

CONDITION REPORT

TITLE	<i>The Flight into Egypt</i>
ARTIST	François de Nomé, French, (active in Italy), c. 1593 - after 1644
DATE	c. 1610-1644
DIMENSIONS	32 1/4 x 51 3/4 in. (81.9 x 131.4 cm)
MEDIUM	Oil
SUPPORT	Lined canvas
FRAME	Carved and gilded wood
DISTINGUISHING MARKS	None apparent
ACCESSION	61.64
ID NUMBER	47403

SUMMARY

The painting shows the Holy Family on the flight into Egypt, traveling against a fantastic architectural backdrop before a landscape setting. The painting has undergone extensive restoration throughout its history which may have significantly altered its appearance and apparent quality.

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 1948; its provenance prior to that is not well documented. Nomé, a French artist who worked in Naples, has only recently been identified as the author of works formerly attributed to "Monsù Desiderio."

The paintings previously attributed to Desiderio are now considered to be the work of Nomé and Didier Barra, and possibly a third, unknown, painter. (Wittkower 1958).



Figure 1. *The Flight into Egypt* recto in normal light. Images: Matthew Golden



Figure 2. Detail of infrared reflectograph showing figures painted thinly on top of architectural elements already brought to a state of high finish.

The surreal romanticism of *The Flight into Egypt* is typical of Nomé's style, where the figures and the narrative subject of the paintings often appear as minor elements, physically and psychologically, in comparison with the monumental, grotesque architectural elements. Indeed, when examined through infrared reflectography and x-radiography, it's clear that the figures were applied thinly, and last — almost as afterthought. The compositional work-up of the painting suggests that Nomé was most concerned with the landscape and the architectural ruins. It has been suggested that the figures in his works were not painted by him at all, but rather by other artists, with Dutch

SUMMARY cont.

Figure 3. François de Nomé, *The Flight into Egypt*, 1624, Musée des Arts Decoratifs. Image scanned from Marandel, 1991, p. 39.

artist Jacob van Swanenburgh (1571-1638) and Neapolitan court painter Belisario Corenzio (1558-1643, Greek) among the proposed candidates (Whitfield 1982). The MFAH painting has a close relation in *The Flight into Egypt* dated by Nomé 1624 in the Musée des Arts Decoratifs in Paris. In this work, the tiny figures of the Holy Family pass a fantastical Gothic church, and are yet even more dwarfed by the towering, surreal architecture. Like the MFAH painting, the figures were the last to be painted, and were added thinly on top of background elements already brought to high finish.

The MFAH painting has been restored several times prior to its entry into the collection. It appears to be lined to another painting, which is likely a very old restoration. According to a report in the MFAH conservation archives, another lining canvas was added in 1948, likely by the studio of Kress Collection restorer Stephen Pichetto, at which time the painting was also “cleaned and restored with dry colors and damar. French varnish isolator [and] damar varnish coating [were applied].” In 1953, by which time Pichetto had died and Mario Modestini had taken over care of the Kress Collection, the following is noted: “corrected a few stains with dry colors and tempera. French varnish isolator. Protective coating of damar varnish. Good condition.” (Dwyer 1987).

SUPPORT

The auxiliary support is a wooden stretcher with lap bridle joints, with two vertical and one horizontal crossbar attached with half bridle joints. The members are 8 cm wide and 3 cm thick. There are 14 keys present. The verso has several numerical notations: “1540” (the painting’s Kress Collection number) in pencil along a vertical crossbar and in pen on the top stretcher member and “48122F” on the top member at right. The edges of the canvas and stretcher have been papered over. This stretcher is not original to the painting.



Figure 4. *The Flight into Egypt* verso in normal light.

The tertiary support is a basket-woven (2/2 plain weave) lining canvas likely attached to the primary support with a glue-paste adhesive. There are approximately 28 vertical threads per inch and 34 horizontal threads per inch, suggesting the warp runs in the horizontal direction.

The secondary support is a fine plain-woven canvas, which appears to be a finished oil painting lined with glue to the verso of the primary support. In the x-radiograph, broad shapes can be seen at the upper and lower edge corresponding to this painting.

SUPPORT cont.

Figure 5. *The Flight into Egypt* x-radiograph. Note compositional elements not associated with the Nomé composition at the upper and lower edges.

