

Visitors to a Venetian Convent during Carnival

Conservation and Art Historical Analysis:
A Collaborative Research Investigation

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Introduction

This research paper is the culmination of the annual *Conservation and Art Historical Analysis* project at the Courtauld Institute of Art, which aims to build up a thorough understanding of paintings through technical investigation and art historical research. This is a collaborative project, which sees postgraduate student from the Conservation of Easel Paintings programme coupled with a History of Art student, and such research is usually carried out alongside conservation treatment of the specific painting. In a 1998 essay, the art historian John Leighton points out that one of the common criticisms pitched against the technical study of paintings is that it challenges the extent to which they stand as ‘mysterious creations’, robbing them of their ‘magic’ and reducing them to the ‘banality of their everyday constituents’.¹ Contrary to this view, we believe that technical investigation is crucial in building up a material history of the painting, which cannot be achieved through stylistic and iconographic analysis alone. Ultimately, this project shows that by combining individual skills and research and interrogating works of art on a material, technical, historical and visual level that we can gain a much more developed and far enriched understanding of the painting in question. Closing the gap between the disciplines, we will relay our findings using a clear and transparent language.

The investigation focuses on *Visitors to a Venetian Convent during Carnival* (likely to be a descriptive title applied to the painting at a later stage), an unattributed work by an unknown, most likely Venetian, artist, presumed to date to the early eighteenth century (*Fig. 1*). Painted in oil on an open weave linen canvas and measuring 83 (h) x115 (w) cm, *Visitors to a Venetian Convent during Carnival* shows an interior convent scene during carnival. The convent’s distinctive five grilles on the back wall separate the nuns from the visitors, who arrive in costumes and masks. There is very little information regarding the provenance of the painting. Since there are so few firm facts relating to this work, our task has been to try to establish a broad context within which this painting can be understood. It was decided in the early stages of research that the search for a specific attribution would be an unfeasible aim, for reasons that will be discussed further below. Consequently, there are two main aims to this investigation: the first is to establish a context for this painting, in terms of production and in a more general social and cultural sense (Venice, convents and the carnival), and the second is to narrow down a time period for the execution of the work. As this report will go on to show, these two aims are interlinked, because context informs creation date and vice-versa.

Although much scholarly attention has been devoted to seventeenth and eighteenth century Venetian nuns, convents and festivals, very little has been written specifically on the pictorial representation of such scenes.² Images of scenes similar to that in *Visitors to a Venetian Convent during Carnival* often accompany scholarly discussions of nuns’ lives and convents,

but they are rarely given serious consideration from an art historical or material perspective. Since this is an understudied area, the following report will establish some of the basic facts regarding artistic conventions in this period, and will seek to determine the function and purpose of this painting in light of this information. From the outset we have viewed this project as an intellectual intervention, however the painting as a physical object will form the basis for our research. It has by no means been conclusive, reflecting the nature of investigating a little-known area, and there is certainly potential for future research. We begin with the history surrounding the work and its provenance, before moving on to consider the material history of the painting.

The Object and its Provenance

The painting belongs to Westwood Manor, a National Trust property near Bradford-on-Avon, Wiltshire. In the early twentieth century, Westwood Manor was in a parlous, semi-derelict state, having been used as a farmhouse since 1833. In 1911, the diplomat Edgar Graham Lister took over the house and set about sympathetically renovating and refurnishing it.³ *Visitors to a Venetian Convent during Carnival* entered the house as part of this restoration campaign at some point between 1911 and Lister's death in 1956. Precisely when it entered the house is unclear: we have been unable to locate any inventories or information relating to this painting (such as invoices, correspondence, or diary entries) in Westwood Manor itself, and we have also found no reference to this painting in auction or sales catalogues for this 45 year period. Lister's primary interests were furniture, musical instruments, and the more structural elements of the house – for instance, he installed panelling in the Kings Room, erected a porch, and added a kitchen wing at the back of the house – rather than its art collection specifically.⁴ Tracing the work's provenance has been further complicated by the unstable title of the work: it currently has a descriptive title, but it is highly likely that this has changed over the years. Indeed, a stuck to the stretcher on the reverse (*Fig. 2*) gives the title, *Interior with Figures Masked*, suggesting its identity is unfixed and fluid. It may well have had an Italian title at one point, which has been translated and altered over the years. Whilst we did look for works mentioning these key words – such as 'Venetian convent', 'carnival', 'masked figures', and 'interior' – we were unable to find anything which matched the scene depicted in our work. What we can be certain of, however, is that the painting entered the National Trust's collection in 1956, when Westwood Manor and its contents were bequeathed to the Trust's collection following Lister's death.

Given this lack of provenance, *Visitors to a Venetian Convent during Carnival* itself, as a material object, will be at the centre of our investigation. At Westwood Manor, the painting

hangs opposite its pendant pair, *Gambling at the Ridotto* (Fig. 3). As is the case with our painting, there is no information pertaining to the provenance of *Gambling at the Ridotto*, but we can reasonably assume that they entered the house at the same time. They not only share the same dimensions (83 x 115cm), but as a pair, they can be aligned with an artistic convention that was established by the mid-eighteenth century. Indeed, other artists such as Francesco Guardi (Figs. 4 and 5) and the lesser-known Giuseppe de Gobbi had all produced pendant pairs of the convent parlour and the Ridotto. These pairings were perhaps based on the premise that the convent parlour reflected a pious and morally superior space, whilst the Ridotto – the legalised public gambling house, which had opened in Palazzo Dandolo in 1638 – reflected a seedier and morally dubious space: in other words, the former worked to redeem the latter. *Gambling at the Ridotto* shows the interior of one of the rooms in the Ridotto; groups of people sit around tables, and the scene is organised into a series of distinct vignettes.

In turn, it was necessary to consider *Visitors to a Venetian Convent* in light of its pendant pair. This would not only broaden the scope of our research (investigation into *Ridotto* scenes would open up otherwise neglected avenues, essentially doubling our research possibilities), but this would also allow us to place these paintings in the context of other eighteenth century convent parlour/Ridotto pendant pairs. Interrogating how the Westwood Manor pair relates to these other pairs would help us to reach conclusions regarding whether the convent parlour depicted in our painting relates to a specific convent or if it is a more generic depiction; it is hoped that stylistic comparisons will contribute to establishing a time of execution for our painting. Our quest for attribution can really only go as far as narrowing down a creation date, rather than making connections to a particular artist or workshop. Due to its focus on a specific scene in the Venetian calendar – the Carnival – we can see how our painting fits into the context of view painting. We now immediately turn to Canaletto when we think of view painting, and although he predominantly paints outdoor scenes, view painters would also depict interior scenes, such as the convent parlour. But view painters – with the exception of Canaletto – attracted very little attention from art critics in the eighteenth century; indeed, in Alessandro Piazza's 1762 *Compendio* of the lives of important contemporary Venetian painters, there is no mention of view painters.⁵ Consequently, there are now only very few traces of view painters, and as Filippo Pedrocco has pointed out, the great majority of view painters 'slipp[ed] into an oblivion from which only now, with great efforts and sometimes with inexact and forced arguments and conclusions, modern critics are rescuing some of them.'⁶ This makes attribution especially problematic, because without contemporary records, it makes the process of tracing back incredibly difficult.

Attribution is further complicated by the production context for works such as ours. Our work was no doubt intended as to satisfy the tourist demand, functioning, along with its Ridotto pair as ‘picture-souvenirs’.⁷ As Michael Levey has pointed out, these paintings were aimed almost exclusively at the tourist market; these works were ‘carried back to the North, shown to admiring untravelled friends’, bringing ‘Southern light and warmth into that cold world.’⁸ The tourist sought a work that would both ‘commemorate their travels’ and ‘evok[e] the events engaged in during their stay.’⁹ These works could have been produced in workshops, and in order to ensure they were produced quickly and inexpensively, several painters often worked on one painting. Painters would be assigned certain elements – such as figures and architecture – depending on their area of expertise or ranking in the workshop hierarchy. Consequently, our search for attribution will not lead to the identification of a specific artist, but it is feasible for us to specify a loose date range.

