

***THE TOILET OF VENUS***  
**CIRCLE OF VERONESE**

THE COURTAULD INSTITUTE OF ART RESEARCH FORUM:  
CONSERVATION AND ART HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

WORKS FROM THE COURTAULD GALLERY

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The following report is a summary of the results and findings as part of the annual project *Conservation and Art Historical Analysis: Works from the Courtauld Gallery*, in which a student of the Diploma of the Conservation of Easel Paintings and a research student in the History of Art collaborated to examine, treat and come to a closer understanding of a particular painting. This collaboration aims to promote interdisciplinary exchange between art historians and conservators, and emphasises the benefits for each party to combine certain knowledge to use in art historical research.

*The Toilet of Venus* stands in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Venetian tradition of depicting a beautiful woman at her toilette and in the past has been attributed to Titian, Veronese, their workshops or followers. The aim of this project was to explore the provenance, date and origin of the painting by investigating the iconography, composition and materials of the painting. This was hoped to achieve a better understanding of where this painting fits into the context of sixteenth-century Venetian painting.

An introduction to the subject matter and the cultural heritage of the iconography will be followed by a discussion of the origin of the composition and an account of the painting's provenance. This report will then take a closer look at the physical evidence of the painting before the final concluding remarks.

## **ICONOGRAPHY**

The *Venus at her Toilet* shows a partially nude female figure in three-quarter length seated on a cushion in front of a red curtain (fig. 1). Her torso is shown frontally while her legs are turned to her right. Her head is turned to the left and she is gazing at herself in a mirror, which is held by a cupid. She has golden hair that is skilfully braided and adorned with a small laurel wreath. Venus is holding her veil between two fingers, an ambiguous pose for it is difficult to tell whether she is dressing or undressing herself. The ambiguity carries on in her dress that covers one breast and reveals the other. She is dressed in a white garment that loosely covers her body and reveals her left leg, her arms, shoulders and right breast. With her left hand she is pressing the robe up against her chest.

This popular subject matter is known as *Venus at her Toilet* or *Venus with a Mirror* and in the sixteenth century and beyond comes in many variations with different poses and compositions. Ancient mythological imagery was translated into paintings as part of the revival of the classical in the Italian Renaissance. The so-called *Capitoline Venus* in Rome (fig. 2), which dates from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD and is a copy of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC sculpture by Praxiteles, represents the *Venus Pudica* type and survives in various copies. It served as a model for many Venetian paintings and its pose is similar to that of the Courtauld Venus. The goddess is raising one hand to cover her breast while her other tries to cover her nether regions. The *Pudica* represents the goddess in a private moment of dressing in which she has been interrupted by someone unseen by us. This

explains her reaction of trying to cover herself with her hands. We are bystanders who witness the results of his voyeurism and doing so become complicit in his crime of looking.<sup>1</sup>

Early sixteenth century Venice was a crucible in which artists turned to new subjects drawn from classical antiquity and developed new styles and techniques to represent them. Genres are not rigid.<sup>2</sup> The taste for ancient art was so great that the city became the first in the modern world to have its own public collection of classical sculpture.<sup>3</sup> The lack of portraits of Venetian noblewomen by significant artists is more than offset by the large number of idealised, erotic paintings of beautiful women.<sup>4</sup> The eroticised, half-length female portrait was an innovation developed in the first third of the 16<sup>th</sup> century by Venetian artists of the highest rank. These rich and varied idealisations introduced a portrait type, which enjoyed continued success throughout European painting for centuries to come.<sup>5</sup>

Some claim that Venetian paintings of sensuous women are nothing more than erotic portrayals, while some people see them in the light of contemporary love poetry and Neoplatonic philosophy.<sup>6</sup> Bordone's *Venetian Women at their Toilet* is an example of the representation of female figures in alluring fashion (fig. 3).<sup>7</sup> The image of Venus in the sixteenth-century Venice was heavily influenced by philosophical trends and writings, primarily Neoplatonism, which promoted erotic and aesthetic experiences, and neo-Petrarchan poetry, where the ideal type modelled on Petrarch's Laura, with black eyes, rosy cheeks, curly golden hair and white skin, was minted.<sup>8</sup> Titian was familiar with Renaissance love lyrics and close acquaintances with Ariosto, Bembo and Giovanni della Casa, all three petrarchan lyricists.<sup>9</sup>

The iconography of Venus always comes with certain attributes that identify her as the goddess. The jewellery she wears reflects her beauty with pearls symbolising her perfectly shaped head, her blonde hair outshining the gold of her jewellery, the ring as an attribute of eternal love and other jewels seeming pale and dull compared to radiance of her beauty.<sup>10</sup> In Titian's *Venus with a Mirror*, today at the Washington National Gallery (fig. 4), the harmony of reds, whites and golds is associated with her physical features described by poet Ludovico Ariosto of the perfect, beautiful woman.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> R. Goffen, *Titian's Women* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), 136.

<sup>2</sup> D. A. Brown, "Venetian Painting and the Invention of Art," in *Bellini · Giorgione · Titian and the Renaissance of Venetian Painting*, eds. David Alan Brown and Sylvia Ferino-Pagden (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 16.

<sup>3</sup> A. Butterfield, "Titian and Venetian Painting in a Time of Triumph and Tragedy," in *Titian and the Golden Age of Venetian Painting*, ed. Edgar Peters Bowron (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 13.

<sup>4</sup> Sylvia Ferino-Pagden, "Pictures of Women – Pictures of Love," in *Bellini · Giorgione · Titian and the Renaissance of Venetian Painting*, eds. David Alan Brown and Sylvia Ferino-Pagden (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 191.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 190.

<sup>6</sup> Butterfield, "Titian and Venetian Painting in a Time of Triumph and Tragedy," 16.

<sup>7</sup> It is not known exactly what the subject matter is; Butterfield, "Titian and Venetian Painting in a Time of Triumph and Tragedy," 16.

<sup>8</sup> On the influence of Petrarchan poetry on the iconography of Venus, see E. Goodman-Soellner, "Poetic Interpretations of the "Lady at Her Toilette" Theme in Sixteenth-Century Painting," in *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (1983): 426-442.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 436.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 432.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 440.

She has red lips, white skin and golden hair and as the queen of love she is crowned with a wreath, another motif from Renaissance love poetry.

The iconography of Venus does not differ very much from that of the secular subject matter of the Lady at her Toilet. Images of lady at her toilet pay homage to female poetic beauty. What sets her apart are her idealised features, often the unspecific and sometimes phantastic environment she is placed in as well as the presence of cupids. They make her identifiable as the goddess Venus rather than a mortal woman. In the School of Fontainebleau's *Lady at her Toilet* (fig. 5) (Dijon, c. 1590) a beautiful woman is shown at her toilet. Despite being mortal, as depicted through the setting in an interior, she can be seen as a profane, earthly Venus because of the roses and pearls, both attributes of the Goddess of Love.<sup>12</sup> She is wearing pearls, is surrounded by flowers and her face is reflected in the mirror, which is one of the main features of depictions of Venus, and often associated with vanity and beauty.

