

MORE than meets the EYE

How do we know who painted a work of art from the past? Or who the sitter is in a portrait? Or if a work has been damaged, or part of it has been lost?

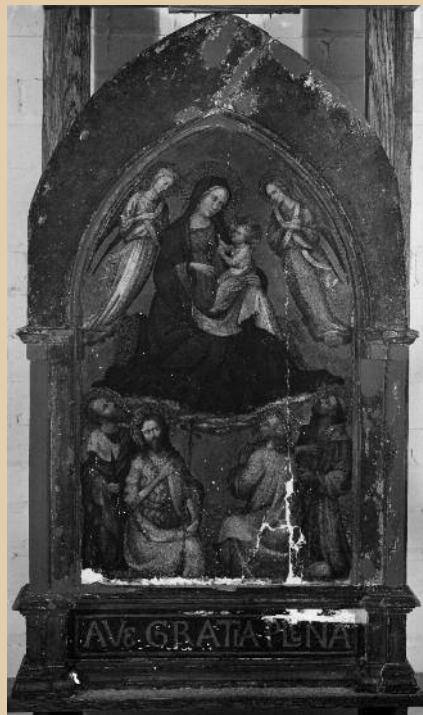
Museums study works of art in a variety of ways, primarily focusing on what's visible (the subject of the work) and what's beneath the surface (accessed by scientific tools).

Beneath the Surface



MASTER OF THE STRAUS MADONNA

Virgin and Child with Angels and Four Saints around 1400



Before restoration

600 YEARS OLD AND STILL LOOKING GOOD

This fifteenth-century devotional painting on wood is still in surprisingly good condition. However, some paint loss has occurred – visible as white areas in the photo above. This is primarily due to changes in humidity, which cause the wood panel to expand and contract, and in some cases crack. Through in-painting, the conservators have filled in the losses and retouched the surface. To ensure that conservation work is readily identifiable and can be easily removed in future treatments, conservators use a different kind of paint than the original.

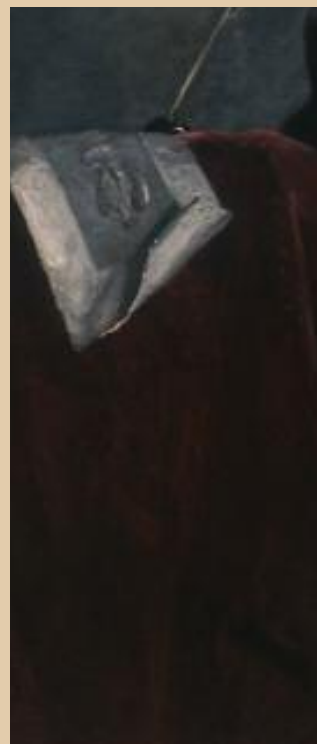


JOSHUA REYNOLDS

Portrait of Horace Walpole, 1756

DEAD OR ALIVE?

British portrait painter Sir Joshua Reynolds was notorious for experimenting with paints, which resulted in the drastic fading of his colours. As one of his contemporaries put it: “His portraits died before his sitters.” As recently as the 1950s the tablecloth in this picture was described by AGO staff as scarlet colour. In just fifty years the colour has faded significantly.



LUCA CARLEVARIS

The Molo Looking West, 1730

OVERDOING IT

Examine the ship at the left in this painting from the early 1700s. This section of the painting was overzealously restored in the 1800s. When an AGO conservator removed the later paint, it was discovered that the areas of original damage were much smaller than the later restoration. After researching the construction of historic ships only minor additions were made.



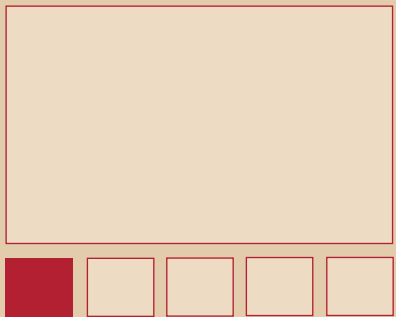
Left: During removal of the early restoration overpaint.
Right: After the filling of lost original paint and before in-painting.

Research to the Rescue



GIOVANNI DEL BIONDO

Vision of St. Benedict, 1350–98



The altarpiece would originally have consisted of a large central panel and several smaller panels, probably lined up along the bottom.

WHAT'S MISSING?

Some works can be damaged or destroyed due to war, neglect or natural disasters. Sometimes just fragments survive. By researching church inventories, the AGO discovered that these two small paintings from the 1350s were originally part of an altarpiece from Florence. It consisted of a large painting of St. Benedict and a number of smaller panels featuring episodes in his life. While the large painting has been lost, three small panels can be found in Italy and the United States.



BARTHEL BRUYN THE YOUNGER

Portrait of a Lady of the von Kreps Family, around 1580–1585



Coat of arms of the von Kreps family

LOOKING FOR CLUES

Most people in historical portraits are unknown. Items in paintings – such as clothing, jewellery, and furniture – can play a key role in their identification. In 2008 the AGO was able to identify the young woman in this portrait. Research on the coat of arms revealed that the sitter was a member of the aristocratic von Kreps family of Cologne, Germany. A further study of the family tree suggests that she is likely Gertrud or Elisabeth, probably depicted at the time of her engagement.



JOHANNES HALS

Portrait of a Man, 1648

WHODUNIT?

Look carefully at these two portraits. Could they be by the same artist? The work on the right, *Vincent Laurensz. van der Vinne*, has always been attributed to Frans Hals, one of the greatest portrait painters of the Netherlands. The work on the left, *Portrait of a Man*, is another matter.



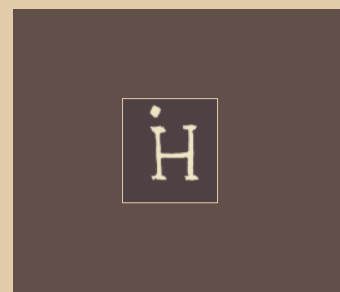
FRANS HALS

Vincent Laurensz. van der Vinne, around 1655–1660

In 1939 the AGO received a telegram from an expert in Dutch art describing the painting on the left as a “fine male portrait by Frans Hals.” This work is now attributed to his son Johannes. Why?

Clue #1: Signatures

Sometimes signatures are tampered with. Very often they're simply not there. *Portrait of a Man* has a monogram—located at the right above the sitter's elbow—that combines an “I” and an “H” (I = J in the 17th century). Research confirms this monogram is that of Johannes Hals. However it could be mistaken for the combined “F.H.” of Frans Hals. The monogram at the lower right of *Vincent Laurensz. van der Vinne* is indecipherable. Yet because of its painting style, experts have never doubted the attribution of this work to Frans Hals.



Monogram combining “I” and “H”



Compare the brushstrokes of these portraits.

Clue #2: Painting style

Artists develop unique ways of applying paint to the canvas. Like many masters of the time, Frans Hals taught pupils (including his sons) to work in his style. Despite Johannes's attempt to imitate his father's style, his brushstrokes never look as fluid or spontaneous. Compare the hair and collars in the two portraits.





ERNST BARLACH

The Singing Man, cast 1928

The appearance of this sculpture is unusual. Most bronze sculptures are coated with chemicals that react with the surface, resulting in tones that range from blue to brown, black and red. This process is known as artificial patination. Here, the greenish gold tone is the result of natural patination, the aging of untreated bronze. Some areas such as the subject's eyebrows may have been highlighted through polishing.

Touching permanently damages all bronze surfaces.