Venetian Convents in Context

Establishing the context of the Venetian convent in the eighteenth century is important for two reasons: it allows us to establish the type of a scene our painting represents, but also – through considering other pictorial representations of the convent parlour – allows us to see how our painting stylistically engages with other works.

Essentially a figurative composition – it contains 87 figures – *Visitors to a Venetian Convent during Carnival* depicts a number of guests in fancy dress mingling in the convent parlour. The scene is framed by the convent walls on the left, right and back of the room. Although there is some sense of movement (such as the figure carrying the basket of the bread in the right foreground), figures are generally arranged in static lines around the room and these lines are stacked on top of one another (*Fig. 6*). In some instances, figures are arranged in pairs. The scene is one of joy and frivolity: as the masks, elaborate costumes and group of musicians entering the convent to the right suggest, this is a carnival celebration. While initial research was undertaken into the fashions depicted, in the hope that this would allow us to establish a time frame for our painting, it became clear that dating the painting through clothing fashions was problematic: many of the figures, due to the nature of Carnival, are in costume and so it is difficult to precisely locate the particular garments historically (*Fig. 7*). This led to a more thorough consideration of the particular convent in relation to dating. There were many convents in Venice during the eighteenth century, ranging from the poor (often late fifteenth or sixteenth century convents) to the hugely wealthy Benedictine, Cistercian or Augustinian convents, such as San Zaccaria and San Lorenzo.¹⁰ Although our scene appears to be one of order and decorum,

the convent parlour, by the eighteenth century, had become a more subversive space. Convent parlours were legally reserved for nuns' relatives only, and so the presence of carnival goers, musicians and children, and the distribution of breads and sweets, is in fact rather more unruly than it first seems.¹¹ The historian Jutta Gisela Sperling has noted that parlours often became centres of entertainment, developing into 'salonlike gathering places' where 'purity faced the perils of corruption.'¹² The parlour, then, became a theatre, where the grilles mark the divide between the interchangeable audience and stage: the nuns are spectators of the unruly visitors, and the visitors, peering at the nuns through the grilles, treat them as a spectacle.

In its depiction of a convent parlour, our painting is not unusual; by the mid-eighteenth century this subject had attracted the attention of artists, and there are many compositions dating from the 1740's – 1760's which show visitors in the convent parlour. A painting in Museo Sartorio, Trieste, categorised as eighteenth century Venetian school, shows a group of musicians, similar to those in the right foreground of our painting, playing their instruments in a convent parlour in front of the three grilles through which the nuns peer (*Fig. 8*). A child runs around to the right, and a cat and dog are placed in the foreground. A better-known interpretation of the convent parlour is Guardi's *Parlatorio delle monache di San Zaccaria* (c. 1740-50) (*Fig. 4*), which again shows nuns behind grilles and visitors making their way around the parlour. Our attention is drawn to the lady in the white dress in the centre of the composition. A puppet box – a common form of entertainment at this time – is shown to the right of the scene, and two children watch the show, enthralled. Pietro Longhi's *Parlatorio del Convento* (c. 1760) depicts a similar scene: nuns are shown behind grilles, whilst visitors wander and children play in the convent parlour (*Fig. 9*). Longhi's composition adopts a similar perspective to that taken in Guardi's scene, and our attention, like in Guardi's, is drawn to the lady in the large pink dress, who, in this instance, is just right of the centre. The colour and size of her dress distinguish her from the other visitors. Dating from the same period, Giuseppe de Gobbi's *The Nun's Parlour* (c. 1760) (*Fig. 10*) shows a similar scene again; whilst the space depicted is architecturally different to that shown in the Guardi and the Longhi, the distinctive grilles once again appear. Again a woman – in this instance in a white dress – dominates the composition through her central position and elaborate costume. As in our scene, musicians feature and are shown in the left foreground.

The Guardi, Longhi and de Gobbi scenes all have a pendant pair, which depicts the Ridotto. Through looking at these comparative images we can see that our composition was working to a convention, which was certainly established by the mid-eighteenth century: this was not only about depicting the convent parlour, but depicting it in relation to the Ridotto. These convent parlour scenes have been generally assigned to the category of genre painting,

and our composition can thus be understood in this context. Similarities relate primarily to subject matter: most obviously the convent parlour setting, but also the multitude and range of figures, (men, women and children are all represented), the elaborate costumes of the carnival goers, and the distinctive grilles separating the nuns from the visitors. It is clear that the convent parlour was not a space of enclosure, but in fact a thriving and lively social space. As Silvia Evangelisti has pointed out, the ‘conversation, smart outfits, and fun’, which became key ingredients of convent parlour scenes, aligned it closely with other ‘social spaces’ in Venice at this time.¹³ Thus far, we can see that our scene is aligned with an eighteenth century pictorial trend detailing the social world of the convent parlour.

The Question of Dating

Having established a context for the pictorial representation of the convent parlour, it is necessary to interrogate the differences between our composition and the Guardi, Longhi and de Gobbis scenes. Using stylistic analysis, together with material investigation, it is hoped that an approximate time frame for the execution of our convent parlour will be established.

The convent parlour scene under investigation differs notably from those shown in the Longhi and Guardi compositions from the mid-eighteenth century. Architecturally, it is a different space; the groin-vaulted ceiling in the Guardi (*Fig. 4*) and the rounded ceiling in the Longhi (*Fig. 9*), with the semi-circular windows distinctly differ from the wood-beamed one in the Westwood Manor composition. Regarding the perspective and interior details of the convent, this painting bears the most obvious resemblance to the convent parlour scene attributed to de Gobbis from c. 1760 (*Fig. 10*).¹⁴ Since this painting has a pendant pair, entitled *The Ridotto* (*Fig. 11*), it is worth considering how these works, as a pair, interact with our pair. De Gobbis’ *The Nun’s Parlour* is working to a different scale and there are far fewer figures present compared to our painting. But the grilles, (although there is one less in the de Gobbis) and the three paintings above them on the back wall, are similarly depicted. Both compositions include musicians and show a broad range of costumes. The *Ridotto* scenes are less similar; the architecture and arrangement of the room is different, but there are tables in both, which people are gathering around. Since the *Ridotto* had ten rooms, as the many doorways in the de Gobbis composition testifies, it is plausible that simply different rooms are being represented, and the Westwood Manor *Ridotto* scene could well be offering a more generic depiction of it. The de Gobbis’s have been dated to c.1760, so the Westwood Manor scene can be seen to share some stylistic qualities with works dated to the mid-eighteenth century.

But the Longhi, Guardi and de Gobbis compositions attend to figures in a manner distinctly different. The Guardi, for instance, presents a series of vignettes; two children are

amused by the entertainments that the puppet stand offers to the right, whilst the lady sitting in front of the middle grille is attracting the attention of the nuns behind it. To the left of the scene, a beggar, with a crutch and his hand outstretched approaches the two ladies who are by the first grille. Although the figure of the beggar features in *Visitors to a Venetian Convent during Carnival* too, in the right foreground, there are not such obvious narratives running through this scene. A similar tangle of narratives to that in the Guardi can be observed in the de Gobbi and the Longhi; gazes interact, children play, men and women flirt and flaunt and nuns peer out on this spectacle, either intrigued or embarrassed. These three representations work to the conventions of genre painting, celebrating the everyday and multiple narratives. The Westwood Manor composition, however, does not attend to figures on an individual level and they are treated in a more formulaic manner. Although there are some conversations and interactions, these are not intended to attract significant attention from the viewer; the figures are there simply to add to the overall impression. Therefore, whilst some superficial similarities can be observed, this scene is different; therefore extending the scope of this research to include depictions of the convent parlour from different time periods is necessary in order to account for this.