The original, primary support is a coarse plain-woven canvas with wide-set cusping on the right and left edges, which may indicate preparation layers were applied on a looped working strainer. The absence of cusping on the upper and lower edges as well as the diagonal, straight trimming inside of the original tacking edges suggests a change to the format and dimensions of the painting. This is supported by the sharp cutoff of the spires in this composition, where restored sections at the upper edge are restored to sky rather than continuing the spire, as well as a lowered aspect ratio from Nome's other compositions, which often have

taller rectangular formats with less disparity between the height and width. Because the edges are papered over, the tacking edges are missing, and the verso is not accessible, little information about the primary support can be gathered at this time. X-radiography shows the presence of several repaired tears throughout the painting, most notably a large compound tear in the upper right quadrant.

GROUND

The ground layer is not presently accessible. X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy (XRF) indicates that the ground or imprimatura layer likely includes some lead pigment. X-radiography indicates ground layer losses associated with the repaired tears mentioned above, as well as displacement of many ground and paint chips near these disruptions to the canvas. Grid pattern cracking in the paint layer appears to extend through the ground layer as well.

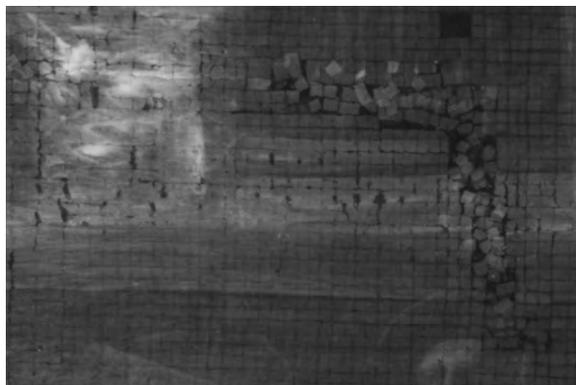


Figure 6. Detail of x-radiograph showing pavement-like cracking and displacement of paint/ground around tears.

PAINT

The paint is a thinly applied oil medium with many areas of detailed impasto. Examination in infrared and x-ray both confirm that the painting was built up first with the landscape and architecture, then the sculptures were applied, and lastly the human and animal figures were added. The arcade of columns behind and to the right of the central circular pavilion was added after the original layout was conceived, as the road behind it was painted in fully before the columns were sketched in.

XRF analysis suggests the presence of "lead white, red lead, vermilion, smalt, copper-based blues and greens, and iron-earth species including yellow ochre and perhaps umber and red ochre" (see appendix for full XRF report). The extremely dark tonality of the painting is due to both the pigments used, how they have degraded over time, as well as a darkened varnish.

PAINT cont.

Figure 7. Specular highlight detail of weave enhancement and moating around impasto.

There is a strong overall craquelure in a grid pattern, called pavementuse, which is commonly seen in Neapolitan canvases and is a result of the coarse, open weave. The paint layer has suffered dramatically from multiple lining processes. The high heat and pressure applied during aqueous linings, such as those evident here, can significantly deform an oil paint layer. The painting has had an overall loss of texture, and there is significant weave enhancement as the topography of the primary support has been pressed into the paint layer. There is also flattening and smoothing of, as well as moating around, the fine detailed impasto of the sculptural figures. There is loss to the paint layer throughout the painting associated with tears and the craquelure (see **GROUND**).

SURFACE COATING

There is an oxidized natural resin varnish present (noted to be damar in restoration reports), and remnants of older, very darkened varnishes in the interstices of the paint and canvas weave. There are multiple campaigns of retouching present, some of which appear to be extremely old. Some of the retouching is no longer matching. There is a slight grime layer present.

REFERENCES

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- Marandel, J. P. 1991. *François de Nomé : mysteries of a seventeenth-century Neapolitan painter*. Houston: Menil Collection.
- Whitfield, C., and J. Martineau. 1982. *Painting in Naples, 1606-1705 : from Caravaggio to Giordano*. London: Royal Academy of Arts in association with Weidenfield and Nicolson. pp. 198-199.
- Wittkower, R., J. Connors, and J. Montagu. 1999. *Art and architecture in Italy, 1600-1750*. New Haven: Yale University Press. Vol. II, p. 163.