Giovanni Bellini's *Woman in a Mirror* (fig. 6) also uses the mirror as a metaphor for her beauty and her radiance. This association goes back to the fourteenth century and again Petrarchan poetry. In Titian's *Young Woman at her Toilette* (fig. 7) the young woman's lover is holding the mirror. The lover holding a mirror was a popular topos in Petrarchan poetry. The model of this theme was Petrarch's *Il mio adversario*, in which the poet envies the lady's mirror since it, rather than he, is the object of her glance.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the beholder is cast in the role of the intruder, which again links back to the Pudica type of the Venus iconography. The mirror reflection of one of her eyes may suggest that she sees him, but only as a reflection in the mirror.<sup>14</sup>

The Courtauld Venus is closely connected with the tradition of the motif of the beautiful woman. She can be identified as the goddess thanks to the presence of the cupid, who holds the mirror. However, the Venus here differs from other compositions of the time since she is not adorned with any jewellery apart from a simply laurel wreath in her hair. Her beauty is rather conveyed through her natural appearance and her elegant pose. Images of Venus at her Toilette, apart from alluding to sensuality and beauty, reflect contemporary notions of decorum, as Venus modestly covers part of her chest in a very private setting. Beauty was closely tied in with decorum and a women's beauty was seen in the context of morality, virtue, rank, as well as economic and sexual relationships. Virtuosity is represented and controlled through body language and physical appearance, while the allusion to decorous behaviour allows for the nude female figure to be viewed with sensuality. Venus' ambiguous pose, covering one breast while exposing the other, makes her appealing and contributes to the sensual image. Furthermore, the reds and whites that surround her strongly allude again to the poetic tradition of those colours.

The following section will describe the composition of *The Toilet of Venus* within the context of workshop replication, using technical analysis to firmly link the composition of *The Toilet of Venus* to the workshop of Titian.

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<sup>12</sup> Goodman-Soellner, "Poetic Interpretations", 430.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 436-437.

<sup>14</sup> Goffen, *Titian's Women*, 136.

## **COMPOSITION**

As we have seen, the composition of *The Toilet of Venus* has many similarities to sixteenth-century Venetian treatments of this subject matter. The next stage in the research was to investigate into the painting process using technical examination, and to compare the composition with other versions to explore the paintings status.

The x-radiograph of *The Toilet of Venus* shows that there have been no changes to the composition in the paint layers (figs. 9 and 10). This indicates that the composition was planned out from the beginning of its execution. The figure of Cupid present in the x-radiograph is indistinct due to the low proportion of X-ray absorbent pigments used to paint this figure. It is likely that the ruddy flesh tone of Cupid was created using earth pigments and very little lead white or vermilion. There is no evidence using Infrared Reflectography that any carbon based drawing material has been used to either sketch out the composition or used for transfer techniques such as squaring up or pouncing. However, this does not exclude the use of other underdrawing materials such as red paint, chalks or inks which do not contain carbon.

An X radiograph of *Titian's Mistress*, attributed to the Workshop of Titian (English Heritage collection), shows a previous composition beneath the final image that is closely similar to that of *The Toilet of Venus* (Courtauld Institute). Technical study of works by Titian and his workshop suggests that reuse of canvas was common practice, for example, the painting *Venus at her Mirror* by Titian (National Gallery of Art, Washington) also has another composition beneath the finished painting.<sup>15</sup>

A scaled overlay of the composition from underneath *Titian's Mistress* onto *The Toilet of Venus* highlights the similarities and differences between the two compositions (fig. 11). The compositions are certainly comparable in size, and while the faces agree quite well in terms of size and position of features, there are some small differences in the figures. The figure of the Venus under *Titian's Mistress* appears to be shorter, her left hand and arm are positioned slightly higher on her breast and the raised hand holding the veil is closer to her head.

While the features of Venus underneath *Titian's Mistress* (English Heritage) are clearly defined in the X-radiograph, the positioning of her body shows a number of changes. For example, the position of the woman's proper left arm has been changed a number of times. The difference in the density and clarity of the brushwork suggests that the figure was not as worked up as the face of Venus. These changes indicate that the composition was worked up on the canvas rather than copied from another version or template. It is possible that the unfinished painting visible in the X radiograph was an original composition worked out by Titian. Titian is known to have frequently drafted preliminary compositions in paint which he used before subsequently overpainting with a completely different composition.<sup>16</sup> This could imply that the composition of *The Toilet of Venus* was by Titian, or perhaps a template that was used in his workshop.

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<sup>15</sup> Washington: National Gallery of Art, *Titian: Prince of Painters*, (Munich: Prestel, 1990), 302.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Joannides, "Titian's Repetitions," in *Titian: Materiality, Likeness, Istoria*, ed. Joanna Woods-Marsden (Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2007), 39-40.

Like most successful painters of the time, Titian ran a large workshop which replicated successful compositions and completed less important commissions. From the 1530s Titian had an enormous workload and therefore needed a large workshop that made and replicated many of his commissions.<sup>17</sup> This replication was an important aspect of the workshop practice and make present-day ideas about an 'original' painting less applicable.

It is known from various documentary sources that Titian kept both *abbozzi* (sketches) and *ricordi* (records) of paintings in his house.<sup>18</sup> Records of paintings, or popular compositions, were essential for efficient workshop production, used to make copies and in case works were lost in transport. Documentary evidence suggest that Titian used drawings as records,<sup>19</sup> and the existence of several painted replicas of originals dating from 1545 onwards suggests he stocked these *ricordi* systematically, compiling a 'catalogue' that enabled workshop production to meet the demands of his clients. It has been suggested that Titian kept copy paintings of smaller paintings and drawings of larger works.<sup>20</sup>

The painting, *Venus with a Mirror* by Titian (National Gallery of Art, Washington) has an unfinished double portrait underneath the Venus composition, and interestingly Titian left the man's red coat exposed to form the velvet robe Venus used to cover herself.<sup>21</sup> This flexible use of the abandoned composition suggests that this painting was perhaps the first version of several paintings of this theme produced by Titian. The earliest documentary reference to a "Venus looking into a mirror" painted by Titian occurs in the list of paintings delivered to King Philip II of Spain in 1574, and it is thought that this painting is the lost replica of *Venus with a Mirror* (Washington).<sup>22</sup> This lost painting was copied by Ruben and showed Venus with only one Cupid (fig. 8). In Rubens copy, Venus is more modestly dressed, wearing a white chemise in composition much closer to that of *The Toilet of Venus*.

Various copies and variations, together with written documentary sources, indicate that there were at least two other major compositions by the master other than *Venus at her Mirror* (Washington).<sup>23</sup> A scaled overlay of *The Toilet of Venus* and the composition underneath *Titian's Mistress* onto the *Venus at her Mirror* (Washington) shows that the figures, whilst not identical, are a similar size and are not wholly unrelated (fig. 12). These different treatments of the Venus at her toilette motif by Titian, along with the composition underneath *Titian's Mistress*, strongly suggests that the composition of *The Toilet of Venus* originated from Titian's workshop and is actually a copy of a lost Titian painting.

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<sup>17</sup> B. Cole, 'Titian and the Idea of Originality in the Renaissance' in *The Craft of Art: Originality and Industry in the Italian Renaissance and Baroque Workshop*, eds. Ladis Andrew, and Carolyn Wood (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 92.

<sup>18</sup> Terisio Pignatti, "Abbozzi and Ricordi: New Observations on Titian's Technique," in *Titian 500*, ed. Joseph Manca (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1994), 73.