One artist who deserves further attention is Alessandro Piazza, active in Venice between 1691 and 1702.¹⁵ Whilst we have been unable to find a convent parlour scene by Piazza (this is not to say that one does not exist, but it does highlight how these works have not been subject to significant scholarly attention, and may subsequently be difficult to locate) his *Interior of the Ridotto at Venice* (Fig. 12) is certainly similar to our Ridotto scene: the walls are flecked with a similar red pattern and the candelabras hanging from the ceiling are also outlined in red. But it is the figures, which are the most similar; a decision has been made not only to present many figures, but also to not pay too much attention to individual features. The fact that Piazza was working in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century suggests that the Westwood Manor composition may well have an earlier execution date than the Longhi, Guardi and de Gobbi comparisons initially suggested. Another pair of paintings from the seventeenth century are also suggestive in relation to the Westwood Manor pendant pair: attributed to the Venetian School, one of these paintings shows masked carnival-goers in the convent parlour, whilst the other shows a Venetian ball in a patrician domestic interior (Figs. 13 and 14). The same elevated viewpoint employed in our composition is also used in this scene, although the convent interior is architecturally different.

Turning closer attention to the seventeenth century then, we can see that the Westwood Manor convent parlour scene bears the closest resemblance to a work produced by the artist Joseph Heintz the Younger (c. 1600 - 1678) who was working almost a century earlier than

Longhi, Guardi and de Gobbis (*Fig. 15*). Born in Augsburg, Heintz trained as a painter under his father Joseph the Elder. He then moved to Venice, where he was active for most of his life. Although he painted religious subjects on large canvases, he became better known for narrating Venetian celebrations, festivals, and masked events.¹⁶ Many of these were outdoor scenes, in which he attempted to provide an exact transcription of reality, whilst also capturing the frenetic excitement of the city and its festivals. The critic Filippo Pedrocco has suggested that Heintz's work can be seen as an important precursor to eighteenth century *vedutisti* (view painting).¹⁷

Heintz's *Parlatorio di San Zaccaria* shows an almost identical scene to that in *Visitors to a Venetian Convent during Carnival*.¹⁸ The same elevated perspective has been adopted and architecturally the space is similar: both have a wooden-beamed ceiling, both have the same shaped room and arrangement of grilles, and although there is one more grille in the back of the parlour in the Heintz work, they are of similar proportions and style. There are also three paintings on the back wall in each and one on the wall to the left. In the lot notes for the sale of this painting, the figures were described as 'naively characterized people', a description that is equally applicable to our composition, and the factor that distinguishes it, as we have suggested, from the Longhi, Guardi and de Gobbis convent parlours.¹⁹ Further research has suggested that there are other convent parlour scenes by Heintz, which present a similar scene and only differ very subtly, suggesting not only that the convent parlour was attracting artistic attention by the mid seventeenth century, but that a market existed for copies of this subject matter.

Working on the basis that our painting is closely related to Heintz's, we wish to suggest that it has an earlier execution date than the previous studies in relation to Longhi and Guardi had suggested. Heintz has attracted little serious art historical engagement, and Pedrocco has pointed out that many paintings have been attributed to Heintz in the past when they are in fact more likely to be the work of a student or imitator.²⁰ This highlights the problem, which we discussed in our last presentation, of attributing such a work. A number of variations and copies were produced by artists associated with, or attempting to emulate, artists such as Heintz, and we must view our work within this context – as a product of artistic circles, where copying and imitating was rife.

The Heintz link is interesting, as in the course of our research an image from the Witt Library, marked simply 'German school Ridotto', showed evidence of having been constructed using multiple pieces of canvas, as seams were visible due to the painting's poor condition (*Fig. 16*). The significance of this detail is discussed further below. Stylistically, this work compares to our convent parlour and ridotto scenes: note the similar viewpoint, depiction of figures, costumes, and chairs for example. The painting belongs to the collection at Alte Pinakotek in

Munich, where, according to the current curator of Italian painting there, the painting had been conserved and subsequently attributed to Joseph Heintz the Younger.

Further research into the provenance and attribution of all these works may prove interesting, but is beyond the scope of this collaboration. The identity of these works and the artists to whom they are attributed is nebulous to say the least, making the task more complex. The Heintz link, nonetheless, provides us with a significant lead: our composition was most likely produced by someone who was at the very least aware of the work of Heintz, or perhaps a follower of Heintz, operating within or peripheral to his circle. In turn, this suggests an earlier date of execution for the Westwood Manor composition. Although it may still be an eighteenth century work by a painter who was working in Venice and who was aware of the work of Heintz and Piazza, it could well be a late seventeenth century work. Indeed, it is stylistically almost identical to the Heintz, and it is obviously different, as we have seen, from the Longhi, Guardi and de Gobbis interpretations of the convent parlour.²¹ Further analysis of materials present has given more clues as to the possible date of this painting as is discussed further below. Specifically, the presence of Prussian blue would give an earliest date of around 1710 (however its absence cannot be taken to mean that the work is necessarily earlier).

On the Surface

The painting came into the Conservation and Technology Department primarily in need of aesthetic treatment, in order to restore the spatial and tonal relationships within the scene, as these were severely compromised. As full conservation treatment of the painting was concurrent with this research, an opportunity for gathering material evidence pertaining to the objects' physical history presented itself. There is of course more to any painting than meets the eye, and clearly over the course of three centuries the painting has undergone changes in appearance, related both to the passage of time and human intervention, some knowledge of which can help further inform our understanding of this painting now. Probably the most significant factor affecting the appearance of this painting is its varnish – it has oxidized, yellowing, and imbibing dirt over time, and contributing to a kind of 'flatness' due to the reduced contrast and tonal range (*Fig. 17*).

The composition consists of large, well-defined passages of colour, with more detailed handling in the costumes of the figures for example (*Fig. 18*). The highlights show some low, detailed impasto and the darker passages appear more glazed. Details are charmingly depicted; although some discreet retouchings are visible, none indicate major revisions to the composition (*Fig. 19*). While we read black, white and red as dominant colours, it is likely that the brightness

and clarity of these and many other colours are currently compromised. During the conservation treatment varnish removal tests were able to give a tantalizing glimpse of the currently obscured colour relationships, revealing bright blue and green passages that had previously appeared green or brown, and bright whites (*Figs. 20 and 21*).

The Convent Depicted

Whether the convent represented in our scene is generic or if it relates to a specific convent needs to be interrogated. It is very probably one of the more wealthy and noble convents in Venice, judging by the fact that it contains paintings. Women from the highest ranks of Venetian society often entered into either San Lorenzo or San Zaccaria, Benedictine convents which were among the wealthiest in the city.²² Heintz's convent parlour has been identified as San Zaccaria, and based on the architectural similarities that we have observed between the convent in the Westwood Manor composition and that in the Heintz, we can reasonably assume that our scene is also depicting San Zaccaria.²³

The three specific and detailed paintings on the back wall in both our painting (*Fig. 22*) and Heintz's composition suggest that a particular convent was intended rather than just a generic interpretation.²⁴ Evangelisti has remarked on the significance of art in the convent parlour, noting that '[t]heoretically, nuns were not to look at profane images that could distract them from their devotional duties.'²⁵ As Evangelesti goes on to point out, a 'variety of sacred images and edifying scenes' were found on the convent walls, such as the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ and male and female saints. Images of the Archangel Gabriel often 'watched over conversations with visitors and meetings with messengers in the parlour.'²⁶ The Archangel Gabriel appears in our painting on the right wall, close to the door. Having looked closely at the three paintings on the back wall in the Heintz scene and in our painting, it appears that they are very similar, and further supports our suggestion that they are representing the same convent, San Zaccaria. The middle painting in the Heintz scene quite obviously has the same arrangement of figures to those in the Westwood Manor composition. This central image depicts the Good Samaritan, and it bears some similarities to a painting of *The Good Samaritan* from the studio of Leandro Bassano²⁷ (*Fig. 24*). The image on the right is most certainly meant to represent the Madonna and Child, possibly with donors, and the outreaching gesture of the child fits a common trope, as seen in this much earlier painting by Lorenzo Lotto, which is entitled *Madonna and Child with Two Donors* (*Fig. 25*). The painting to the left appears to show Madonna and Child, with what appears to be a bishop judging by the shape of the hat, and can be seen to loosely resemble *A Venetian Family presented to the Virgin by St. Lawrence and a Bishop Saint* by Tintoretto and Studio (*Fig. 23*). Although these are not the exact images on the

walls, they give a clear idea of the iconography in the convent, and by seeing their similarity to the images in the Heintz painting, we can suggest that the convent depicted is San Zaccaria.²⁸

Material Investigation

Technical study provides an opportunity for gathering material evidence pertaining to the objects' physical history, and can make a significant contribution to the establishment of context and creation date range. Having the opportunity to investigate two paintings simultaneously has resulted in much fruitful research stylistically, as many of the paintings we found to be stylistically comparable were found while searching for Ridotto scenes. Having one painting to immediately compare to another has allowed a context to emerge, and can hopefully demonstrate how further technical analysis can contribute to locating the painting in the particular time period and geography currently assigned to it.

