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OZIAS HUMPHRY (1742-1810), *PORTRAIT OF JANE AUSTEN*

Oil on canvas, 142,2 x 92,7 cm

CONDITION AND CONSERVATION 9/2011

- **ABSTRACT**

In 2010, I have been entrusted with the restoration of an oil painting depicting a full-length study of a young girl, probably the authentic portrait of Jane Austen by the British painter Ozias Humphry (1742-1810). The decision of restoration was made, since the art-historical and technical significance of the painting was overshadowed by its cloudy, dull and flat appearance. The painting was imbedded in a greyish-coloured mixture of synthetic wax and resin – out-and-out from the back through the paint layer-. In addition, extensive overpaint over an irregular cleaned surface explained the patchy appearance of the composition.

Indeed, the painting had been in need of treatment for aesthetic as well as for conservation reasons.

The conservation treatment focused substantially on the extraction of the synthetic wax and resin deposits, mummifying the painting on both sides, the cleaning of the paint layer involving the removal of layers of varnish, overpaint and other deposits such as incrustated dirt, grime or resinous residues of brownish varnish trapped in asperities. In addition, structural treatment of the original support had been another priority.

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Fig.1: Detail of the umbrella before cleaning:
Lower left angle
Photo : © Eva Schwan, 2010



Fig.2: Detail before cleaning:
Upper right angle in the sky
Photo : © Eva Schwan, 2010



Fig.3: Detail before cleaning:
Lower right angle
Photo : © Eva Schwan, 2010

Details showing the greyish veil altering the paint layer due to important accumulations of wax and resin. Important accumulations of wax and resin are particularly visible in the interstices of the cracks.

• ORIGINAL TECHNIQUE

The original support appears to be a rather tight and regular woven linen canvas, originally mounted on a wooden stretcher that can be keyed-out. The canvas weave remains fairly prominent suggesting that the cream-coloured ground may correspond to a single application.

The technique of the painting seems astonishingly direct, and the artist had to work with great rapidity, to capture the slightly windy atmosphere, best expressed by the smooth movement of the white airy dress floating in the wind. Indeed, visual examination of the painting method reveals bold brushwork, painted largely wet-in-wet, with later brushstrokes blending with earlier ones to produce subtle colour mixtures.

The artist appears to be using an interesting range of pigments. Although no study by scientific methods of identification had been carried out we may safely assume the presence of lead white (basic lead carbonate; *hydrocerussite*), azurite, yellow ochre, vermilion (mercuric sulphide; *cinnabar*), red-brown ochre and ivory black. For a full technical analysis, samples of the paint layers and ground would need to be taken in each of the different areas in order to determine the exact stratigraphy and the nature of each of the component layers.

The binding medium of the painting has not been identified, but it is a reasonable first assumption that the painting has been executed in an oil medium. Traditionally such drying oils¹ were linseed oils, walnut oil and poppy oil.

¹ The term 'drying oil' refers to oil expressed from vegetables sources, which has the potential to become semi-solid by polymerisation of the individual molecular units of which it is composed.

- **CONDITION OF THE PAINTING BEFORE OUR RESTORATION**

The methodology of the preliminary examination consisted of visual examination of the painting in daylight, UV and raking light. Although this investigation was limited, it provided an overview of the condition of the painting, which has been recorded photographically.

Since its creation, it seems that the painting had been exposed to quite a number of rather traumatising interventions, some of them documented in records dating back to the last thirty years ².

- **The support:**

Tracing back the conservation history of the painting, we know that the original canvas had been lined and un-lined repeatedly in order to strengthen the damaged support. We may assume that the canvas had been glue-lined sometimes in its early conservation history, and it is likely that the tacking edges were cut off at that time of the lining. It seems that the last relining had been carried out in 2006, to be un-lined again, only two years later. According to records³ as to the last lining procedure, we know that the structure had been treated with synthetic materials, using Beva[®] 371.⁴ While the canvas texture is still visible under the painted surface, the back of the canvas appears impeccably smooth and flat. As we know, lining requires a perfectly even surface in order to create satisfying adhesion between the original and the lining canvas. For this purpose, it seems most likely that sometimes in the past, any irregularities such as protruding knobs in the canvas weave had been eliminated. In addition, heat and pressure during the different lining procedures may also have flattened down the texture. Unfortunately, along with the preparation of the canvas texture for lining, other important information, such as inscriptions or supplier stamps, has been severely damaged.