<sup>19</sup> Miguel Falomir, "Titian's Replicas and Variants", in *Titian*, ed. David Jaffé (London: National Gallery Company, 2003), 63.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Washington: National Gallery of Art, *Titian*, 302.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> S. Poglayen-Neuwall, "Titian's Pictures of the Toilet of Venus and their Copies," *The Art Bulletin* 16, no.4 (December, 1934): 376-378.

There is another known version of *The Toilet of Venus* belonging to the Accademia di San Luca in Rome (fig. 13), which is currently attributed to Carletto Caliori (the youngest son of Paolo Veronese).<sup>24</sup> The compositions of the Rome and Courtauld versions are almost identical, although there are some superficial differences in the dress of the two Venuses. The Rome Venus has pearl earrings, an elaborately ruffled chemise and an arm bracelet.

The canvas of the Rome Venus has been extended by 4cm on each side. This makes the original painting the same height and about 4 cm wider than the Courtauld painting. Cusping present at the top and left hand edges in *The Toilet of Venus* (Courtauld) indicates that while there has been some damage and loss to the right and bottom edges the composition has probably not been significantly cut down, as an extension to the right would unbalance the cropped and intimate composition.

As the dimensions of the painting are so similar to that of the Rome painting it seems plausible that these two paintings were once exactly the same size. An overlay of the composition of the Courtauld Venus onto the Rome version shows that while the compositions agree very well in most aspects, especially the size and major compositional elements, there are some notable differences (fig. 14). Perhaps the largest difference is Cupid's head which is tilted upwards more in the Rome painting. The hands of Venus holding the veil are also slightly different and there are many other small differences in the positioning of the figures.

The existence of another painting so closely similar in size and composition to *The Toilet of Venus* suggests that these paintings were workshop copies, possibly originating from the same stock image or cartoon. Evidence from the x-radiograph supports the notion that the Courtauld Venus is a copy in which the composition was planned from the start and not significantly altered during the painting stage, contrary to Titian's characteristic painting practice. However, without knowing more about the Rome version (especially its materials and technique), it is difficult to say how closely related these paintings may be.

Despite the large number of known copies and versions of *Venus at her Mirror* (Washington), there are few known versions of the composition of *The Toilet of Venus* (Courtauld) in either paint or print. This indicates that the composition was not one used later on and made to look Venetian or Titianesque, but was based on a today little-known composition of an original which was either lost or painted over relatively soon after it was painted.

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<sup>24</sup> Many thanks to Angela Cipriani of the Accademia di San Luca in Rome for providing us with this information.



## **PROVENANCE**

As opposed to large-scale paintings with religious subject matters the relatively small-sized Venus at the Courtauld Gallery was probably made for a private setting. This is also reflected in its provenance since the painting stayed in private hands for most of its recorded history. The paintings provenance is relatively clear. It was bequeathed to the Courtauld Gallery in 1947 after the death of Lord Lee of Farhnham, who had been the previous owner.<sup>25</sup> It has been suggested that the possibly earliest mention of the painting is made in the inventories of the Gonzaga Dukes of Mantua of 1665 and 1705.<sup>26</sup> Titian is known to have worked for the Gonzaga and so this seemed like a viable clue.<sup>27</sup> Although the inventory entry describes the painting as 'una Venere et Cudpido' and in principal matches our subject matter, it is too vague for us to be able to say with certainty that it describes the Venus here at the Courtauld.<sup>28</sup>

We know that in the seventeenth century many paintings from the collection were copied and the originals sold off, and that the last Duke of Mantua, Ferdinando Gonzaga, sold off his collection of paintings to London and Paris after he had left his ducal office in 1708.<sup>29</sup> Thus, our painting could either be the original that was once held by the Gonzaga family and is described in the inventories or a copy made after it. Ultimately, however, due to the lack of any firm documentary evidence into the provenance before the eighteenth century, we cannot tell where the Venus at the Courtauld Gallery originated or who its first owner was.

Henry Bentinck, first duke of Portland, who was an art collector, is known to have bought several paintings from the Gonzaga collection including works by Veronese. He also owned the Courtauld Venus, which he sold in 1722 as *A Venus Dressing* by Veronese. The painting then came into the possession of Paul Methuen of Corsham Court in Wiltshire before being passed on to Methuen's descendants, all along still attributed to Veronese. The Second Baron Methuen sold the *Venus* in 1875 to Alfred de Rothschild for £3.500 although according to his catalogue he himself believed that it was not worth more than £500. Alfred de Rothschild gave the picture to the Countess of Carnarvon, his illegitimate daughter, who again sold the picture in 1918 at Christie's where it was catalogued as 'Veronese'. Lord Lee of Farnham bought the painting from a London art dealer called Nico Jungman on in 1923 for £300, as a work by Titian. This was an extraordinarily low price if they really considered it to be a by the master himself and it is likely that they in fact did not think it was.

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<sup>25</sup> Many thanks to Karen Serres for granting us access to the Courtauld Gallery archival material.

<sup>26</sup> M. Eidelberg and E.W. Rowlands, "The Dispersal of the Last Duke of Mantua's Paintings," in the *Gazette des Beaux Arts* (June 1994): 228.

<sup>27</sup> For Titian's involvement with the Mantuan court see Sogliani, Daniela, *Le Collezioni Gonzaga. Il Carteggio tra Venezia e Mantova* (1563-1587), (2002).

<sup>28</sup> R. Morselli, *La Collezioni Gonzaga: l'elenco dei beni del 1626-1627*. Vol. 2. art.1288 (Milan, 2000).

<sup>29</sup> Eidelberg and Rowlands, "The Dispersal of the Last Duke of Mantua's Paintings," 227.

## **MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUE**

The long provenance of *The Toilet of Venus*, coupled with the conclusions drawn from investigating the composition suggests that this painting is a contemporary or near contemporary sixteenth century Venetian painting. The materials and techniques of the painting were investigated in order to place the painting within the context of sixteenth century Venetian painting practise.

### **Support**

*The Toilet of Venus* is executed on a plain weave, linen canvas (untested) with a thread count of 14 x 13 per cm. While 16<sup>th</sup> century Venetian artists continued to paint on panel, the use of linen canvas as a painting support for important commissions became common in Venice during the 16<sup>th</sup> century for several reasons. Artists began to favour canvas for its portability, price and texture. Also canvases could be made very large inexpensively and transported more easily on ships.<sup>30</sup> A survey of Titian's late work (1543-76) shows the predominant use of plain weave canvas in fine and course weaves.<sup>31</sup>

### **Ground Layers**

*The Toilet of Venus* has a double ground; an off-white ground layer and a grey ground layer and both layers are bound in oil (fig. 15). The first off-white ground layer contains two types of material, distinctly visible in UV light (fig. 16). Elemental analysis indicates that the majority of the ground is composed of an off-white siliceous earth. While the use of siliceous earths has not yet been identified in many 16<sup>th</sup> century Venetian paintings, it has been identified in other 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian paintings. Dosso Dossi (a 16<sup>th</sup> century Ferrarese artist, c.1490–1542) is known to have used clays and siliceous earths in some of his coloured imprimatura layers.<sup>32</sup>

This layer also contains small, translucent particles which are composed of pure silica (SiO<sub>2</sub>). The painting *Saint Catherine of Alexandria* (1522) by Lorenzo Lotto is an example where this type of material has been used in 16<sup>th</sup> century Venetian painting. Lotto seems to have used fine sand as a siccative in the red lake glazes used in the red robe of St Catherine. This sand is pure silica, and may have come from the same source of sand used to make the high quality colourless Venetian *cristello* glass.<sup>33</sup>

By the 16<sup>th</sup> century the Venetian glassmaking industry was a well-established and highly regulated industry producing luxury goods for a large export market.<sup>34</sup> The highly prized colourless *cristello* glass was produced using the very pure sand made

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<sup>30</sup> Nicholas Penny, *National Gallery Catalogues: The Sixteenth Century Italian Paintings, Volume II, Venice 1540-1600* (London: National Gallery Company, distributed by Yale Press, 2008), xiii.

