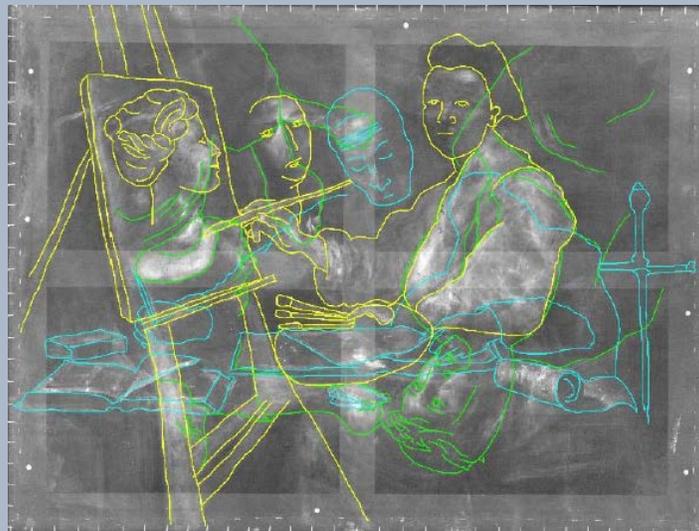
Some paint pigments chemically alter over time and become transparent. Here, this reveals a face and arm from an earlier painting which appears immediately below the surface.



Using x-ray imaging and rotating the canvas 180 degrees, we can see that this face belongs to a scene from the biblical story of the mocking of Christ. Christ wears a crown of thorns and faces two soldiers.



X-ray imaging also reveals an even earlier composition of an artist at work in his studio. Here, the canvas has been rotated back 180 degrees.



These outlines indicate all three paintings visible with x-ray imaging: St. Paul in blue, the mocking of Christ in green, and the artist at work in yellow. These layered compositions tell us that this canvas was reused multiple times for very different paintings, perhaps by the same artist.



Domenico Tintoretto

Italian, 1560–1635

Tancred Baptizing Clorinda, c. 1586–1600

Oil on canvas

The Samuel H. Kress Collection, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 61.77

Paintings by Venetian Mannerist Domenico Tintoretto share stylistic qualities with the work of his father, the renowned painter Jacopo Tintoretto, with whom Domenico studied and worked. Technical investigations of this painting, considered to be by Domenico, suggest that father and son were also alike in their artistic practice. In this scene from *Jerusalem Delivered* (1575–76), Italian poet Torquato Tasso's epic poem about the First Crusade, the grieving Tancred kneels to baptize his dying love Clorinda, whom he mistakenly wounded. Infrared reflectography reveals a grid pattern drawn under Tancred's body, indicating that the crusader's kneeling form was transferred onto the canvas from a drawing. Transfer grids (squaring) allow proportions to be maintained when replicating a smaller image on a different (usually larger) scale and were commonly used in Jacopo's workshop. Small squared drawings attributed to Jacopo, now in the British Museum, are almost certainly the sources for Tancred, suggesting that the younger artist had access to and used his father's figure studies.

While Domenico may have utilized the transfer grid to draw the figures onto the canvas, pentimenti revealed through x-radiograph imaging suggest that the artist also worked out several details in paint directly on the canvas, notably in Clorinda's right hand. The x-radiograph indicates that the artist used an opaque paint (probably white) to alter previously drawn figures, a technique also detected in several paintings by Jacopo and his workshop. This use of white for alterations, alongside the use of the transfer grid and figure studies, reinforces the idea that the working methods of father and son had much in common.

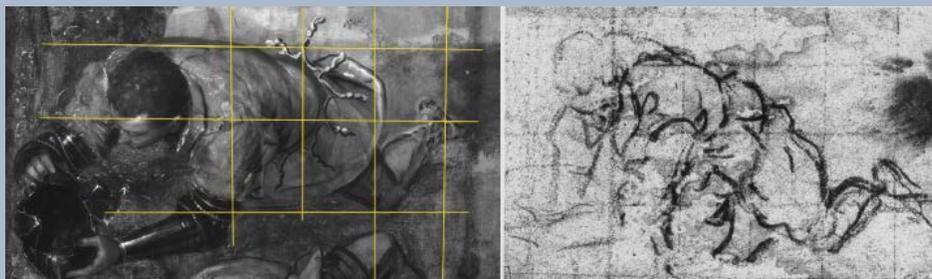




Infrared imaging allows us to see marks made by the artist, Domenico Tintoretto, in preparation for this painting.