² See Anne Rice's archives




³ See Anne Rice's archives

⁴ *Beva@371 is a synthetic wax/resin mixture developed by Gustav A. Berger in 1970. In order to activate the application of Beva@371, heat (at least 65°C) and pressure is necessary.*

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Throughout the long and quite impressive conservation history of the painting, it seems lining was considered to be the only valid and effective treatment in order to re-establish strength and resistance as to the condition of the original canvas.

Indeed, after removal of the last lining, a multitude of tears affecting the original support have been unmasked. With the exception of one 16 cm long tear in the upper left quarter, most of the tears are rather small. However, their presence may explain the motivation for constant lining and re-lining.

		
<p>Fig.4 and 5: Details showing the irregularly applied Beva@371 wax and resin mixture applied on the back of the original canvas. Photos: © Eva Schwan, 2010</p>		<p>Fig.6: General view: back of the canvas Photo: © Eva Schwan, 2010</p>

- **The paint layer:**

Both techniques (glue-lining and lining with synthetic wax/resin mixtures) implying heat and pressure, they were disastrous as to the original condition and aspect of the paint layers: impasto was irreversibly squashed, original brushstrokes flattened, surface effects such as the white dots crushed, in some areas, the canvas structure is reinforced into the surface texture of the paint (weave re-enforcement). Cracks in paint and ground caused by strain from movement of the support are visible all over the surface of the painting. After cleaning, previously retouched stretcher marks along with cracks and losses were clearly visible.



Fig.7: Details of the painting during cleaning:
Cracks and losses along stretcher marks
Photo : © Eva Schwan, 2010

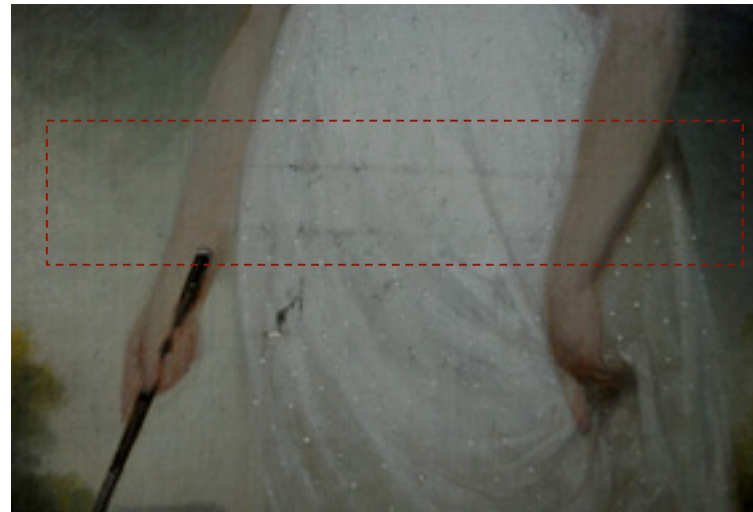


Fig.8: Details of the painting during cleaning:
Cracks and losses along stretcher marks
Photo : © Eva Schwan, 2010



Fig.9: Details of the painting during cleaning:
Cracks and losses along stretcher marks
Photo : © Eva Schwan, 2010