<sup>31</sup> Christina Young, "History of Fabric Supports" in *The Conservation of Easel Paintings*, eds. Joyce Hill Stoner and Rebecca Rushfield, (London: Routledge, 2012), 128.

<sup>32</sup> Barbara H. Berrie, "A note on the imprimatura in two of Dosso Dossi's paintings," *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 33 (1994): 307-313.

<sup>33</sup> Barbara H. Berrie and Lousia C. Matthew, "Material Innovation and Material Invention: New Materials and New Colours in Renaissance Venetian Paintings" in *Scientific Examination of Art: Modern Techniques in Conservation and Analysis* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2005), 16-19.

<sup>34</sup> H. Tait, *The Golden Age of Venetian Glass*, (London: British Museum Publications Limited, 1979), 9.

from the quartzite pebbles from the banks of the Ticino River.<sup>35</sup> It is likely that a similar type of material has been used in *The Toilet of Venus*, although the size of the particles is quite different. The particles found in Lotto's painting are ca. 4-8 microns in diameter,<sup>36</sup> and the particles found in the ground of *The Toilet of Venus* are somewhat larger at ca. 12.5-25µm.

The second, ground layer is composed of coarsely ground particles of lead-white, carbon black and some earth pigments. This layer is of significant thickness and opacity and covers the whole first ground layer. The upper layer of grey ground is used in the painting as the mid-tone, and is left visible in some of the shadows of the flesh. Coloured ground layers, which were sometimes thinly applied and described as an imprimatura layer, were popular in Italy at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century but uncommon in paintings elsewhere in Europe until the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>37</sup> A variety of different coloured grounds and imprimatura were used by artists painting in 16<sup>th</sup> century Venice, depending on the overall aesthetic they wanted to achieve.<sup>38</sup> Grey or dark coloured primings, or imprimatura, have been found on several paintings by Titian and Veronese in the National Gallery, London, including Workshop of Titian's *An Allegory of Prudence* and Veronese's *The Consecration of Saint Nicholas*.<sup>39</sup>

The technique of priming canvas in 16<sup>th</sup> century Venice stemmed from the preparation of panel paintings. In 16<sup>th</sup> century Venice panels were still being prepared with gesso (gypsum bound in animal glue).<sup>40</sup> However, as the need for thick and well prepared grounds for gilding for canvas paintings was unnecessary, artists choose instead to skim a thin layer of gesso over the canvas. This had several benefits. The application was faster, the texture of the canvas could be used by the artist and thin priming made the painting more flexible and therefore more stable to being rolled up and transported by boat. For much of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, an application of gesso continued to be the first stage in the preparation of a canvas, even if it was further modified with an imprimatura layer or a more substantial second ground.<sup>41</sup>

The absence of a gesso ground is unusual for a 16<sup>th</sup> century Venetian painting, and the unusual preparation for the Venus may indicate that it was probably not the product of the workshop of any of the well-known artists working in Venice in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, few paintings with oil bound grounds have been identified from this time, although there are exceptions.<sup>42</sup> The preparation of canvases was a practise workshop assistants would have learnt and followed. While some of the materials used in this ground are somewhat unusual for 16<sup>th</sup> century Venetian painting practise, they are materials that have been identified and used in other ways in 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian paintings.

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<sup>35</sup> Berrie and Matthew, "Material Innovation," 17.

<sup>36</sup> Berrie and Matthew, "Material Innovation," 16.

<sup>37</sup> Maartje Stols-Witlox, "Grounds, 1400-1900" in *Conservation of Easel Paintings*, eds. Joyce Hill Stoner and Rebecca Rushfield (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 167.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Penny, *The Sixteenth Century Italian Paintings*, 236 and 344.

<sup>40</sup> Stols-Witlox, "Grounds, 1400-1900," 167.

<sup>41</sup> Jill Dunkerton, Susan Foister and Nicholas Penny, *Dürer to Veronese: Sixteenth-century Painting in the National Gallery*, (London: Yale University Press, 2002), 271.

<sup>42</sup> For example, Tinteretto sometimes used oil bound grounds. Penny, *The Sixteenth Century Italian Paintings*, 154.

## Paint Layers

Damage to the paint both in loss and abrasion compromises the appreciation of the original painting technique. However, significant passages of the painting are in good condition and varnish removal has revealed the subtle shading and application of colour as well as a greater depth of form and composition. The white robe of Venus has been applied using lively brushstrokes to create an animated and finely textured surface. The flesh of Venus has been painted more finely than the drapery, the paint has been applied to achieve a smoother texture and her features have been delicately rendered with fine brushstrokes. Important lines such as the top lids and lashes of her eyes, her nostril and line of her mouth have been defined with dark lines.

16<sup>th</sup> century Venice was renowned for its wealth, commerce, multicultural society, dyeing and glass making industries,<sup>43</sup> and from 1490 onwards saw the appearance of *vendecolori*, merchants who specialised in dealing in colorants.<sup>44</sup> While the range and quality of pigments available in Venice was superior to many places in Europe, this painting has a fairly limited palette and includes lead-white, carbon black, iron oxide/earth pigments, azurite, red lead and red lake pigments.

The flesh and white drapery the painting have a straightforward application which utilises the grey ground to act as a mid-tone and shadow in the flesh. The sumptuous red drapery has been beautifully rendered and the use of materials in the choice of pigments and layering structure in these areas shows a practised knowledge of how to achieve these effects economically. Just as the cool grey ground has been used as an underlayer for the painting of the flesh, an opaque layer of red lead (with some earth pigment) has been applied to the areas of the red drapery in order to block out the effect of the grey ground.

Red lead or minium is lead tetraoxide,  $Pb_3O_4$  and is one of the earliest artificially prepared pigments.<sup>45</sup> It is fairly uncommon in 16<sup>th</sup> century Venetian painting, although it would have been available at that time. It has been identified in *Portrait of a Sculptor* by Tintoretto (1570),<sup>46</sup> however, this does not seem to be a regular feature of his palette. Vermilion is more commonly used by artists such as Titian, Veronese, Tintoretto, Lotto and Bordone. Comparing the price of red lead and vermilion in Italy in the 17<sup>th</sup> century gives an indication of the difference in price of the two pigments. Red lead was around ten times cheaper than vermilion,<sup>47</sup> and it is very likely that it was chosen for this reason to be used in an underlayer.

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<sup>43</sup> Paul Hills, *Venetian Colour*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 1-21.

<sup>44</sup> L.C. Matthew, "'Vendecolori a Venezia': the reconstruction of a profession," *Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 144 (2002): 680-86.

