

Off the Map: The Provenance of a Painting Documentary

[Ruth Cox Art Conservator throughout]

If I could speak with Joseph Wright of Derby today I would ask him, actually, to take up a brush and to finish out the face the way he originally painted it. I would ask him to use his magic and have this picture shine as it once did.

Welcome to my painting conservation studio. I am Ruth Cox and I've been working with the Nasher Art Museum since before it was the Nasher way back when it was the Duke University Museum of Art in the '90s and early 2000s.

Today we've invited you into the studio to take a look at this wonderful picture painted by the Joseph Wright of Derby probably in the mid-1750s-1760s at some point in there. It's a beautiful painting and, though, if we were to display it in its archaeological wholeness, meaning unrestored, it wouldn't be very appealing for people to look at. So, as a result, all the restorations we did were in order to bring it back as closely as possible to how the picture would have looked when it was painted.

In this upper left quadrant there is a very large tear that had become prominent, it's actually an h-shaped tear in the canvas, and it had been over painted by an earlier conservator very liberally, covering much of the tonality of this left background area. The face of the image looked very raw and scrubbed; it had cold areas and warm areas that were unintended by the artist, and there wasn't a sense of cohesiveness between the shadowed areas and more of the highlighted forms. Additionally the face had been cleaned much further than the rest of the picture. There were areas that had fallen into obscurity, the most dominant was this very small still life of paper and drawing materials that were in the foreground of the picture. The sitter's proper left hand looked a lot darker and was falling into obscurity along with the sculpture. If you refer to other pictures by Joseph Wright of Derby you can see that he did a lot of work in finishing glazes to give a real breath of life to his pictures.

The first step in the treatment was obviously to remove the painting from the frame when it arrived in my studio and then dust it and clean off the back so I could handle it without it becoming a mess all over my studio. Then we surface cleaned the picture to remove any grime and dirt that would inhibit the varnish removal solutions that I would use. After the dirt was removed I worked on solvating the varnish and carefully removing all of the old layers. As the painting emerged from all the layers of old restoration and discoloration the three-dimensionality of the sitter became more prominent. For instance, the hands began to read much more clearly as did the sculpture in the background.

After the painting was cleaned we began the structural work on the painting, however, before the canvas could be lined the tears had to be re-mended.

After that the fibers were actually rejoined and the Japanese tissue could be used to bridge the tear mend. After the painting was planar, and the tear had been repaired, the next stage was to actually affect the lining.

The lining canvas was stretched onto an aluminum platen which could heat up to 150 degrees Fahrenheit and the painting was placed on top of the lining canvas which had been prepared with sheet

Viva 371, which is a heat seal or heat tack adhesive. After the painting had been lined the painting then needed to be filled and retouched. All of the losses in the paint film were compensated with the gesso. After a varnish was rubbed into the surface using a silk cloth in almost a French polish manner the losses of the gesso and fine pinpoint losses could be under painted in watercolor. After the watercolor underpainting was complete a full-bodied layer of natural resin varnish was applied. Final retouching could be done in a synthetic paint in order to complete all the compensation work. One of the tenets of conservation is that everything we do should be reversible. That means that all of the materials and techniques I used to conserve this picture were done in such a way that they could be undone without damaging the original picture.

You now see the painting framed and, though this isn't the original frame that was chosen by Joseph Wright of Derby to exhibit this picture, it is a period frame and fits the picture stylistically and aesthetically very nicely.

Now I'd like to tell you a little about how we think this painting might have been painted.

Joseph Wright of Derby was known to prefer a medium weight linen canvas as his primary support. He would have started with a canvas that would have been stretched onto a stretcher. The first thing then was to stabilize the canvas by infusing it with a light layer of glue-size and that would be an animal high glue, a rabbit skin. This is granulated rabbit skin glue.

You can see it would be swelled in water and then brushed in a liquid form onto the canvas. The canvas was first prepared with a glue-size and over that was applied a layer of gesso. Gesso traditionally, if you go back to the Middle Ages, was made with whiting or a chalk or gypsum and rabbit skin glue. By the 18th century it's known that Joseph Wright of Derby's gessos tended to be lead white with different small fractions of pigments involved, probably a little bit of palette scrapings. But it was generally a slightly off-white color. It was the first layer that was applied to the canvas Joseph Wright of Derby most likely did not grind his own paints. They may have been prepared in his studio or he may have ordered them and purchased them from a colorman where he worked.

The actual colors come from different materials. For instance, the red vermilion comes from a stone, Cinnabar. This wonderful blue that you see in Wright of Derby's jacket, that most likely is a Prussian blue. Prussian blue was first invented or discovered in 1704 when the experimenter was trying actually to make a beautiful red and it turned blue instead.

When an artist, let's go a century earlier, in the 17th century might want to make his paint they would start by putting some pigment onto a glass plate or most likely a grinding stone. They would use a muller, this one happens to be glass, but there were stone mullers as well. It has a very fine frit or abrasion on both the back face of the muller and on the face of the plate.

When you ground the pigment with water to begin with, you would disperse the pigment evenly over this slightly gritty plate. In order to get oil into the mixture you would, as the water evaporated, slowly add more oil and grind and grind. By the 18th century linseed oil was used, but poppy seed oil was also a preferred oil for lighter colors because it wouldn't discolor as readily as linseed oil. The ground preparation, which we think might be a double layer ground in here, and then the first layers of true paint after his sketch and the dead coloring were done, I think, rather loosely. You can still see in his

face almost little blotches or brush strokes of different shades of pink, yellow and flesh tones. After he roughed in the color scheme of cool and warm tones, he could then add more layers of paint to create a unified surface.

When done with the final body paint and his glazing he could then wait another six months to a year before a varnish layer was applied. At that time dammar and mastic varnishes were known, as well as other tree resins. You can see here this is mastic resin which is collected from a tree specifically found in Greece and in the Greek Islands. Once the artist had finished painting the picture to his satisfaction, the painting would have to rest for at least six months or a year before a final layer of varnish could be applied to the surface.

When the painting came into the collection it was thought to be a work by a French artist, [Joseph] Duplessis. Through a great deal of research it was thought to be more likely a product of Joseph Wright of Derby. I believe the technique in which it was painted, the brush strokes, every aspect of this work, supports that attribution.