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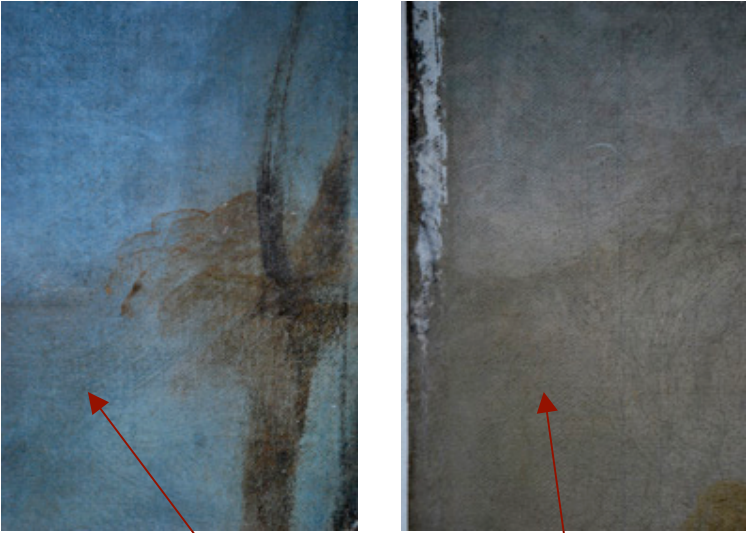


Another kind of cracking caused by stresses within the paint itself can be seen in areas of thick paint layer such as the cracks in the white dress.



The paint layers suffered from several cleaning procedures, due to mechanical and chemical abrasion: we observe considerable losses of glazes and fine details that might have been perfectly visible such as the original composition in the golden medallion that is barely visible today and may lead to all sorts of interpretation. Localised losses, most seriously along the borders are clearly visible under UV-light.

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White coloured filling material was applied in some of the losses. The filling was used to even out the losses in the painting, and was applied without much consideration, since it often overlaps the surviving original areas. Previous interventions on the paint layer consisted of tonal repair of large missing areas, and retouching of smaller losses. Unfortunately, retouching was not restricted to areas of loss only, rather in contrary, it seems extensive retouching was done with the intention of having compensated surface abrasions and areas of loss in the original paint. The surface was heavily coated with a synthetic resin varnish layer, applied over an irregular cleaned surface with yellow and brown accumulations of varnish lodged in the paint depressions. It was also found that dust and surface grime was trapped in the cavities of the original paint layer, accentuating the irregular surface aspect.

		
<p>Fig.12 and 13: Detail during cleaning: Note the patchy surface appearance due to grime, dirt and retouching Photo: © Eva Schwan, 2010</p>	<p>Fig.14: Detail in the dress: previous retouching Photo: © Eva Schwan, 2010</p>	<p>Fig.15: Detail of the right border: Previous retouching Photo: © Eva Schwan, 2010</p>

• THE DE-RESTORATION AND RESTORATION

• Cleaning of the paint layer and the support:

Because of the irregular surface aspect distorting the original palette and obscuring details and because of the discoloured retouching visually disturbing as well as misleading, it was decided that the painting should be cleaned.

The cleaning methods adopted were based on extensive testing, conducted methodically with the objective of anticipating any new situations that might require alternative methods or modifications. Decisions regarding the desired level of cleaning were those that allowed us to reveal the artist's painting in its multiple aspects: form, colour, brushwork, and substance.

One of the most protracting interventions had been the tedious extraction of the considerable amount of wax and resin heavily impregnating both sides of the canvas. Retouching was removed along with the varnish, which allowed us to remove excess fillers over areas of intact paint and other tenacious residues trapped in the cavities of the painting.



Fig.16: After extraction of the wax/resin mixture
Photo : © Eva Schwan, 2010



Fig.17: Extraction of the wax/resin mixture
Photo : © Eva Schwan, 2010

Only a small sample of the important amount of the synthetic wax and resin mixture, Béva®, that has been extracted.