<sup>45</sup> Elisabeth West Fitzhugh, "Red Lead and Minium" in *Artists' Pigments: A Handbook of their History and Characteristics*, ed. Robert L. Feller, (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1986), 109.

<sup>46</sup> West Fitzhugh, "Red Lead and Minium," 133.

<sup>47</sup> Richard E. Spear, "A Century of Pigment Prices: Seventeenth Century Italy" in *Trade in Artists' Materials Markets and Commerce in Europe to 1700*, eds. Jo Kirby, Susie Nash and Joanna Canon (London: Archetype Publications Ltd., 2010), 282-283.

The modelling of the drapery has then been built up from this underlayer using red lake pigments and lead-white. A cross-section taken from the drapery clearly shows this technique; how the artist has employed a pure red lake glaze on top of the more opaque underlayers in order to create the deep, rich red of the drapery (fig. 17). This was very common painting practise, as red lake pigments are not only very transparent in oil, but one of the more expensive pigments in the artists' palette. The highlights of the red background drapery have been painted in broader, thicker brushstrokes of lead-white with glazes of red lake over the top which have pooled in the brushstrokes. This technique is characteristic of other 16<sup>th</sup> century Venetian artists such as Titian and Bordone.

Good quality lake pigments were one of the most expensive pigments in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Venetian palette and are derived from organic dye molecules from various natural sources, bound to an inorganic substrate. These sources include plants (madder), insects (cochineal, lac and kermes) and off-cuts from the dyeing industry.<sup>48</sup> The majority of recipes to make cochineal, kermes and other insect based lake pigments (excluding lac) between the late 14<sup>th</sup> to late 16<sup>th</sup> century used shearings (scraps of dyed material, a waste product of the dyeing industry) as the source of the dye rather than the costly raw material.<sup>49</sup> The thriving dyeing industry in 16<sup>th</sup> century Venice provided artists with an excellent range and quality of lake pigments.<sup>50</sup> Reds were especially prized as dyes<sup>51</sup> and Venice had privileged access to the raw materials through its extensive trade links with the East.

Lake pigments can be identified using elemental analysis by detecting elements associated with the inorganic substrate. In this painting there are at least two different lake pigments used, probably of different colour or quality, as two different substrates have been detected using SEM-EDX. This suggests a knowledgeable and economic use of pigments, as analysis indicates that a cheaper red lake pigment was used in the flesh, where presumably the richness was not as important as in the drapery.

## **CONCLUSION**

Investigations of the composition, aided by technical examination, have revealed that the composition of *The Toilet of Venus* can be firmly linked to the workshop of Titian, and was probably copied from a lost Titian painting (or drawing). It is unlikely that *The Toilet of Venus* originated in Titian's workshop, due to the materials and technique of this painting. However, the provenance of the painting dates back to the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and considering the lack of copies and versions of this composition, it is likely that the painting is a contemporary or near contemporary workshop copy of a Titian original.

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<sup>48</sup> Jo Kirby, Marika Spring and Catherine Higgitt, "The Technology of Red Lake Pigment Manufacture: Study of the Dyestuff Substrate," *National Gallery Technical Bulletin*, Volume 26 (2005): 74.

<sup>49</sup> David Saunders and Jo Kirby, "Light Induced Colour Changes in Red and Yellow Lake Pigments," *National Gallery Technical Bulletin*, Volume 15 (1994): 83.

<sup>50</sup> Jill Dunkerton, "Titian at Work, Titian's painting Technique" in *Titian*, ed. David Jaffé (London: Yale Press University, 2003), 46.

<sup>51</sup> Hills, *Venetian colour*, 174.

The status of the painting as a workshop copy is supported by the materials and techniques of the painting. Technical examination has shown that the painting has been made economically, utilising cheap pigments in underlayers and with a practised knowledge of the best way of using these materials. The painting has been carefully planned out from the beginning, not only in terms of its composition, which lacks changes in the paint layer, but also in the layering structure of its paint and ground layers.

The ground of *The Toilet of Venus* is unusual for 16<sup>th</sup> century Venetian painting practise and indicates that it did not originate from a well-known or studied workshop. Further investigation into other paintings with similar grounds could lead to a better understanding of the paintings making and origin. While some of the materials used in this painting are somewhat unusual for 16<sup>th</sup> century Venetian painting practise, the use of these materials is consistent with the innovative ways 16<sup>th</sup> century Venetian painters used their materials.

It is hoped that ongoing conservation treatment will allow for a fuller appreciation of this beautiful and historically important painting in the Courtauld collection.

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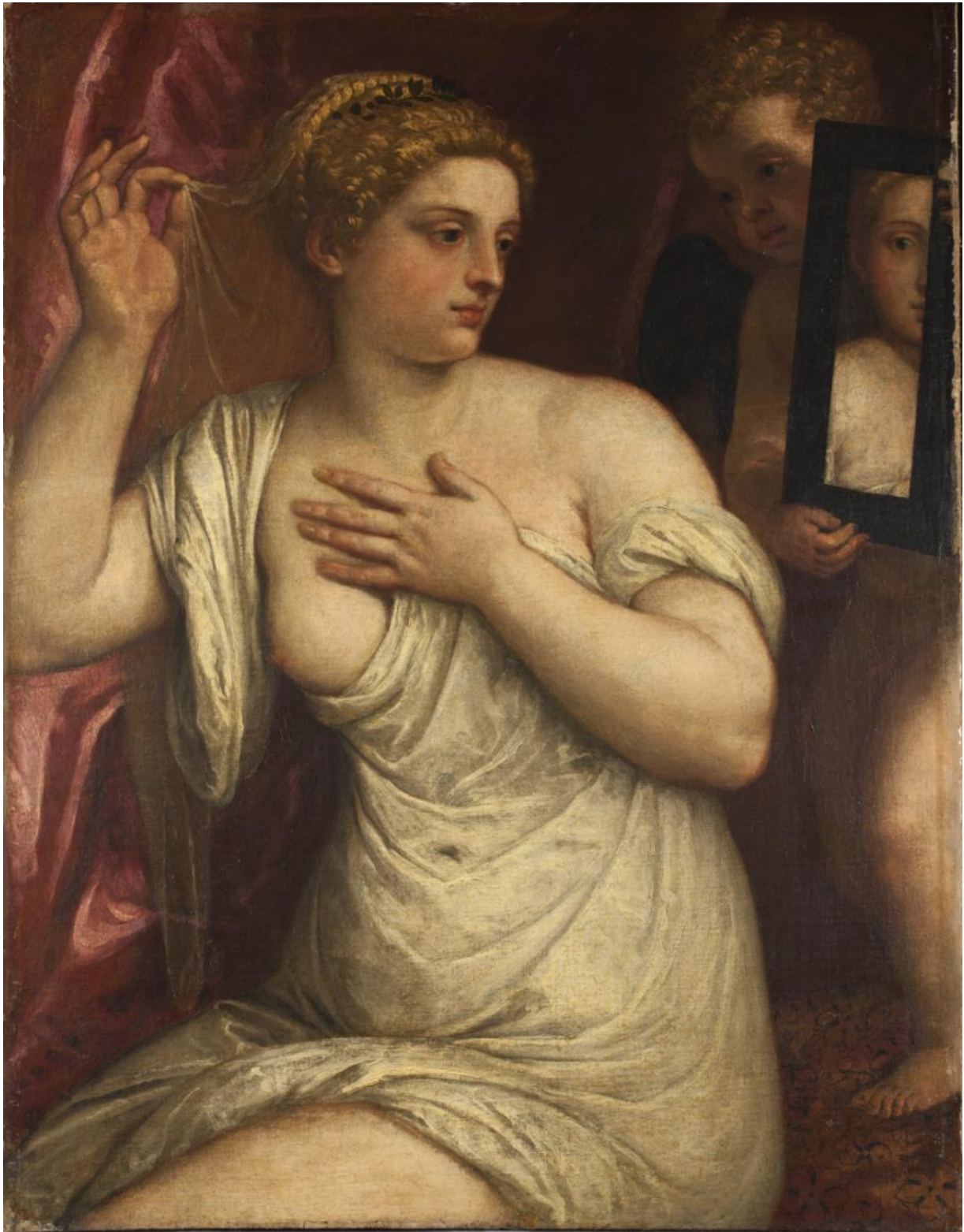
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## ILLUSTRATIONS