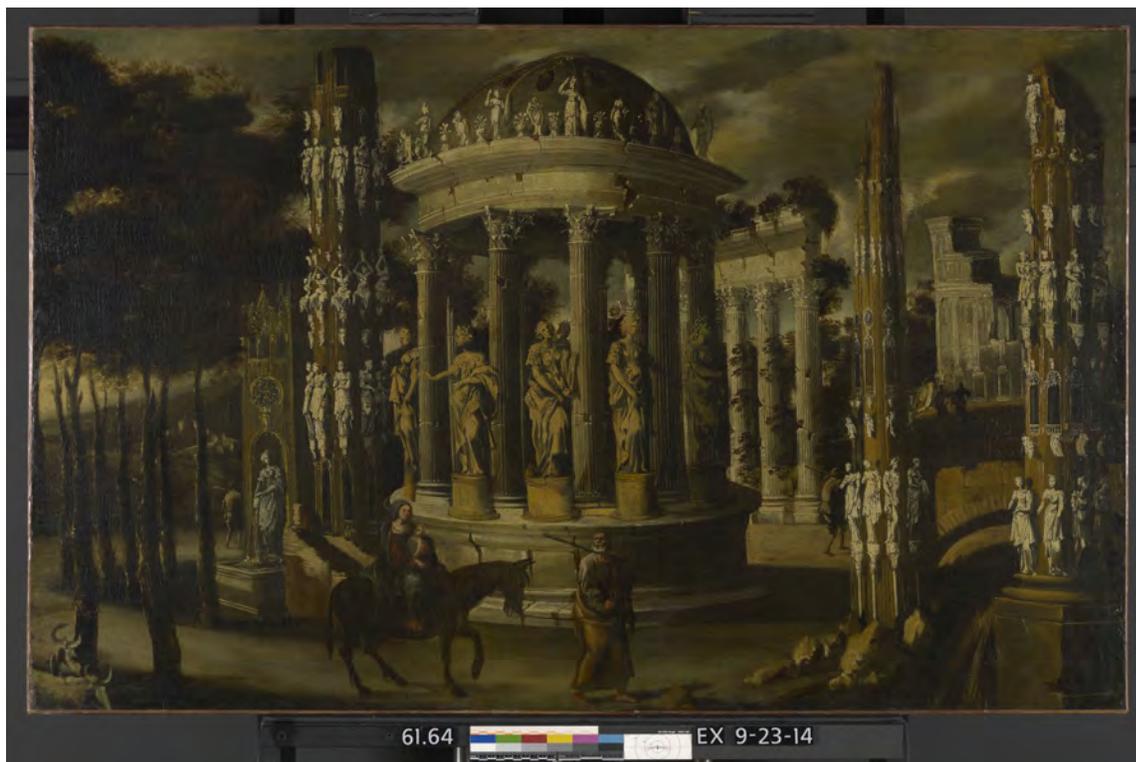
IMAGES

Figure 9. *The Flight into Egypt* recto, normal light.



Figure 10. *The Flight into Egypt*, x-radiography image captured with Pantak-Seifert x-ray tube at the following parameters: 25kV, 3 μ A, 45 seconds, 40" distance from tube. Captured in 20 sections, composite image created in Adobe Photoshop CS6. Image digitally altered by the author to minimize the appearance of stretcher bars.



Figure 11. *The Flight into Egypt*, infrared reflectography image captured with an Osiris Infrared Imaging System (InGaAs array sensor) in six sections and composite image created in Adobe Photoshop CS6.