The dimensions of this painting are identical to comparable Italian paintings from the mid-eighteenth century (for example *Figs. 10 and 11*), therefore it seems likely that these became standardised stretcher sizes at some point in the eighteenth century. However, no concrete evidence relating to when these specific dimensions were introduced was found but the standardization of canvas sizes in Venice could indeed be an area of future research.²⁹ The support is a plain, open weave linen, a typical Italian painting support of this time, which has been lined onto a similarly open weave linen.³⁰ What the lining canvas conceals but what x-radiography revealed, was the existence of a horizontal seam just below the top edge of the original canvas, and an additional vertical seam in the centre of this strip showing that the painting consists of three pieces of cloth. When compared with x-rays from the Ridotto scene, this piecing together of canvas was found to be replicated (*Figs. 26-28*), and closely resembles the canvas construction seen in the Heintz work at the Alte Pinakotek (*Fig. 16*). Although both x-rays showed faint cusping above and below the seam (*Fig. 29*), comparison of the ground composition was able to provide further evidence as to whether these pieces belonged to the original dimensions of the painting and are not later additions and is discussed further below. Infra-red reflectography did not reveal any underdrawing, nor any signs of revision or hesitation in the execution of the composition. This does not indicate its absence however, as it may have been executed in a non-carbon-based material.

To contextualize and interpret the information gathered through this technical investigation, reference has been made to historic treatises, in particular the Volpato Manuscript³¹. Giovanni Batista Volpato, the author of this MS, both practiced and taught the art of painting. This document, presented as an informal discussion between a junior and senior

artists' apprentice is thought to have been written in the latter decades of the 17th century, and therefore an invaluable source of information.³²

In order to fully understand the composition and layer structure of specific areas, tiny cross-section samples were taken and analysed. All samples with a complete layer structure showed a thick double reddish brown ground, with both layers appearing very similar in composition, but with the upper ground having a slightly finer texture³³ (*Fig. 30*). It is probable that the ground is oil-bound, although microchemical testing for oil was inconclusive. Oil grounds were robust and less prone to cracking in damp conditions, making them particularly suited to the Venetian climate. Elemental analysis of the ground identified calcium sulphate together with iron oxide, and aluminosilicates, suggesting argil or clay material. Micrographs taken during cleaning (*Figs. 31 and 32*) reveal ground showing through between blocks of colour; in some areas, adjacent passages barely even touch let alone overlap. There is no spontaneity here, rather, a strong sense of premeditation and efficiency. The ground would have helped to create an even painting surface from the open-weave canvas – the texture of the canvas does not seem to have been intentionally preserved, as there is no scumbling, for example.

The dominant colours – black, white, red yellow, green, blue – have been achieved through uncomplicated pigment mixtures, resulting in strong, bright hues. Although application of the paint varies somewhat, from detailed descriptions of costume to simpler, wash-like passages for the background, the composition seems to have been executed confidently and methodically; no more than two paint layers have been observed in any cross-section so far.

The identified palette is consistent with materials available in Venice at the turn of the eighteenth century and includes orpiment, vermilion, green and brown earth, lead white and bone black. Cross-section samples do not show a consistently coloured underpaint layer, generally showing a neutral underlayer followed by a brighter, darker or stronger final layer suggesting a tonal mapping of forms or moderation between the ground and upper layer colour (*Figs. 33 - 35*). *Fig. 33* shows an especially bright particle of green earth, which was used extensively in (mainland) European oil painting during the 17th century. Historically, Verona, northern Italy, was the most famous source of this pigment; 'terra verde di Verona' was considered the highest quality due to its high chroma and bluish-green colour³⁴.

The presence of Prussian blue would be significant, giving a post-date of around 1710. Despite various 'blue' passages being sampled, none showed this pigment to be present, although it must again be said that its absence does not necessarily indicate an earlier date. While *Fig. 34* shows that the blue was an optical effect achieved by mixing predominantly black

and white, Fig. 35 undoubtedly contains a blue pigment of large particle size, identified using elemental analysis as the glassy pigment smalt, a cobalt-containing alumino-silicate.

Interpretation of Material Evidence

A number of factors can be seen to contribute to the assertion that the workshop in which these paintings were produced was likely to have been of a commercial and economic nature, perhaps producing souvenirs of the city for foreign visitors and driven by an economy of means³⁵. Both *Visitors to a Venetian Convent during Carnival* and *Gambling at the Ridotto* were constructed from three pieces of canvas; this in itself is not uncommon and can indicate an alteration to original dimensions at a later date, or a lack of sufficiently large enough canvas at the time due to loom width restrictions. In this case however, it was found that loom widths already exceeded the dimensions of this painting as artists active in the preceding century are known to have constructed canvas from multiple pieces of cloth, where the dimensions of individual sections exceed those found in these paired paintings³⁶, leading to the conclusion that the pieced-together canvas was born out of thrift and resourcefulness rather than lack of large enough material.

Calcium sulphate is typically found in grounds of Italian paintings of this period, and when comparing the elemental spectrum of the ground layer that of an Italian red earth, the spectrum was identical.³⁷ Analysis of the stratigraphy and materials in cross-sections from above and below the seam where the smaller auxiliary canvas pieces are joined, showed the colour, composition, texture and distribution of materials in the ground layer to be extremely similar indicating that the layer is present throughout thus confirming that the additional canvas pieces are indeed original. Having also compared the ground composition and layer structure *between* the two pendant paintings, interestingly, clear differences can also be observed: that seen in *Gambling at the Ridotto* very clearly reads as two layers, the upper clearly showing particles of black not seen in the lower layer, nor to any degree at all in the ground of the Carnival scene painting. So perhaps the workshop in which these paintings were produced, was perhaps of some size, and the paintings were created more or less simultaneously by different hands under the same instruction, thus accounting for the slight variation in ground composition. No evidence of revisions to the composition were found either in the infrared reflectograph or observed in cross-sections, where the layer structure appeared efficient and pre-planned suggesting a tonal mapping of forms prior to painting; the identified pigments would have been cheap and readily available. Referring again to the Volpato Manuscript, the younger apprentice asks his senior: “*How are good colours known from bad, because sometimes my master sends me [to purchase colours], and I have not had much experience on this subject.*” And the senior

apprentice replies: “*Many are known by the eye, others by grinding them on the stone, others on the palette, in using them, and others during the painting, but the knowledge of the last is the painter’s business, and not ours, for we do not paint.*”³⁸ This serves to remind us that the workshop arrangement producing such pictures was one of labour well organized and divided. Smalt, commonly found in European oil painting of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, was the blue pigment identified. Notably indigo has not been identified; indigo was surpassed by Prussian blue at the beginning of the eighteenth century by artists working in oil.³⁹

The seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries have been referred to as the dark age between two golden ages, characterized by the ‘burden of living in the shadow of a glorious tradition’. This general sense of cultural decline, related to the wider economic health of the city, is expanded upon by Philip Sohm in “Painting for Profit”⁴⁰, and serves to further inform our understanding of the production context of these works. They can therefore be understood not as representatives of those glorious traditions, but products of a time in between where painters were subject to hardship and the need to make ends meet affected the quality of the work produced.