**Figure 1:** Follower of Titian, *The Toilet of Venus*, sixteenth century, 738 mm x 944 mm, Courtauld Gallery.



**Figure 2:** Copy after Praxiteles, *Capitoline Venus*, 2nd century AD, marble, height: 1.93 m, Capitoline Museum, Rome.



**Figure 3:** Paris Bordone, *Venetian Women at their Toilet*, c.1545, oil on canvas, 970 x 1410 mm, National Galleries of Scotland.





**Figure 4:** Titian, *Venus with a Mirror*, c. 1555, oil on canvas, 1245 x 1055 mm, National Gallery of Art, Washington. Image: Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington.



**Figure 5:** School of Fontainebleau, *Woman at her Toilette*, 1550-1570, oil on panel, Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts, USA.



**Figure 6:** Giovanni Bellini, *Young Woman at a Mirror*, 1515, oil on canvas, 620 x 790 mm, Kunsthistorisches Museum.





**Figure 7:** Titian, *Young Woman at her Toilette*, c. 1515, oil on canvas, 990 × 760 mm, Musée du Louvre.



**Figure 8:** Peter Paul Rubens, *Venus at her Toilet*, 1608, oil on canvas, 1370 x 1100 mm, Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum.



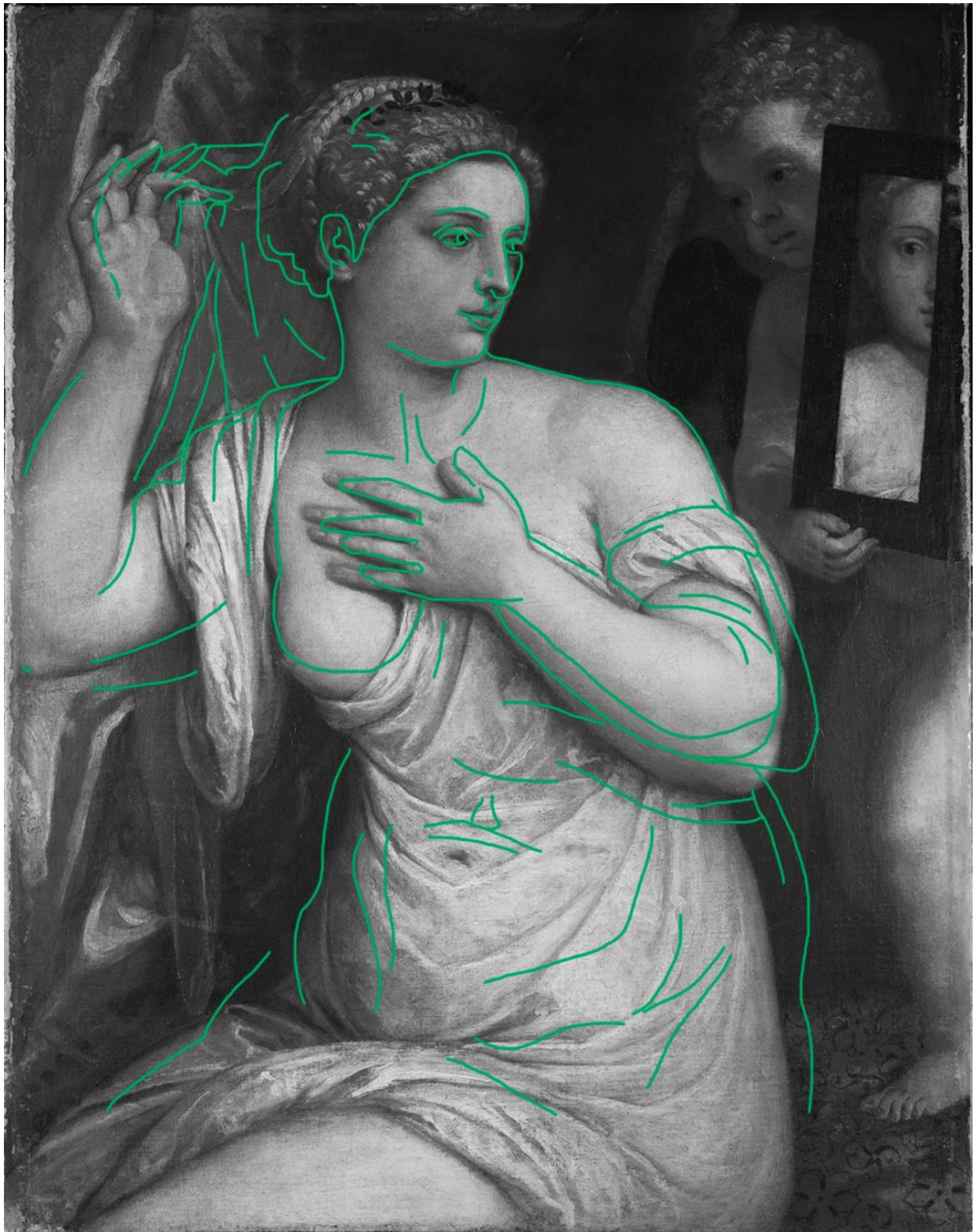
**Figure 9:** X-radiograph of *The Toilet of Venus* (Courtauld Gallery)





