



CARPACCIO'S KNIGHT

RESTORATION AND TECHNICAL STUDY

17 May 2021 to 25 September 2022. Room 11

With the restoration now completed of *Young Knight in a Landscape* by Vittore Carpaccio (ca. 1505), one of the most celebrated works in the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, the results of the project will be shown in a special display in Room 11 of the permanent collection where the restoration took place on view to the public throughout 2020 and until March 2021. This presentation is part of the programme of exhibitions and activities organised to mark the centenary of the birth of Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza, a commemoration that is benefiting from the support of the Region of Madrid.

The restored painting is shown alongside a video which explains the work undertaken on it and the results obtained from the technical study of a type that accompanies all such projects, also published as a monographic volume. Materials analysis, X-radiographs, reflectographs and other technical procedures have allowed the painting to be studied in depth in order to firstly obtain detailed knowledge of its creative process and the artist's working method and secondly the information needed to embark on the restoration in the most rigorous manner and with the maximum respect for the work.

Image: Details of test patch cleaned

More information and images:

Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza – Press Office:

Paseo del Prado, 8. 28014 Madrid. Tel. +34 914203944 / +34 913600236.

prensa@museothyssen.org

<https://www.museothyssen.org/en/private-area/press/dossiers/carpaccios-knight>

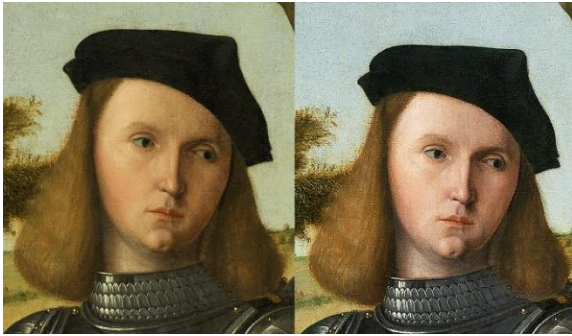
THYSSEN-BORNEMISZA
MUSEO NACIONAL



With the collaboration of:



Comunidad
de Madrid



The face before and after restoration

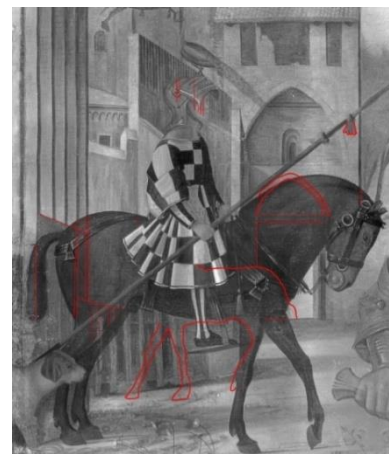
The restoration process has firstly consisted of stabilising the painting's support and consolidating fragile zones of the pictorial surface. The aged, yellowed varnish that covered the surface has also been removed as it greatly altered the effects of light and the original chromatic combinations. The splendid frame that protects and enhances the work has also been restored. These actions have made it possible to reinstate a correct reading of this masterpiece as it was

conceived by its creator and improve its state of conservation, ensuring that it will survive over time in optimum conditions.

The overall tone of the painting is cooler than it appeared prior to the restoration; the whites are now more luminous, the flesh tones pink and the sky an intense blue. Typically Venetian pink tones have reappeared in the buildings while the highlights on the grass and flowers have regained their original brilliance. The zone with the ermine, which was previously confused and muted, has regained brightness and luminosity and the figure's armour now reveals its magnificent blueish-grey metallic tone, standing out against the rest of the composition and giving the young knight the imposing presence that he originally possessed.

The mysterious knight

From captain Marco Gabriel, member of a Venetian patrician family, to Antonio de Montefeltro, Francisco Maria della Rovere, 3rd Duke of Urbino, Ferdinand II of Aragon or a Knight of the Order of the Ermine, there are numerous theories, all unconfirmed, concerning the possible identity of the young knight in this remarkable painting. Executed around 1505 by the Venetian artist Vittore Carpaccio (1460/66-1525/26), it was acquired by Baron Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza for his collection in 1935.



Traces of architecture visible beneath the horseman, highlighted in red for greater clarity

Museo Thyssen in Madrid 2017, maintains that the subject may be the captain Marco Gabriel who was notable in the defence of the fortress of Modon (modern-day Methoni) in the Peloponnese, a strategic Venetian stronghold where he was captured and executed. This hypothesis explains the presence of the walled city in the

painting, which is possibly an idealised version of the fortress, as well as the destroyed building on the left of the composition from which a rider emerges; a young knight mounted on a dark charger (symbol of inner wisdom and death), accompanied by his faithful dog in an allegorical image of the knight's soul embarking on its path towards rebirth. According to this theory, this journey is also symbolised in the trees on the other side of the scene: a leafy oak in the background, its autumnal version in the middle



Sequence of the different stages of life represented by the trees in the composition: prime, decline and death, and rebirth

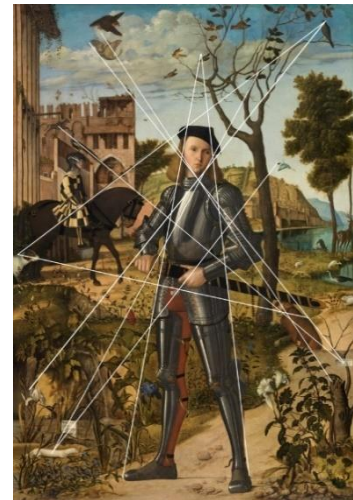
ground and a cut-down tree next to the principal figure from which new shoots are growing and which has a cartouche with the name of the artist and the painting's date.