Conclusion

Through establishing a production, socio- and art-historical context for the Westwood Manor convent scene, we have been able to narrow down the date of execution. Technical investigation has pointed us towards an economically-motivated, resourceful and efficient studio, making the most of available materials. The work shows much similarity with style, materials and techniques of seventeenth century Venetian painting, however it is still possible that this is an early eighteenth century work, by a painter who was working in Venice and who was, at the very least, likely to have been aware of the work of Heintz and Piazza. Had the painting been investigated independently of its pair, without the tentative knowledge of Prussian blue being present, we would more confidently propose a seventeenth century creation date as all stylistically comparable works date to the latter decades of this century. In some way considering them as a pair complicates the situation. However, as previously mentioned, the benefit of having a second painting to guide our research has far outweighed any difficulties in fine-tuning a creation date. *Gambling at the Ridotto* is now undergoing full conservation treatment and technical analysis at the Courtauld Institute of Art and any further relevant findings such as whether Prussian blue is indeed part of the original painting campaign, and if any other notable similarities in materials and techniques can be observed, will be included as an addendum to this report in due course.

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- ¹ John Leighton, 'Taking a Closer Look: Art Historians, Restorers and Scientists' in *Looking Through Paintings: The Study of Painting Techniques and Materials in Support of Art Historical Research* ed. by Erma Hermens (London: Archetype Publications, 1998), p. 30
- ² The most significant contributions to this field are: Silvia Evangelisti, *Nuns: A History of Convent Life 1450-1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Mary Laven, *Virgins of Venice: Enclosed Lives and Broken Vows in the Renaissance Convent* (London: Penguin & Viking, 2002); Jutta Gisela Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in late Renaissance Venice* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1999)
- ³ Denys Sutton, *Westwood Manor, Bradford on Avon: The History of the House and its Inhabitants* (London: Country Life Ltd for The National Trust, 1962), p. 21. As an indication of just how dilapidated the house was, Sutton notes how 'the central range [was] encrusted with ivy'. This is one of two guidebooks for the house; the second has recently been produced by the current tenants of the house (see Jonathan Azis & Emily Azis, *Westwood Manor: Wiltshire: a souvenir guide* (National Trust, 2014)). Sutton's guidebook says very little about Westwood Manor's art collection.
- ⁴ Lister was very interested in musical instruments and his collection is notable. It is worth considering our painting in light of his collecting tendencies: in the eighteenth century, Venice was well known for music, especially opera. Perhaps Lister was intrigued by the musicians in the composition. We should not speculate too much, and it would be a separate task to fully research the thinking behind Lister's collecting habits.
- ⁵ Michael Levey, *Painting in Eighteenth Century Venice* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1980), p. 95
- ⁶ Filippo Pedrocco, *Visions of Venice: Paintings of the 18th Century* (London & New York: Tauris Parke Books, 2002), pp. 24-5
- ⁷ Levey, p. 95
- ⁸ Levey, p. 95
- ⁹ Pedrocco, p. 15
- ¹⁰ Jutta Gisela Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in late Renaissance Venice* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 179-80. Sperling presents a statistic that makes clear just how large the rift was between poor and wealthy convents: whilst the income of Santi Marco e Andrea di Murano was 42 ducats per year, the income of San Zaccaria was a staggering 7,467 ducats per year. (p. 179)
- ¹¹ Sperling, p. 158
- ¹² *ibid.*
- ¹³ Evangelisti, p. 138
- ¹⁴ This is included under the 'Paintings of Uncertain Attribution' in Teriso Pignatti, *Pietro Longhi: Paintings and Drawings: Complete Edition* (London: Phaidon Press, 1969), p. 122. Pignatti suggests that this work, along with its pendant pair, *The Ridotto*, have been wrongly attributed to Longhi in the past, and that they may perhaps be attributed to De Gobbis. See plates 457 & 456. These paintings also share almost exactly the same dimensions with the Westwood Manor paintings: the Westwood Manor works are 83 x 115 cm and the De Gobbis' are 83.82 x 114.94 cm. Another pendant pair identical to those possibly by De Gobbis is also included in the catalogue and Pignatti notes that they too have previously been wrongly attributed to Longhi. See p. 116 and plates 455 & 454. This suggests that many reproductions of the same scenes were produced, and also makes clear how difficult attribution is to a specific artist. It also supports our initial hypothesis that these paintings have been produced from a workshop in order to meet the tourist demand.
- ¹⁵ Martin Davies, 'Italian School' in *European Paintings in the Collection of the Worcester Art Museum* (Worcester: Worcester Art Museum, 1974), p. 422
- ¹⁶ Some of Heintz's works are now in Museo Correr, Venice.
- ¹⁷ Filippo Pedrocco, *Visions of Venice: Paintings of the 18th Century* (London & New York: Tauris Parke Books, 2002), pp. 36-40
- ¹⁸ This painting sold through Christie's, New York in 2000. See: <http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/LotDetailsPrintable.aspx?intObjectID=1710665> See Lot 113, Sale 9318, 'Important Old Master Paintings', 27 January 2000, New York, Rockefeller Plaza.
- ¹⁹ <http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/LotDetailsPrintable.aspx?intObjectID=1710665> See Lot 113, Sale 9318, 'Important Old Master Paintings', 27 January 2000, New York, Rockefeller Plaza.
- ²⁰ Pedrocco, p. 40
- ²¹ It should be noted that our comparison with Heintz is based on a poor reproduction of the original painting. Since it is now in a private collection, we have been unable to access the original. This means that our judgements and conclusions are based on the reproduction. The fact that it has been hard to source a good quality reproduction of this painting is telling in itself: it highlights how understudied Heintz is, and this is certainly an area which would greatly benefit from further research.
- ²² See Sperling, pp. 179-80
- ²³ In the Christie's sale, the Heintz was titled *The Parlatorio di San Zaccaria*. See: <http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/LotDetailsPrintable.aspx?intObjectID=1710665> See Lot 113, Sale 9318,

'Important Old Master Paintings', 27 January 2000, New York, Rockefeller Plaza. We have been unable to follow this up and work out whether this convent parlour scene has always been seen to represent San Zaccaria.

²⁴ We are grateful to Professor Kate Lowe for this suggestion.

²⁵ Evangelisti, p. 155

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 155

²⁷ We are grateful to Paul Kaplan for suggesting the Good Samaritan link to us.

²⁸ Quite how Heintz's painting came to be associated with San Zaccaria is uncertain, and this is an area that would require further research. With further investigation, we would be able to more confidently name the convent that is depicted in our scene.

²⁹ The dimensions are most similar to the French size 50 'paysage' which was 116 x 81 cm.

³⁰ Linen was confirmed by fibre analysis using SEM imaging at the Natural History Museum.

³¹ Merrifield, M. P., "Volpato Manuscript," in *Original Treatises on the Arts of Painting*, vol. 2, 2 vols. (New York: Dover Publications, 1967), 721–55.

³² *Ibid.*, 721–2.

³³ *Ibid.*, 731–2. The Volpato MS recounts preparing and applying the 'priming', where a variety of earth pigments are bound with linseed oil but only briefly stirred, to retain texture in the first ground layer. The second ground layer is pre-ground and thinly applied.

³⁴ Grissom, Carol, "Green Earth," in *Artists' Pigments: A Handbook of Their History and Characteristics*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 142.

³⁵ Etro, F. and Pagani, L., "The Market for Paintings in Italy During the Seventeenth Century," *The Journal of Economic History* 72, no. 2 (2012): 423–47.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 124. Strip widths exceeding 200 cm are recorded in works by Rembrandt in the mid-17th century.

³⁷ Berrie, B., *Artists' Pigments, A Handbook of Their History and Characteristics*, vol. 4 (Washington, D. C.: Archetype, 2007), 89.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 743–4.

³⁹ Harley, R. D., *Artists' Pigments 1600-1835* (Butterworth, 1982), 70.

⁴⁰ Sohm, Philip, "Venice," in *Painting for Profit* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 207.

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Figure 1. Unknown artist (ca. 18th century Venetian), *Visitors to a Venetian Convent during Carnival*, oil on canvas, 83 x 114 cm, Westwood Manor, National Trust



Interior with figures masked
Artist not known

Figure 2. Detail of the degraded paper label on the reverse, and a tracing revealing the inscription.