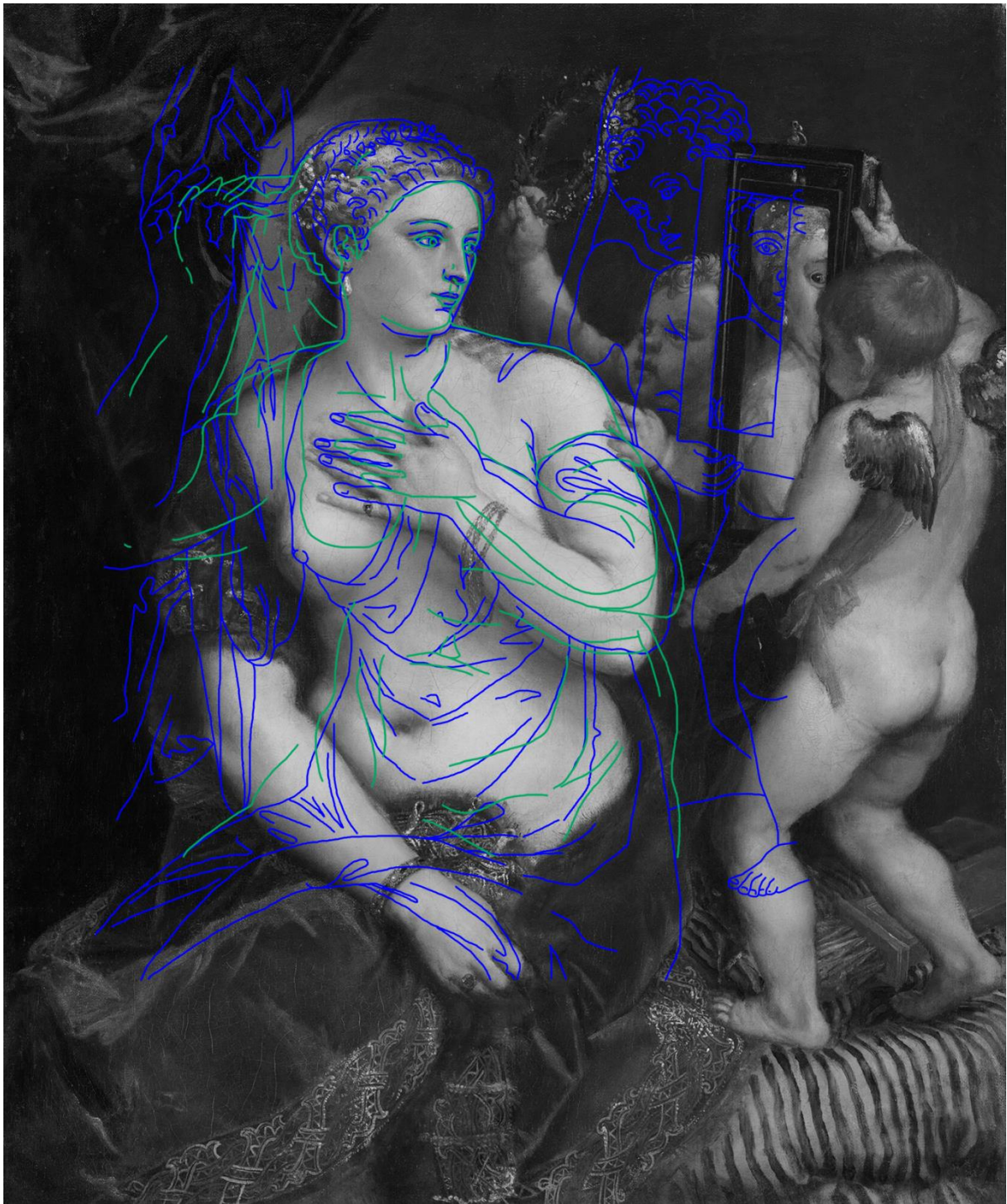
**Figure 10:** Overlay of *The Toilet of Venus* painting composition onto the x-radiograph





**Figure 11:** Overlay of the composition under *Titian's Mistress* onto *The Toilet of Venus* (Courtauld Gallery)



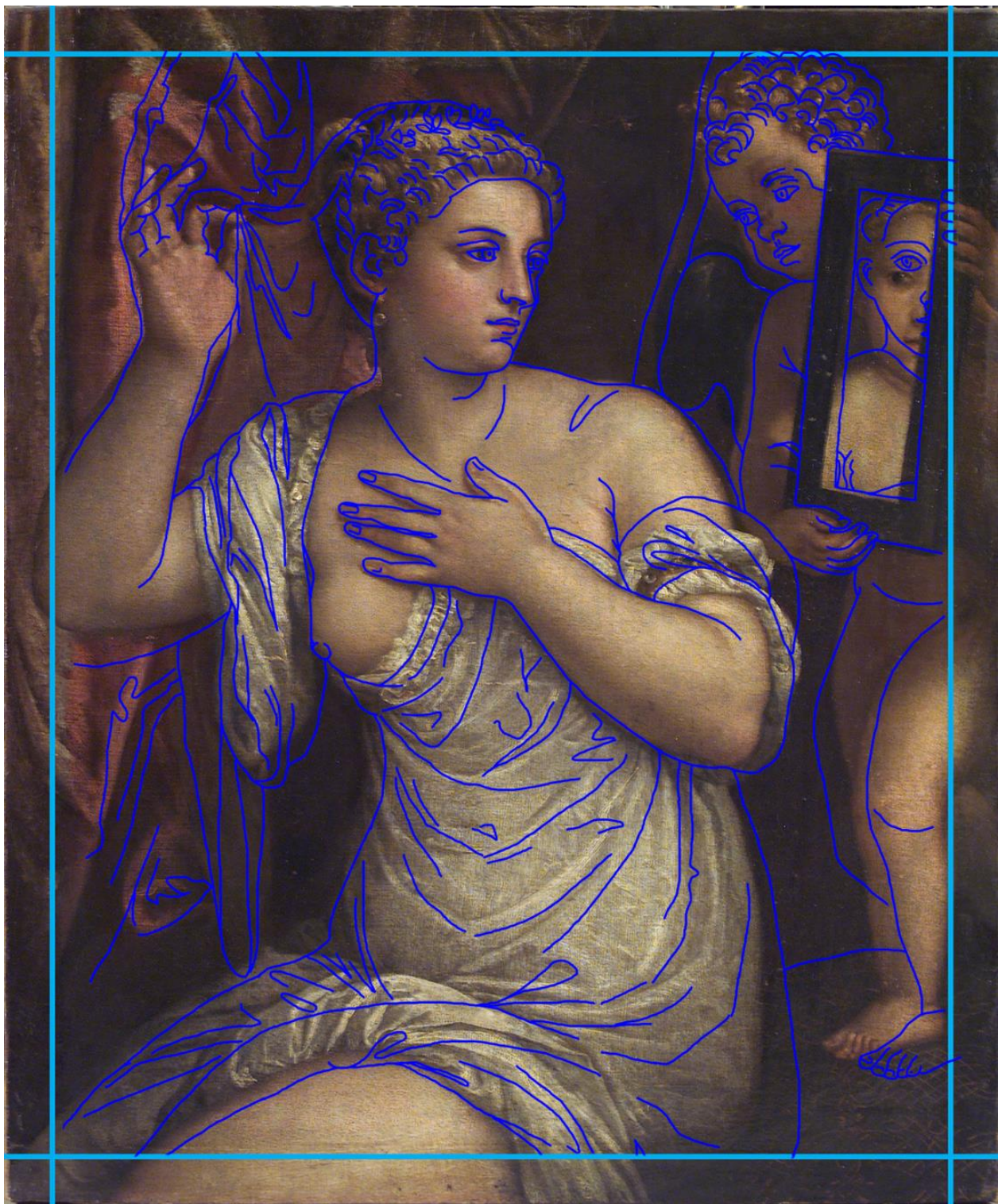


**Figure 12:** Overlay showing the compositions of *The Toilet of Venus* (Courtauld Gallery) (in blue) and the composition underneath *Titian's Mistress* (in green) onto *Venus with a Mirror* (National Gallery of Art, Washington)