This cartouche was rediscovered underneath old overpaints during cleaning in 1958, as was the one with the inscription "*Mal mori quam foedari*" (Rather dead than dishonoured), rediscovered next to the ermine. In the past the painting was attributed to Dürer due to the presence in the painting of a fake monogram of that artist.

Technical study

The recent technical study has revealed some important information which confirms that specific details in the composition were altered or added by Carpaccio himself in order to complete, change or broaden the significant symbolic content of the painting during its execution.

The work contains a wide range of symbolic elements, each of which has significance and meaning: the fauna, flora, landscape, figures, all transmit an interconnected message. Each detail is located in a strategic position within the composition in order to create a narrative associated with the virtues and deeds attributed to the figure and in order to exalt his memory. Like the lance that the mounted knight holds and points towards a falcon (symbol of vision, strategy, knowledge and victory) perched on a branch at the upper right corner. In turn, this imaginary line connects with the dog that accompanies the knight and is a symbol of fidelity and sacrifice. Other "lines" radiating from the falcon link the principal figure with different details among the many to be found in this work. The result is an invisible network of lines that connects all these elements to the principal figure, forming a grid in which he appears to be trapped and thus involved in this tension.



Depiction of some of the imaginary lines connecting different elements of the composition



Details from the armour showing decorative motifs

The figure of the young knight is made up of two opposing halves: the upper half - clad in Italianate armour with simple rivets and motifs of feathers or scales on the arm guards and gorget - is shown as resigned and melancholy while the lower half, with floral motifs decorating the different parts of the German-style armour, is shown as decided and arrogant. The knight's sword divides

these two parts of the figure, a duality that is repeated throughout the painting and which refers to the opposition of good and evil, victory and defeat, the heavenly and the earthly realms.



The present display features a sword of a type very similar to the one held by the knight, which has been loaned to the exhibition by Patrimonio Nacional. Made in Germany between 1500 and 1530, it was in the armoury of Charles V that came

to Spain from Brussels and which Philip II reunited with his father's weapons to create the still extant Royal Armoury in Madrid. Together with the characteristics of the lower half of the armour, the sword's origin and its similarities to the one painted by Carpaccio suggest that the depicted figure may be connected with the Germanic world.

Restoration

The present restoration has been a complex procedure due to the work's eventful history; the painting has been restored on numerous occasions in the past, relined at an early date and its dimensions altered. The complexity is also due to the thinness of the paint layer, which has made the process much more challenging, and to the intrinsic characteristics of the painting, namely its large size (218 x 151.5 cm) and above all the enormous range of elements and details within it, particularly in the landscape with its complex colouring and wealth of plants and animals.



Process of cleaning and removing the aged varnish

In order to proceed systematically the restoration has been undertaken by zones and a rigorous safety policy has been employed throughout the process with the results of the restoration of each phase and zone analysed before taking decisions and continuing with the work.

In addition to the relining, which it was decided not to remove as this could have resulted in more damage than benefit, the painting had been enlarged at the sides and at the top with strips of overpainting on the lining canvas, which was torn at all four corners. In order to avoid further



Process of removing the aged varnish

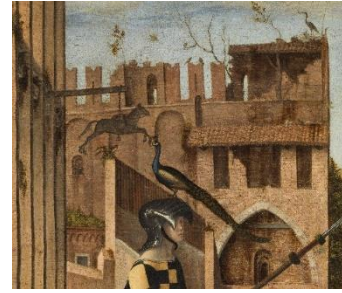
damage and tension the canvas was stabilised with inserts of similar fabric. The thin paint layer layer also revealed numerous micro-losses and wear but it was decided to only consolidate some zones around the perimeter and specific, more deteriorated points. The restorers then moved on to the cleaning, removing the layer of varnish that covered the pictorial surface. These varnishes oxidise and yellow in contact with oxygen in the air, producing a flattening effect of the perspective and affecting the luminosity and the colour

combinations created by the artist. Finally, a new protective layer was applied in the form of a transparent varnish that adds crispness, boosts the colours and enriches the image as a whole.