Figure 3. Unknown artist (ca. 18th century Venetian), *Gambling at the Ridotto*, oil on canvas, 83 x 114 cm, Westwood Manor, National Trust



Figure 4. Francesco Guardi, *Parlatorio delle monache di San Zaccaria*, oil on canvas, 108 x 208 cm, ca. 1740-50, Ca' Rezzonico, Venice



Figure 5. Francesco Guardi, *Il Ridotto*, oil on canvas, 108 x 208 cm, ca. 1755, Museo del Settecento Veneziano, Ca' Rezzonico, Venice



Figure 6. Detail showing the static arrangement of figures in stacks and pairs.



Figure 7. Detail showing elaborate fancy dress worn by the visitors



Figure 8. Unknown artist (ca. 18th century Venetian), *Concerto al Convento*, oil on canvas, dimensions unknown, Museo Sartorio, Trieste



Figure 9. Pietro Longhi, *Parlatorio del Convento*, oil on canvas, 96 x 131 cm, ca. 1760, Ca' Rezzonico, Venice



Figure 10. Giuseppe de Gobbis, *The Nun's Parlour*, oil on canvas, 82.3 x 114 cm, ca. 1760, Private Collection (sold through Dorotheum auction house, 09/04/2014)



Figure 11. Giuseppe de Gobbis, *The Ridotto*, oil on canvas, 83.82 x 114.94 cm, ca. 1760, San Diego Museum of Art



Figure 12. Alessandro Piazza, Interior of the Ridotto at Venice, oil on canvas, 148.3 x 197.8 cm, 1691-1702, Worcester Art Museum, Massachusetts



Figure 13. Unknown artist, Ricevimento mascherato in un parlatorio di monache, oil on canvas, dimensions unknown, ca. 17th Century, Contessa A. Morosini Collection, Venice



Figure 14. Unknown artist, *Mascherata in una casa patrizia veneziana*, oil on canvas, dimensions unknown, ca. 17th Century, Contessa A. Morosini Collection, Venice



Figure 15. Joseph Heintz the Younger, *Parlatoria di San Zaccaria*, oil on canvas, 117.2 x 147.3 cm, Private Collection (sold through Christie's, New York, 27 January 2000)

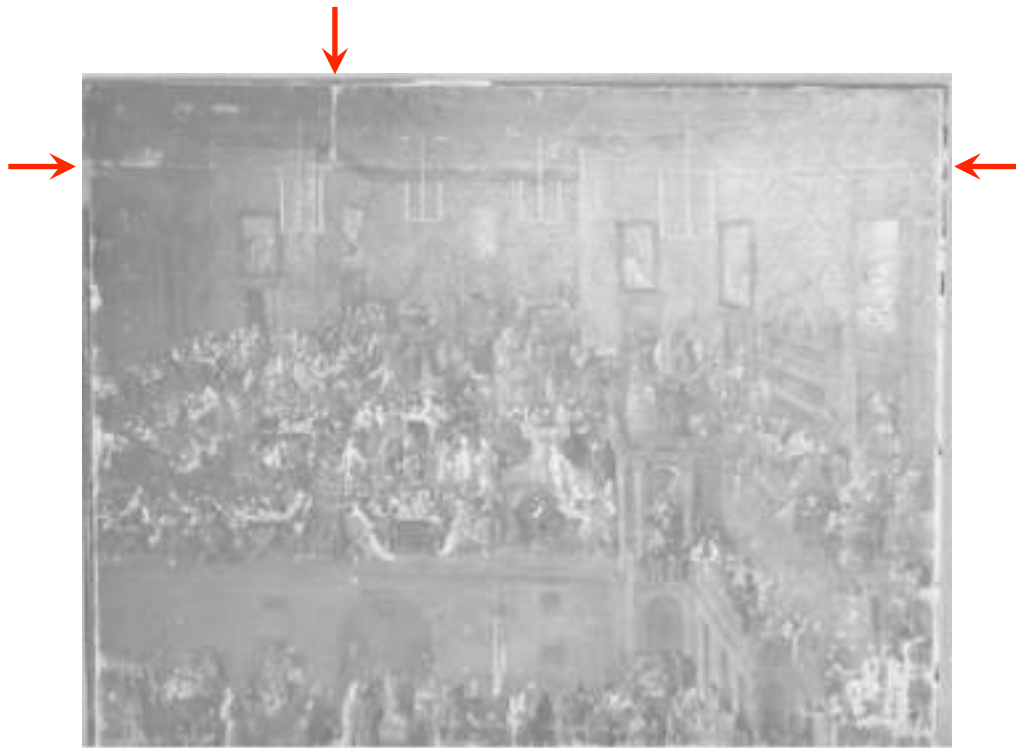


Figure 16. Joseph Heintz the Younger, *Il Ridotto*, oil on canvas, 136 x 163 cm, Alte Pinakothek, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlung, Munich



Figure 17. Detail showing the severely discoloured varnish contributing to a 'flattening' of the composition and causing the white passages in particular to become illegible.



Figure 18. Detail showing the impasto highlights used to depict elements such as jewellery.



Figure 19. Before treatment image showing areas of discreet previous restorations.

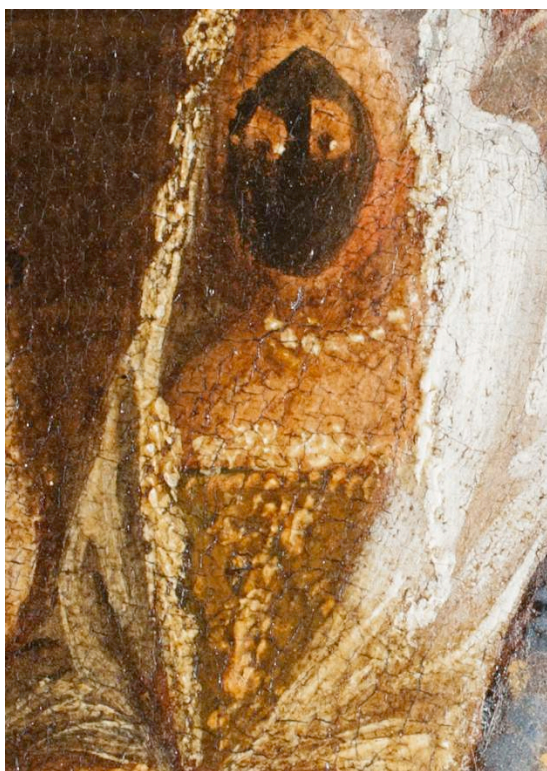


Figure 20. Surface micrograph showing the difference in an area of white before and after varnish removal.

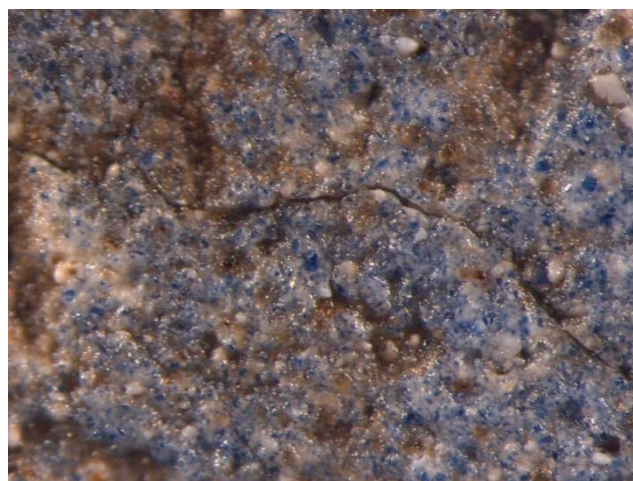


Figure 21. Surface micrograph showing bright blue pigment particles in an area where varnish has been removed. These have been identified as smalt.



Figure 22. Detail of the paintings on the back wall.