This painting's underdrawing was done with fluid, dark paint, especially visible in the muscles of this figure's back. To the right, the underdrawing is visible in yellow.

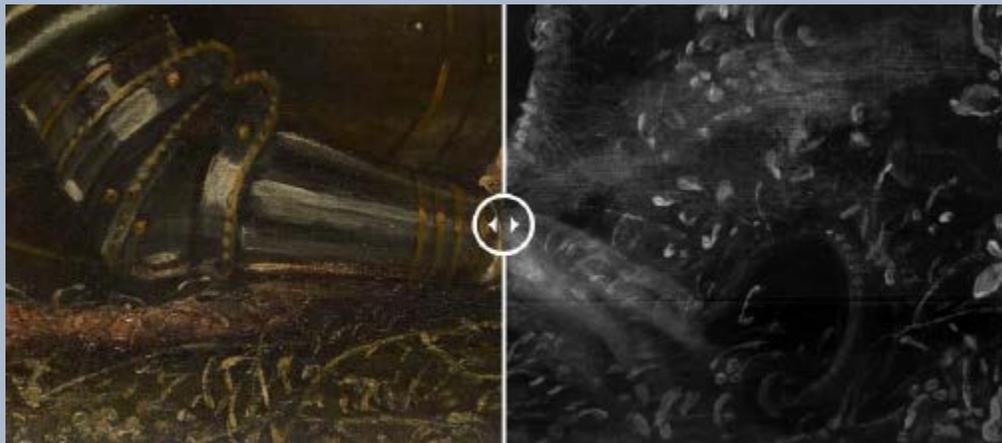


Jacopo Tintoretto, drawing, The British Museum.

A drawing of a figure in a similar pose exists in the British Museum and is “squared” for transfer to a canvas. However, the drawing is not attributed to Domenico Tintoretto, but to his father, Jacopo Tintoretto, suggesting their close working relationship.



X-ray imaging provides clues about Domenico's painting process. In the x-ray detail of the hand above, notice the blades of grass visible within the hand itself. This provides evidence that Domenico had first painted only foliage in this area. During the process of painting, he placed the figure's hand on top of the foliage.



The image above compares the x-ray image of this area with the painting itself. We see changes to the shape of the arm and hand in the final painting, indicating that Domenico continued to work on this composition's details throughout the painting process.



Paolo de Matteis

Italian, 1662–1728

Allegory on the Conclusion of the War of Spanish Succession, after 1714

Oil on canvas

Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, 1980.4

Paolo de Matteis's painting celebrates the end of a pan-European war that, among other results, transferred control of Naples from Spain and its new Bourbon king to the Holy Roman Empire. It shows the artist, who turns to look at the viewer, seated in a landscape with a view of the Bay of Naples and Mount Vesuvius in the background. Accompanied by a monkey—a common symbol of artistic imitation—he paints a canvas held up by a nude male figure, probably representing the Neapolitan river Sebeto, and steadied by flying putti. On the canvas-within-the-canvas are figures representing the Holy Roman Empire and Spain in a gesture of concord. To the right, encouraged by a blast from the trumpet of Fame, Peace drives out War (Mars), and the lamb lies down with the lion. To the left, Truth triumphs over Deceit and Discord.

The Blaffer *Allegory* is a version of an enormous painting, around 9 feet by 12 feet, now mostly destroyed, leaving only a fragmentary self-portrait, today in Naples. The entire composition is known from both this autograph version and a version by another artist—perhaps someone in De Matteis's studio—now in Utrecht.