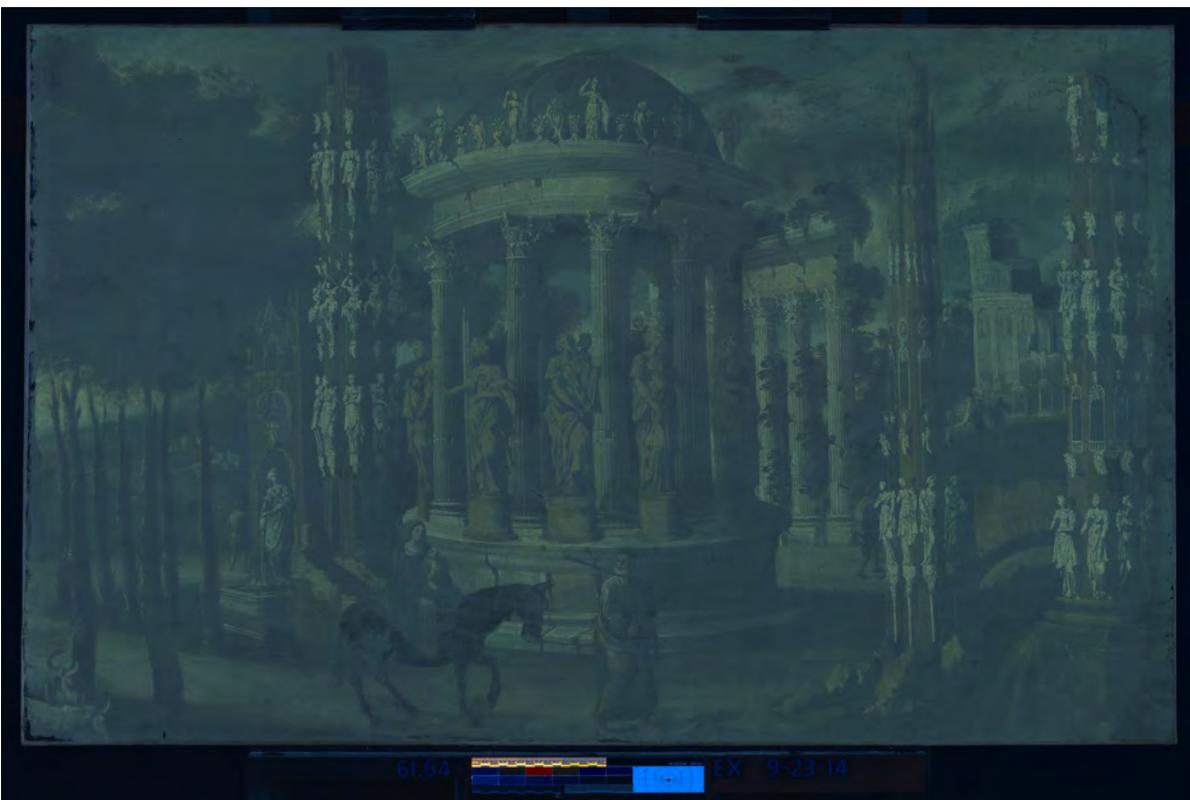


Figure 12. *The Flight into Egypt*, recto in longwave ultraviolet radiation.

MFAH / THE MENIL COLLECTION — Scientific Laboratory Report

X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy report

Accession number: 61.64

Report Author: Dr. Corina Rogge

Artist/Maker: François de Nomé

Institution: The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Title/Description & Date: *The Flight into Egypt* (c. 1610-1644)

People/Culture: French (active in Naples, Italy)

Analysis ID: 61 64 XRF 1

Project Serial Number: Oct.2014.4

Date of Report: 17 October 2014

X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy was used to non-destructively identify elements present in the Francois de Nomé painting *The Flight into Egypt* in order to determine the range of pigments used. Although not able to conclusively identify materials, the elemental signature of colors often provides strong suggestions for the types of materials present. Based upon elemental analysis pigments that may be present in this painting include: lead white, red lead, vermilion, smalt, copper-based blues and greens, and iron-earth species including yellow ochre and perhaps umber and red ochre. Calcium-based red organic lakes may also be present. Confirmation of the identity of these materials would require sampling and analysis by FTIR or Raman spectroscopy.

High levels of lead in the white regions suggest that lead white is the primary white pigment used. Lead was seen in all locations suggesting the use of a lead containing ground or imprimatura layer. Black and dark areas analyzed appeared to contain mixtures of different materials including iron-earth pigments, smalt, and perhaps red lead. No phosphorus was detected indicating that if ivory/bone black is present it is below the detection limit of the instrument. XRF is unable to detect carbonaceous blacks, so the presence of these materials cannot be excluded and their identification would require sampling and analysis by Raman spectroscopy.

Yellow ochre was the only yellow pigment conclusively identified. Vermillion was the primary red pigment detected in brighter red areas and in the flesh tones of the figures. However, iron earth species were found in brown regions suggesting that reddish ochres are also present. Lead was detected in dark passages, and analysis of the attenuation suggests that it has a surface location, this suggests that red lead is also present in addition to lead white. However, this would need to be confirmed by sampling and Raman or microscopy. Calcium-based organic reds may also be present as elevated calcium levels were detected in certain brown passages as well.

Smalt and azurite/blue verditer appear to be the primary blue pigments used. Smalt is present in the blues of Mary and Joseph's clothing, in the flesh tones, some regions of foliage and the sky. The smalt has retained its blue color in Joseph's robe, but may have discolored in Mary's cloak which now appears quite dark, although the same effect may have been caused by the increased transparency of the surface oil paint over the underlying dark paint. In addition to smalt the sky also contains high levels of copper suggesting the presence of azurite/blue verditer. Discoloration of the smalt and/or blue copper pigment may have occurred in the sky, which along with the yellowed varnish could account for its current brown coloration.

Copper was also detected in the foliage suggesting the use of copper-based greens such as malachite/green verditer, verdigris and/or copper resinate. These materials, particularly copper resinate, are prone to discoloration and so these passages may have originally been more green. However, in most of the foliage other species including iron-earth pigments and smalt were also detected suggesting that these areas were never a very bright or intense green.

In conclusion, Nomé has used a very limited palette, and while it is likely that the painting now appears darker than it did originally due to discoloration of smalt and copper-based pigments, the fact that few passages contain unmixed pigments suggest it was always intended to have a rather dark tonality.