Figure 23. Tintoretto (Jacopo Robusti) and Studio *A Venetian Family Presented to the Virgin by St. Lawrence and a Bishop Saint*, oil on canvas, 234 x 173 cm ca. 1580, Scottish National Gallery



Figure 25. Lorenzo Lotto *Madonna and Child with Two Donors*, oil on canvas, 86 x 116 cm, 1525 – 1530, J. Paul Getty Museum



Figure 24. Studio of Leandro Bassano *The Good Samaritan* (1557 – 1622), oil on canvas, 80 x 106 cm, Private Collection

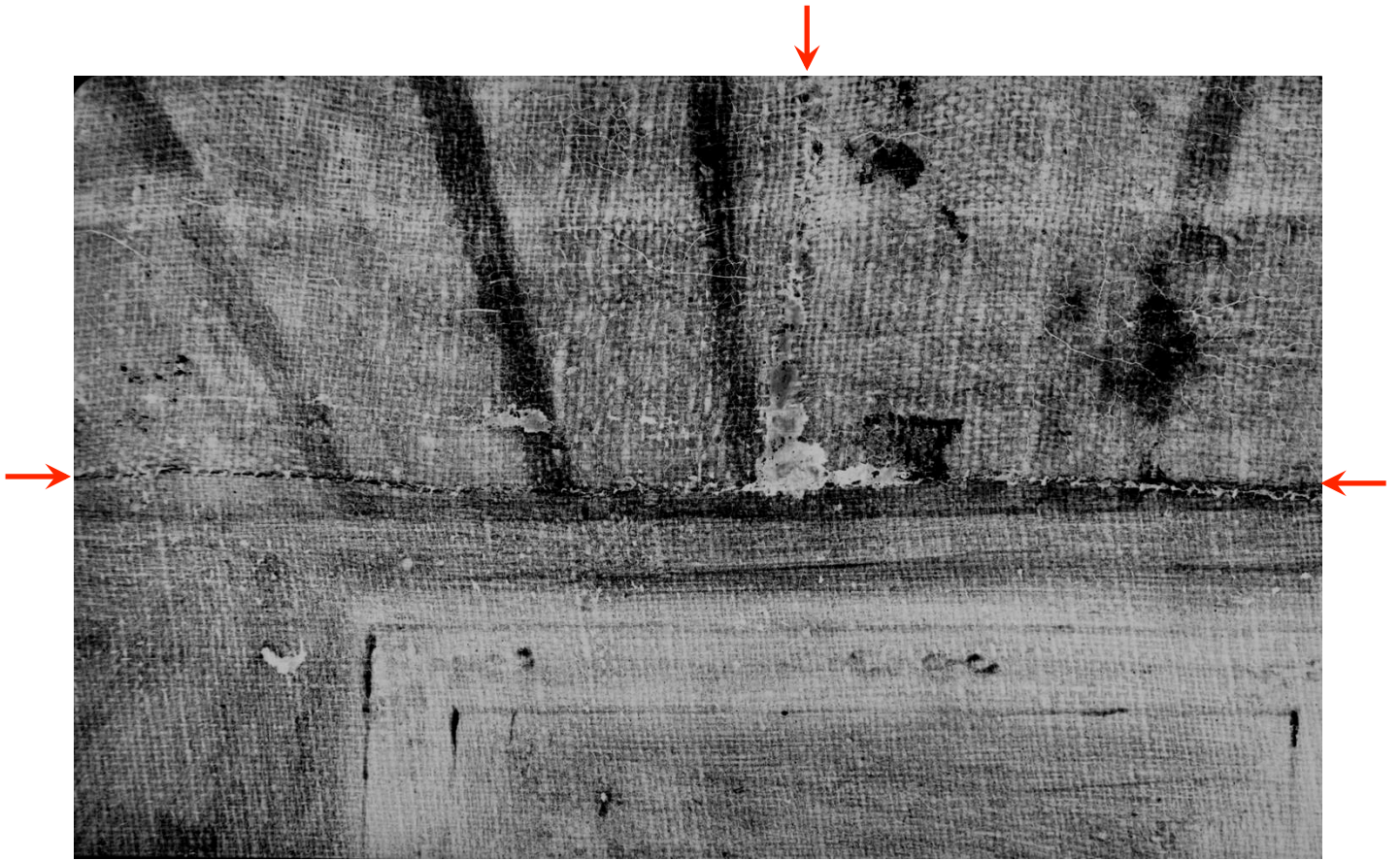


Figure 26. X-radiograph showing detail of canvas construction from *Visitors to a Venetian Convent during Carnival*. The seams are visible as indicated by the arrows.



Figure 27. X-radiograph showing detail of canvas construction from *Gambling at the Ridotto*

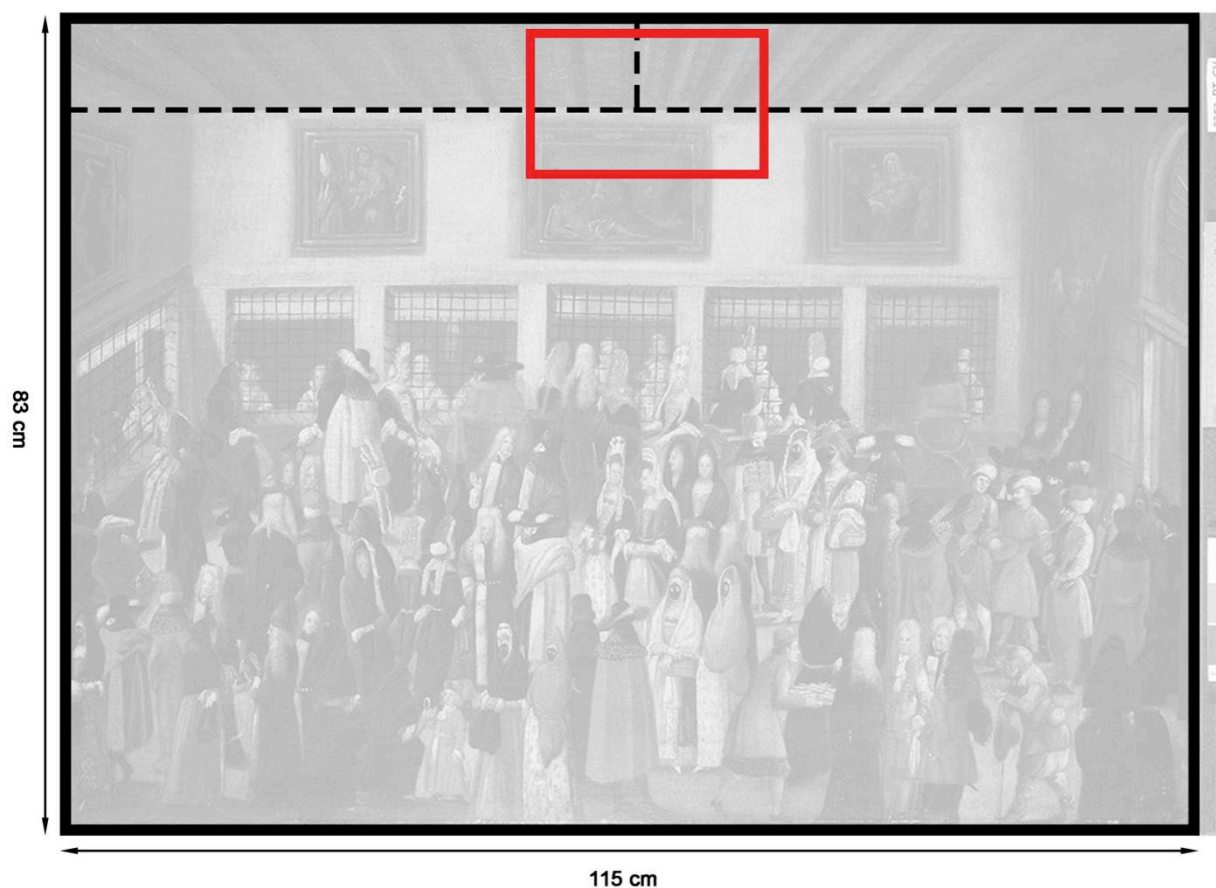
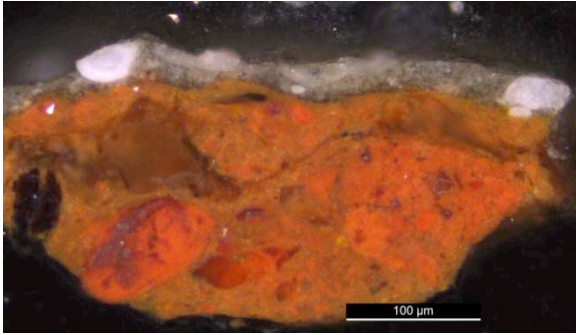


Figure 28. Diagram showing location of x-ray from *Visitors to a Venetian Convent during Carnival* and the canvas construction seen in both paintings.