In the three versions of the composition, the artist wears two different styles of cap. The caps in the Naples and Utrecht paintings are virtually identical and more elegant than the simple (though tasseled) white cap of the Houston painting. X-radiography of this painting indicates that the currently visible figure of the artist is painted over an earlier figure, one probably matching the figures in the Naples and Utrecht paintings: De Matteis lowered the height of the figure and changed the cap. These alterations, considered with other differences in the works, suggest that the Houston picture was painted as a record of the full-sized composition, but with some revision.



Left: Paolo de Matteis, *Allegory on the Conclusion of the War of Spanish Succession*, after 1714, oil on canvas, Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, 1980.4.



Center: Paolo de Matteis, *Allegory of the Peace of Utrecht and Rastatt (fragment with self-portrait)*, c. 1714–18, oil on canvas, Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples.



Right: After Paolo de Matteis, *Allegory of the Peace of Utrecht – Rastatt*, c. 1714–18, oil on canvas, Centraal Museum, Utrecht (detail).



Balthasar van der Ast

Dutch, c. 1593/4–1657

Still Life of Flowers in a Glass Vase, 1624

Oil on copper

Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, 2007.4

While the vivid realism of Balthasar van der Ast's *Still Life of Flowers in a Glass Vase* might at first suggest that this lush flower bouquet was painted from life, technical investigations have shown that the work was instead carefully constructed using a variety of different sources available to the artist in Utrecht. Infrared reflectography indicates that Van der Ast began by drawing ruled lines for the horizontal and vertical axes of

the composition, followed by a highly detailed drawing with a liquid medium. He followed the underdrawing very precisely with paint, in some places utilizing the darkness of the drawing beneath the paint to create shadow.

Van der Ast trained in the workshop of his celebrated brother-in-law, Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder (1573–1621), who himself was exposed to gardens, botanists, and illustrated botanical books while living in Middelburg, a center for flower painting and study in Holland during the 17th century. Bosschaert passed this knowledge on to his students when he moved to Utrecht, and, indeed, Van der Ast occasionally seems even to have borrowed flower sketches from his brother-in-law. The precise structure of Van der Ast's composition is also a feature of Bosschaert's work, which is characterized by the use of axes to plan the composition.



Van der Ast was also greatly influenced by Roelandt Savery (1576–1639), who painted the prototype for Van der Ast's curious lizard in a 1621 still life. Van der Ast, like Savery, enhanced the three-dimensional character of his bouquet by shining a light from the left on the foreground blossoms, while the flowers and leaves at the back are kept more muted.



Paolo Veronese

Italian, 1528–1588

Portrait of a Lady as Saint Agnes, 1580s

Oil on canvas

Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, 1982.14

One of the most important painters in the Venetian Renaissance, Veronese is primarily known for his paintings of biblical and religious history, classical mythology, and allegory, but he was also a successful portraitist. The Blaffer painting is very unusual, possibly unique, in Veronese's work in that it seems to combine features of a portrait, a traditional

Venetian image of an ideally beautiful woman, and the depiction of a saint. The sitter rests her hand on a lamb, the attribute of the early Christian martyr Saint Agnes, who maintained her virginity rather than marry a pagan. She also holds a prayer book in which a text from the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke is partially visible. Given the opulent dress of the sitter, her evident piety, and the reference to Saint Agnes, the painting has been interpreted as a portrait of a young woman, perhaps herself named Agnes, possibly on the eve of her marriage.

X-radiography shows that Veronese made numerous changes to the picture as he painted it. In one area, they reveal his working with a form—the sitter's thumb holding open the prayer book—until he painted it to his satisfaction. He seems to have changed his mind about the background of the picture, painting a green curtain over what had originally been foliage. He also made some significant changes to the sitter's attire, painting over a pearl earring as well as an ornate gold necklace, for which a more restrained veil around the sitter's shoulders has been substituted. Prominent circular forms visible in the x-radiograph around the sitter's shoulders may be connected with Veronese's method of constructing the figure in a series of bold arcs. An infrared reflectogram also helps reveal subtle changes that Veronese made to the sitter's face, especially to the eyes and eyebrows. All these alterations show the care with which Veronese attempted to achieve a nuanced portrayal of both sitter and saint.