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Cleaning in progress:



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After cleaning, more of the artist's original paint layer was revealed. Although most of the painting surface has been rather harshly cleaned in the past, the aesthetic gains of our cleaning were considerable, both in terms of the breadth of the overall chromatic range given by the relative re-emergence of the blue tones, the white dress and its transparency, the subtle pink palette as to the work of the young girl's face and hands, the texture of her slippers which are now clearly recognisable as smooth and most elegant velvet slippers, the different colours in the strands of her hair, as well as the recovery of specific painterly details, such as changes in the composition of both hands (pentimenti).



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Another detail had been suppressed by earlier restorations: although severely damaged by cleaning in the past and concealed with excessive retouching, it would appear to be one of the most important details as to the signature of the artist, the initials OH in the left hand corner of the painting. Although severely damaged by surface abrasion, even the uncovered fragments of the initials play undoubtedly an essential role in the attribution of the painting.



Ozias Humphry's identifying monogram of his initial letters, O and H, the H being encircled with the O, is located in the lower left angle of the painting, at 2cm from the left edge and 2.5cm from the lower edge.
The logo OH has a diameter of 3cm.

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As the conservation proceeded and the proportion of cleaned areas increased, the painting gradually recovered its equilibrium, and it can now be appreciated as being one of the most significant paintings of its period.



Fig.27: Detail: cleaning of the paint layer
Photo : © Eva Schwan, 2010

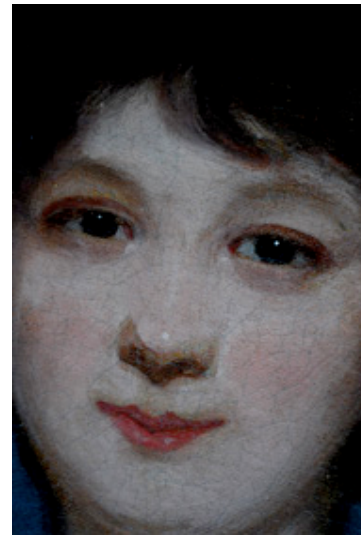


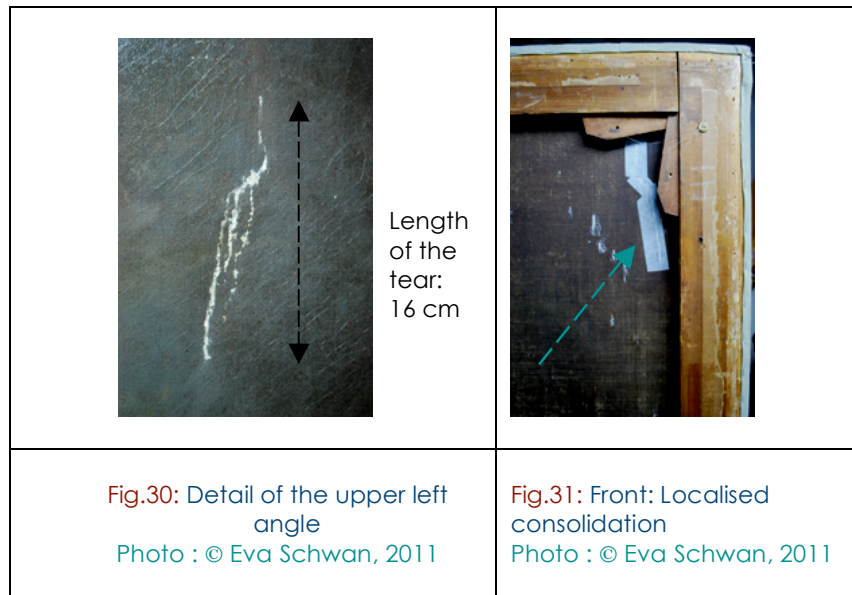
Fig.28: Detail: cleaning of the paint layer
Photo : © Eva Schwan, 2010



Fig.29: Detail: cleaning of the paint layer
Photo : © Eva Schwan, 2010

- **Structural treatment:**

Adopting a less interventionist approach, lining (or rather re-lining) seems to be unnecessary. Indeed, after careful examination, the original canvas appears to ensure sufficient resilience and carrying capacity, without lining. Therefore, for the time being, we decided to preserve the original state of the canvas as much as possible, which means no lining. The tears could be repaired *in situ*: occasional deformations of the structure around the immediate area of some of the tears were levelled with weights and moisture. With the yarns aligned, the tears were reinforced with localised application of an adhesive strong enough to keep the damaged structure in plane. The 16 cm long tear in the upper quarter required more support. The damaged area has been temporarily strengthened with the application of medical strips, *micropore*.



