

TECHNICAL IMAGING REPORT

TITLE	Portrait of a Boy Holding a Book
ARTIST	ITALIAN (Central)
DATE	1560 ca.
DIMENSIONS	28 1/4" x 21 3/4"
MEDIUM	tempera grassa on wood panel
SUPPORT	single linden wood panel (est.), redwood panel addition
FRAME	gilded wood
DISTINGUISHING MARKS	none
ACCESSION	61.58
IDNUM	

SUMMARY

The painting was donated by Samuel H. Kress to the MFAH with a group of 23 paintings in 1961, having been acquired by Kress in 1930. Its provenance prior Kress acquisition is the Marchesa Maresca Collection in Naples.

The MFAH painting has been restored several times prior to its entry into the collection. According to the MFAH conservation archives, the panel was under the care of Kress Collection restorer Stephen Pichetto until 1953 when Mario Modestini took over conservation of the Kress Collection. In 1987, corrective restorations were done Jack Flanagan. The panel was last treated in 1997 by MFAH conservators, Andrea di Bagno and Maite M. Leal when Pichetto's thick coating of Dammar interlayered with Shellac was removed. The painting is in good, stable condition at present.

This arresting portrait of a youth, once the discoloration of the aged old varnish had been removed, revealed the meticulous brush strokes of every fiber of the boy's doublet. This kind of attention to detail, this readiness to devote months to the rendition of a piece of fabric, is typical of Florentine Renaissance painting. With the cleaning of the portrait in 1997, attribution was made to Alessandro Allori, the most important painter in Florence at the end of the 1500s and the best pupil of the great portrait painter, Bronzino.



Portrait of a Boy Holding a Book, recto, 2015, normal light

The young man of noble rank gazes at us with a shy, vulnerable gaze. His clothing indicates his aristocratic upbringing. He holds a book that indicates that he is studious. Its yellow vellum cover is the strongest note of color in the picture. Color is not one of the attributes of Florentine painting. The Florentines were known for their attention to detail and to drawing, to line and precision. Note the exquisite rendition of the lace on the young man's collar. The sitter is yet to be identified, but surely he belonged to one of the leading families in the city. This is a fine example of noble portraiture at the end of the Renaissance.

Attribution of *Portrait of a Boy Holding a Book*, has changed over time between Spanish painter Alonzo Sanchez Coello (1531-1588) and Italians, Alessandro Allori (1535-1607) and Francesco Salviati (1510-1653). Recent studies and technical imaging, suggest a possible new attribution to Bolognese portraitist, Lavinia Fontana (1552-1614). 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 significant similarities with Fontana's signed and dated portrait, *Portrait of a Young Man at His Table*, 1581. Continued technical investigations of other

SUMMARY cont.

works by this important female artist may reveal a similar practice of reusing panels. Lavinia Fontana was a mannerist painter working in Bologna and Rome, much sought after as a portraitist.

SUPPORT

The original support consists of a single wooden panel 1/4" thick. It is characterized in the MFAH registrar's records as linden wood. The original support was thinned and cradled in 1931 by Stephen Pichetto, with possibly an older cradle removed and re-cradled at that time. The cradle consists of 10 horizontal slats, none of which are stuck, and 15 vertical slats. An additional slat about 4" wide is adjacent to the 6th vertical slat and corresponds to the crack in the original panel on the bottom right quadrant. The crack running from the bottom edge through the boy's hand corresponds to the additional vertical slat.

GROUND AND UNDERDRAWING

The ground layer are several layers of a creamy white gesso layer. The topmost layer of gesso was applied across the panel horizontally covering the beginnings of a painting underneath, leaving broad brush marks that are clearly visible in raking light. This was not standard practice for a panel painting at this time, which were typically worked to a smooth polished surface, and especially not for the portrait of a noble person. There is a fine network of cracking in both ground and paint layers that are slightly raised. The adhesion of the ground to the support is good at this time. However, a series of small pin pricks surrounded by areas of flattened paint attest to at least one of a series of consolidation campaigns recorded in the past. The pinpricks are evident in the proper right upper quadrant in the olive gray-green background. There are some old losses of ground due to cleavage and others due to wormholes. IRR reveals two separate figures, possibly three, drawn in some areas with a liquid medium, in black.



2015, verso, normal light

PAINT LAYERS

The paint medium is estimated to be a tempera grassa with finishing oil glazes. In the background the paint is thinly applied. The gray olive-green background is grainy in texture except where it was flattened during a previous consolidation treatment. The grainy texture is due to an added coarsely grained cool white pigment. Where the paint was flattened during the old consolidation treatment the white granules of paint were broken and dispersed creating a halo of lighter tone disrupting the field of olive green. Some traces of raised impasto from the underlying painting are visible in raking light. The glowing flesh of the young sitter was produced by paint applied in softly blended, subtle, even, thin layers. Highlights in the face and hand were produced with small raised brush strokes in heavier paint. The coat was painted with intricate detailing in raised impasto creating the effect of a richly brocaded cloth. The shadowed side of the doublet has a continuous pattern of slightly raised thumb prints used to effect the rich cloth in texture and outline. The thumbprints can only be seen in raking light. The fine network of raised cracks are stable at this time.