Jacopo da Empoli

Italian, 1551–1640

The Virgin and Child with the Young Saint John the Baptist, c. 1575

Oil on poplar panel

Museum purchase, 2016.147

The Florentine painter Jacopo Chimenti, called “da Empoli” after the birthplace of his father, was a notable follower of the great Florentine Mannerist Jacopo Pontormo. This early work closely follows an important Pontormo composition, *Madonna and Child with the Young Saint John*, now in the Corsini Collection, Florence. The two works share the elongated forms characteristic of the Mannerist style, and the face of the Virgin is markedly similar in both paintings. One difference between the compositions is the placement of the Virgin’s right arm and hand. In Jacopo da Empoli’s painting, her hand extends to the lower part of the painting behind Saint John and rests on the side of his torso; in Pontormo’s version, it is raised across her body, touching the arm and chest of the Christ Child.

A preparatory drawing by Jacopo da Empoli in the Uffizi seems to be closely connected with our painting. In the artist’s customary manner, it is squared-up for transfer to the panel. But here too the Virgin’s hand is held across, touching the Child rather than down by Saint John. Infrared reflectography reveals a number of underlying technical details. First, the panel is squared-up like the Uffizi drawing. Second, there is another head, presumably of the Virgin, drawn in outline to the left of the present one along with a smaller angled head under the Child’s. Third, the Virgin’s arm and hand were placed across her body touching the Christ Child. Thus, the composition was initially closer to that of the drawing and the Corsini Collection Pontormo. Finally, and intriguingly, there is another, smaller-scale composition below this one. Close examination of the area of the present Virgin’s chin and neck in the infrared image reveals a female face, the eyes located in the chin and looking downward; below that, a shoulder and the top of a torso may indicate the beginnings of a Pietà, with the dead Christ lying in his mother’s lap.





The image above features the painting's underdrawing. Among other details, it reveals that the artist, Jacopo da Empoli, originally planned for the Virgin Mary's right hand to be placed on the chest of Christ, not around the body of St. John the Baptist as it appears in the finished painting.



Jacopo da Empoli, *Madonna and Child*, n.d., chalk on paper, Uffizi Gallery.

The original hand placement in the underdrawing recalls a drawing by Empoli in Florence's Uffizi Gallery where both the Virgin's arms are around the Christ child.



Jacopo Pontormo, *Virgin and Child with St. John the Baptist*, 1523/25, oil on panel, Corsini Collection, Florence.

The underdrawing is also similar to compositions by the older artist Jacopo Pontormo. Empoli could have been thinking of one of Pontormo's Madonna and Child compositions, like the one at the right, when planning his painting.



By changing the placement of the Virgin's hand during the painting process, Empoli has shifted away from Pontormo's composition and has created a more natural, intimate relationship between the painting's three figures.



William Hogarth, English, 1697–1764
William Hogarth Painting the Comic Muse, March 1758
Etching and engraving
Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, 1983.5.1



Adriaen van Ostade, Dutch, 1610–1685
The Painter, c. 1647
Etching
Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, 1996.10



Jan Pietersz. Saenredam, Dutch, 1565–1607
After Heinrich Goltzius, Dutch, 1558–1617
Allegory of Sight and the Art of Painting, 1616
Engraving
Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, 1997.6



Published by **Johann Georg Hertel the Elder, 1700–1775**
After **François Boucher, French, 1703–1770**
The Landscape Painter, c. 1760
Engraving and etching
Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, 1997.15



Hans Collaert II, Flemish, 1566–1628
 After **Johannes Stradanus**, Flemish, 1523–1605
 Published by **Joan Galle**, Flemish, c. 1600–1676
Oil Paint, c. 1590
 Engraving
Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, 1998.9.14



Dirk Jacobsz. Vellert, Netherlandish, 1480/85–after 1547
Saint Luke Painting the Virgin, 1526
 Engraving
Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, 1998.20



Pierre-Étienne Le Sueur, French, active c. 1775–1800
Le Peintre Créateur, c. 1790–1800
 Etching
Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, 2000.13



Odoardo Fialetti, Italian, 1573–1638
The Painter's Studio, c. 1608
 Etching
Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, 2000.20