While being perfectly reversible, the strips are strong and flexible enough to hold the torn edges in place. Although examination in raking light clearly shows a vaulted appearance in this particular area, it does not disturb the lecture of the composition. Rather in contrary, accepting this deformation – while being aware of the history of the painting – allows us to appreciate a maximum of the original substance and aspect of the painting – front and back -. However, a loose cushion has been placed between this particularly frail area and the stretcher in order to brace the canvas, to protect it from impacts and to absorb any vibrations.

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We have chosen the possibility of reinforcing the edges with the application of strip-lining. Using a synthetic adhesive Plextol B500⁵, load-bearing polyester canvas strips were attached all along the tacking edges. Once the strip-lining applied, we were able to put the canvas back on its stretcher.

⁵ Plextol B500 :
Aqueous dispersion of a butyl acrylate and methyl methacrylate based copolymers, with excellent resistance against frost, electrolytes and high chemical stability. It is free from solvents and plasticizers and forms a clear, slightly tacky film. Plextol B500 is commonly used as an adhesive for canvas lining and for consolidation treatment of special plasters.

			
Fig.37: Before intervention: Photo : © Eva Schwan, 2010	Fig.38: After intervention Photo : © Eva Schwan, 2011	Fig.39: Before intervention: Photo : © Eva Schwan, 2010	Fig.40: After intervention Photo : © Eva Schwan, 2011

- **Reintegration:**

Although the cleaning was the most critical aspect of the overall conservation program, no less important were the interventions related to reintegration. Losses were filled and adjusted to imitate the structure of the surrounding paint. A layer of varnish on cyclohexanone resin basis, used as a protective coat for oil paintings, was applied. Retouching was carried out with natural resin based restoration colours diluted in diacetone alcohol. The products used for the reintegration remain highly soluble so that they may be removed from the painting at any time in the future.

Properties: Thermoplastic, high transparency, high lightfastness.

- **Recommendations**

It is desirable that the conservation condition of the painting should be closely monitored, as any risk of damage to the painting by possible environmental changes has to be excluded. Environmental control of the ambient temperature (AT) and the relative humidity (RH%) may be necessary to provide stable conditions.

Stretcher bar lining may be advisable to make the canvas suitable for loan and transport.

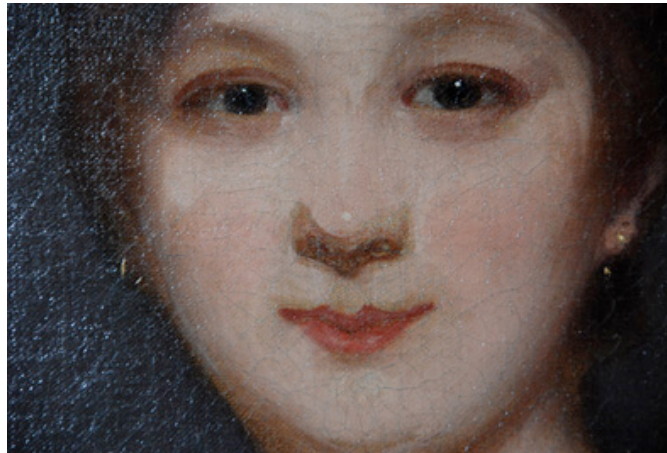


Fig.41:

Detail of the face after treatment:
note the subtle work of highlights accentuation the deep and sparkling eyes along
with the twinkling highlights on the golden earrings

Photo : © Eva Schwan, 2011