2015 Infrared Reflectography

INFRARED REFLECTOGRAPHY

Another larger, possibly adult figure was discovered beneath the surface, under the boy in 3/4 view 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 the 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. In raking light the thinly painted figure is discerned faintly. Very light lines of under drawing are visible rendering this figure. Moreover there may yet another third figure present, making a total of three different figures drawn here. This third figure is more clearly discerned in the x-radiograph. It is probable the under drawing of the other figures were drawn in red chalk which does not show up in infrared reflectography. The proper left hand of the boy was drawn in liquid black paint.



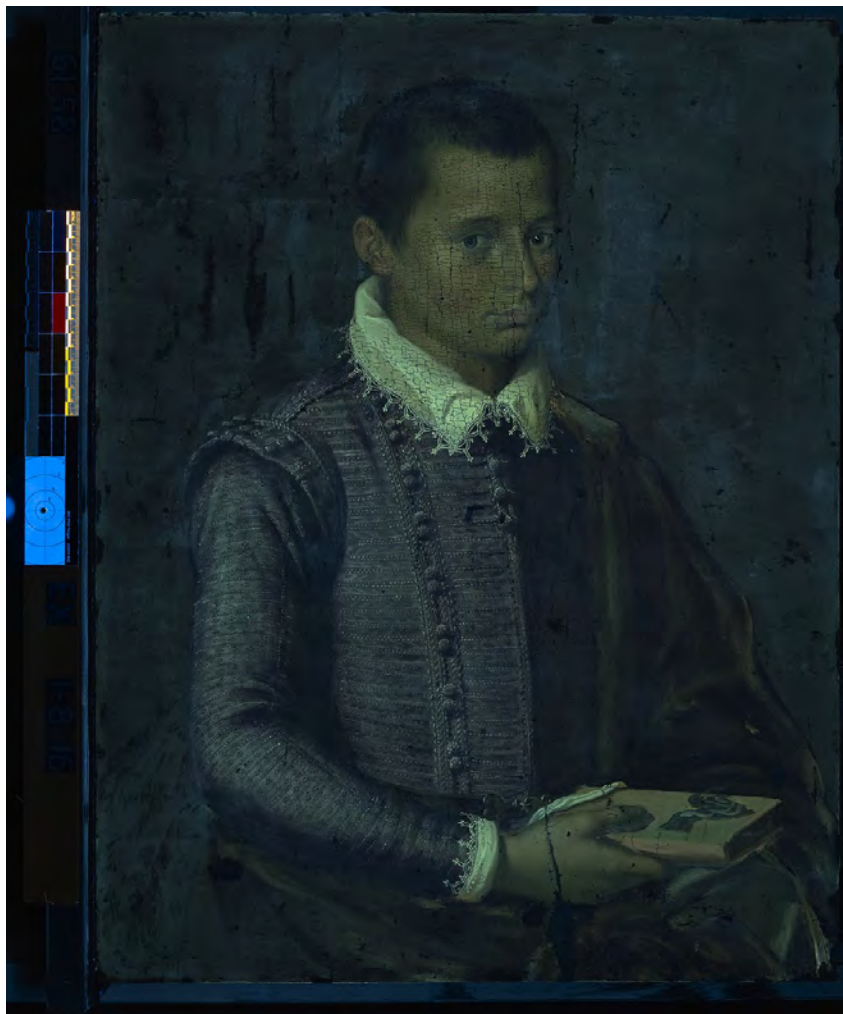
2015 x-radiography

X-RADIOGRAPHY

X-radiography would typically be difficult to read because of the grid-like framework on the back of the panel but it has been minimized digitally here in this image. We see a figure underneath the boy and possibly the woman is wearing a flatter, winged collar without the lace details of the boy's collar situated below and to the right of the two superimposed heads of the boy and woman. However this collar 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.

SURFACE COATING

In 1997, the 1931 Pichetto coating of interlayers of Dammar and Shellac together with corrective restorations and coatings by M. Modestini and J. Flanagan were removed. A brush coating of a low molecular weight resin with Tinuvin was applied to saturate the colors after cleaning and isolate the paint layer. A final spray coating of a Ketone resin varnish was applied.



2015 Ultra Violet Fluorescence

ULTRA VIOLET FLUORESCENCE

Ultra violet fluorescence imaging shows the presence of the thin coatings of a natural resin varnish and the final Ketone resin varnish applied in 1997. The darker areas are the restorations and repairs.

REFERENCES

Dwyer, D. 1987. Conservation survey and personal communication to Peter Marzio. MFAH conservation records for object 61.58, Houston.

Dr. Carolyn C. Wilson, "Italian Paintings XIV-XVI in The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston," The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston in association with Rice University Press and Merrell Holberton Publishers, London, 1996, cat. no. 26.

Exhibition: "Hidden Layers: Painting and Process in Europe, 1500–1800," Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, May 26–September 3, 2018.