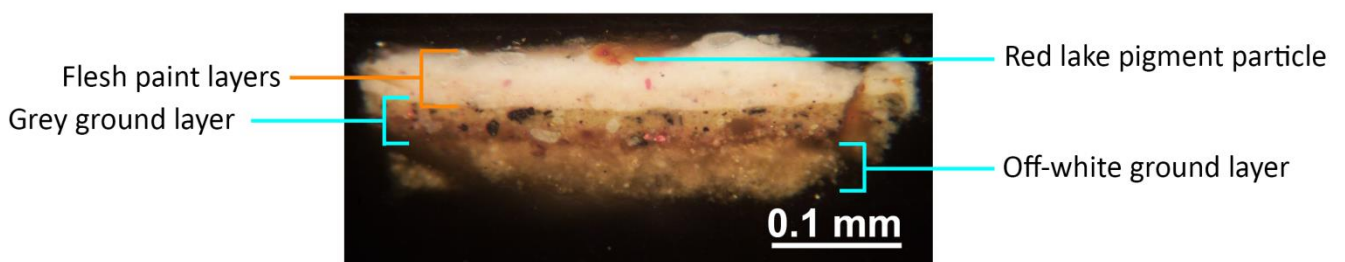
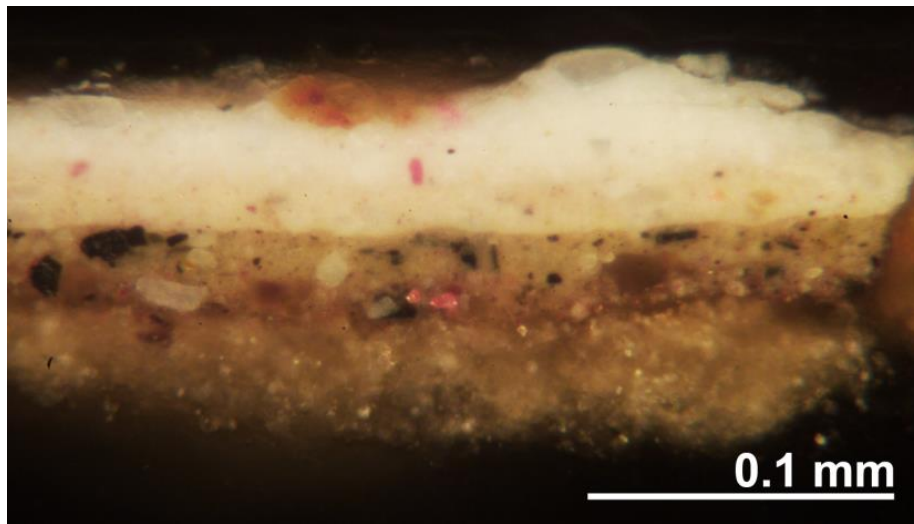


**Figure 13:** Attributed to Carletto Calviari, *The Toilet of Venus*, late 16<sup>th</sup> century, 820 x 985 mm, Accademia di San Luca, Rome.

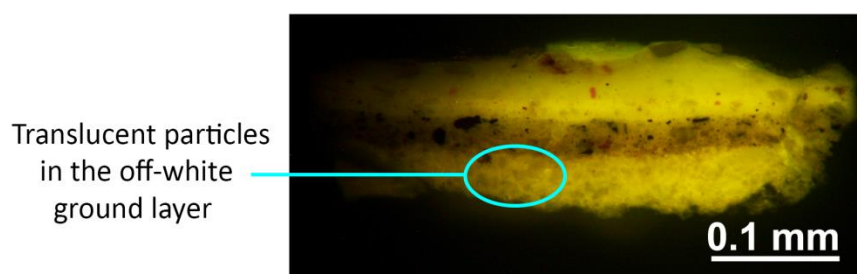
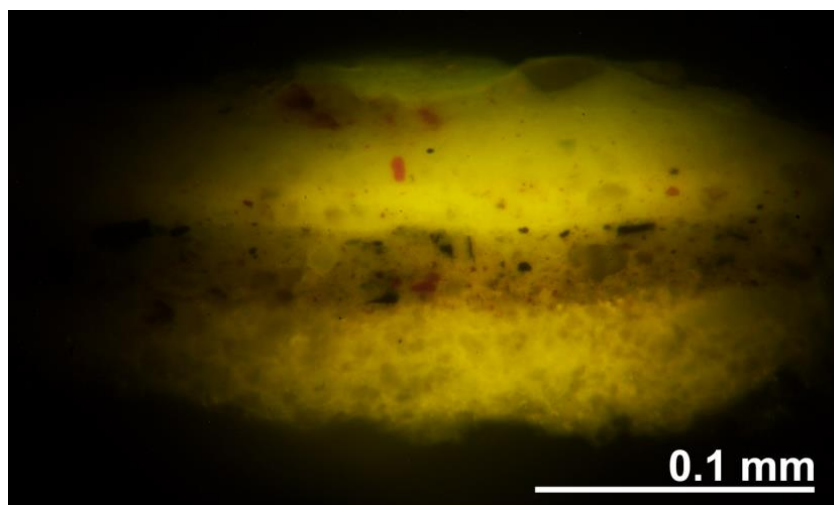




**Figure 14:** Overlay of *The Toilet of Venus* (Courtauld Gallery) onto the Rome version which shows the 4cm extensions to the canvas at the edges

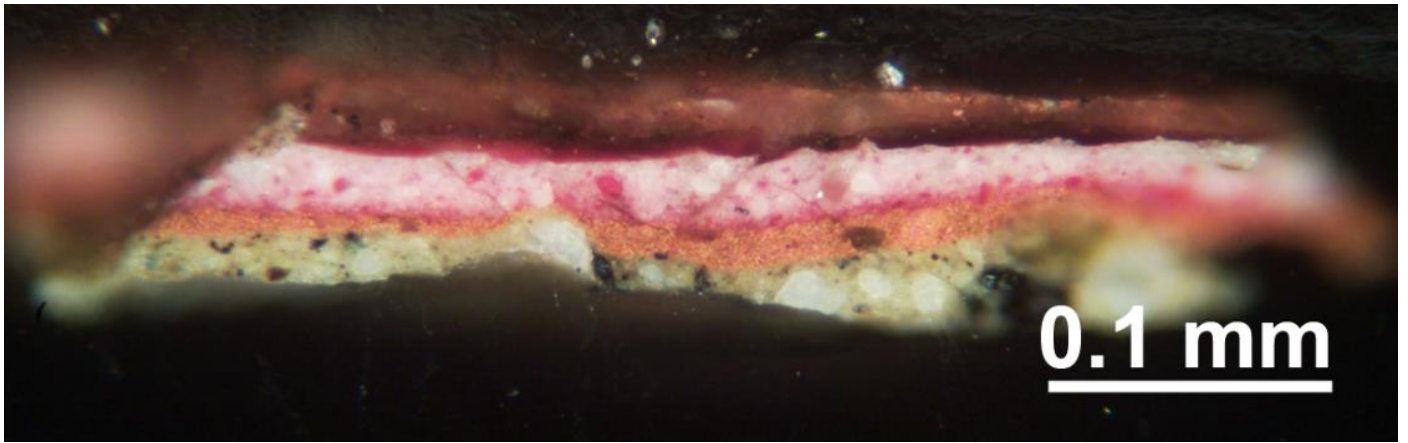


**Figure 15:** Cross-section 7 taken from the leg of Venus showing both layers of ground



**Figure 16:** Cross-section 7 taken from the leg of Venus in UV light, showing the translucent particles of silica





**Figure 17:** Cross-section 8 taken from an area of red drapery showing the building up of different paint layers