Infrared reflectograph

Observation under infrared light shows the underlying layers. The underdrawing beneath the paint layers has a firm, precise stroke, particularly evident in the definition of the principal figure and the architectural elements of the landscape background. It could be seen that the figure on horseback had been added after the building on the left was painted and that it concealed another equestrian figure of smaller size and facing the other way, possibly conceived in this

initial design. Also painted later was the peacock, which seems to be resting on the rider's helmet due to an optical effect. The bird, shown with its tail folded, is the symbol of humility, charity and restraint, and appears to be associated with the horse-shaped sign hanging from the building in a type of juxtaposition or opposition of its attributes and those of the horse (power, strength and pride), which are associated with the representation of heroic figures.



Detail from the fortress in ruins

Other elements were, however, removed by Carpaccio during the work's creation. These include a second deer (an animal that guides souls to the other world), which was rediscovered next to the one visible in the painting, although it may be a



Detail from area of hand and sword, comparison of X-ray and visible

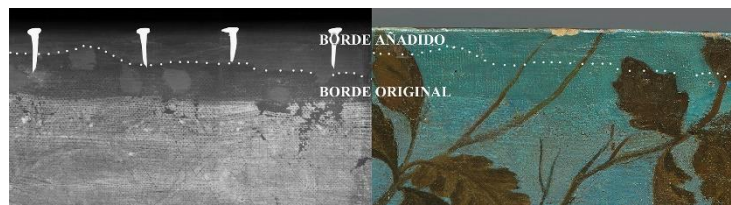
correction to the position of a single animal. Other changes to the principal figure have emerged, such as his gaze, which was originally more frontal but was modified to look to the right; the hand holding the sword hilt, which rests on it in a relaxed gesture but which originally grasped it more firmly; and the elimination of a ring on his right hand.

The landscape also reveals numerous corrections: the elimination of a promontory with a grove of trees and some details of the fortress, while there are also changes to the thickness or position or some of the plants and animals. These are often slight adjustments or minimal shifts of position which are surprising for their preciseness, for example those revealed in the underdrawing of the ermine.

X-radiograph

The X-radiograph has shown that the original painting was a few centimetres smaller than it is now, as evident in both the additions made during the relining and the areas of original, unpainted canvas around the edges. The canvas consists of two pieces of fabric joined with a vertical seam. The size of looms at the time the work was created determined the width of a piece of cloth, for which reason two strips had to be joined together for large paintings. The edges of the fabric were found to be slightly damaged, with wear and losses around the areas where the original nails were located. The priming layer on the canvas is thin and not uniformly distributed, with more applied in the weaker areas and along the whole of the seam.

Before applying pigment Carpaccio drew a few soft, continuous strokes with a brush that are visible in the infrared image. These are initial lines which he subsequently modified in some cases, for example the above-mentioned mountains that would become



Detail from the X-ray images showing the reconstruction of the Edge in an earlier treatment

the walled city. However, from the outset he reserved the space intended for important elements such as the figure of the knight, whose large volumes are perfectly defined in the initial design, as is the upper part of the building on the left. The leafy tree is also present in the initial

design but this is not the case with the almost bare oak, which was added later next to the principal figure.

There are other changes to the young knight's face aside from the direction of the gaze. The light falling on it was originally more pronounced, defining the forehead and right eyebrow. However, Carpaccio subsequently softened the light to make the face sweeter and more delicate: a modification that could be interpreted as the transformation of a warrior's face with a direct gaze that challenges the viewer into that of an innocent youth.

Materials analysis

In addition to confirming the work undertaken throughout the entire restoration process, the materials analysis in the laboratory has provided more detail on Carpaccio's working method. A preparation of white gesso was applied to the canvas and the priming then added on top. Over them, the paint layers are thin and were painted in one or various applications using a varied range of pigments. Notable among them are: carbon black, bone black and antimony black. Mention should also be made of the use of stibnite, a natural mineral of antimony which in pigment form has a dark grey colour. Carpaccio principally used it for the cuirass, combined with lead white and grains of red lake and vermilion, applying this mixture over a slightly grey base of lead white and lamp black with which he achieved the remarkable metallic reflection on the armour.



Studying the work

Finally, the analysis of the arrangement of the paint layers has confirmed the observations made through the technical images, both regarding the changes made by the artist during the creation of the painting and the introduction of new elements into already painted zones. The latter include the two cartouches painted over the foliate backgrounds, both of which include original pigment, thus proving that they were painted by Carpaccio.

The frame



Cleaning process

The frame of *Young Knight in a Landscape* was in a fragile state of conservation with material losses and abrasions. Over the layer of gold leaf was another stucco layer, in addition to repaints of metallic paint and a blackened patina that distorted an overall vision of this element and concealed the gleam of the gold leaf. After preliminary studies were undertaken the restorers proceeded to consolidate the wood and the layers of gold leaf. The repaints were removed, the material losses reconstructed with resin and stucco, and balsa wood inserts added to the corners.

Lastly, a new support was made for the back of the painting in order to ensure its stability and state of conservation, preparing the work for possible transport in the future and loans outside the museum. These include the major retrospective to be held next year at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, the first on Carpaccio in the United States, co-produced with the Palazzo Ducale in Venice and originally scheduled for March 2021. It will now open in Washington in November 2022 and in Venice in March 2023.