Figure 29. Diagram showing cusping along the edges and seam of *Visitors to a Venetian Convent during Carnival* further indicating that the auxiliary pieces belong to the original dimensions.



Sample 1

Layer 4 – upper paint layer, lead white

Layer 3 – lower paint layer, showing single small blue particle (resembling smalt)

Layer 2 – upper ground

Layer 1b – fluorescing interlayer. Oil stain was inconclusive and protein stain was negative.

Layer 1 – lower ground

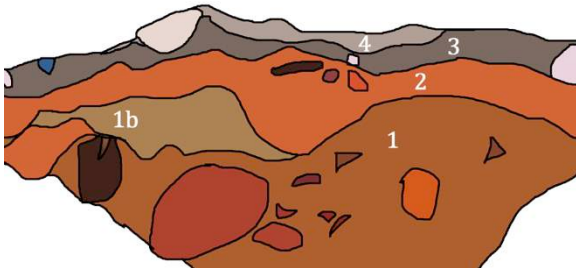
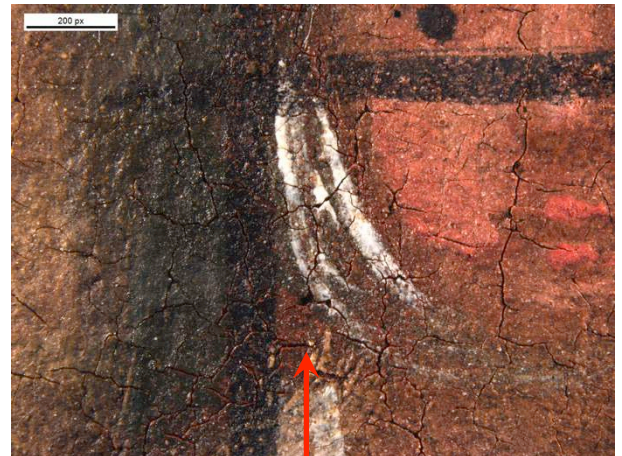
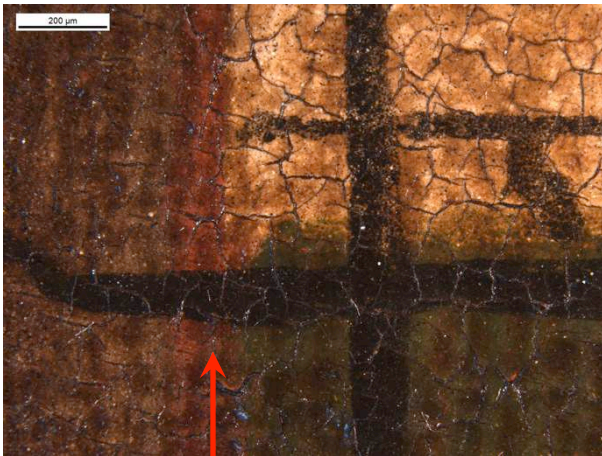
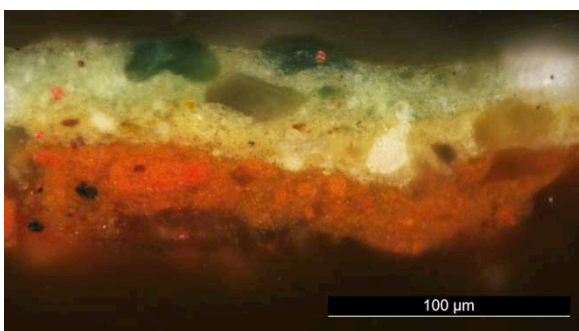


Figure 30. Sample 1 showing ground layer structure and composition with schematic diagram.



Figures 31 (l) and 32 (r). 31 is a micrograph showing the ground visible between passages of paint, 32 is a micrograph showing the red ground visible beneath abraded areas of colour.



Sample 2

Layer 3 – upper paint layer, green earth, silicate, vermilion

Layer 2 – lower paint layer, chalk, lead white, yellow earth

Layer 1 – upper ground layer

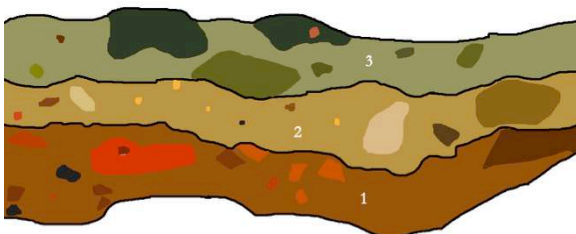
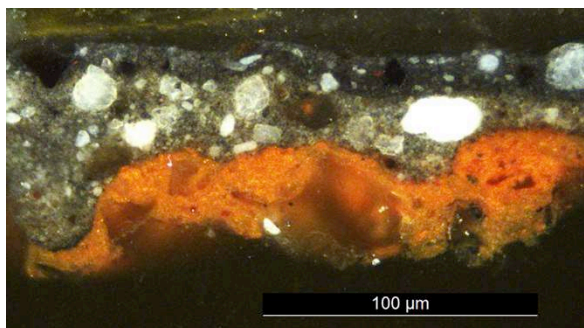


Figure 33. Sample 2 showing bright green earth pigments in the upper layer over a more neutral underlayer.



Sample 3

Layer 4, 5 – varnish layers

Layer 3 – upper paint layer, black and white creating optical blue – no blue pigment identified

Layer 2 – lower paint layer, lead white, chalk, silicates

Layer 1 – upper ground layer, calcium sulphate, red earth

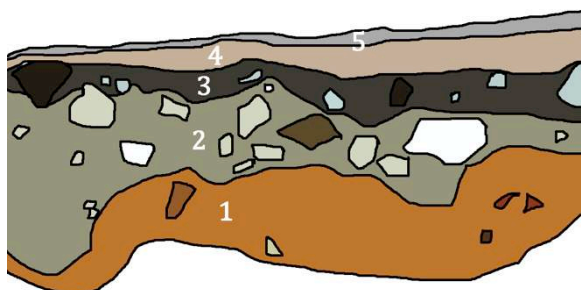
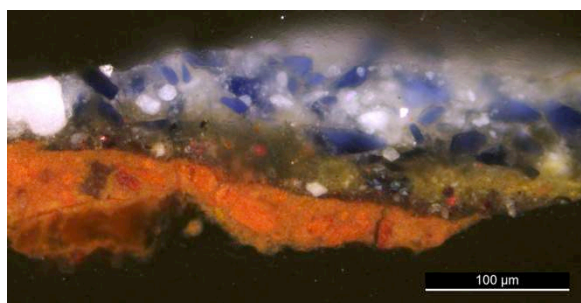


Figure 34. Sample 3 showing an optical blue made from a mixture of black and white pigments.



Sample 4

Layer 4 – upper paint layer, large glassy blue particles of smalt

Layer 3 – partial layer between 1 and 2, most likely from a neighbouring paint passage as three paint layers have not been observed anywhere else

Layer 2 – lower paint layer, lead white, earth pigments, vermillion (palette scrapings)

Layer 1 – upper ground

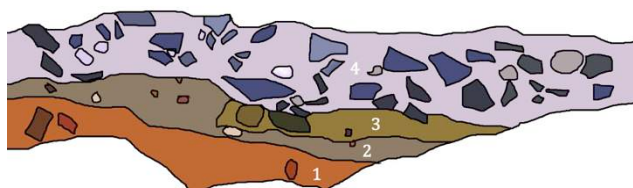


Figure 35. Sample 4 showing bright blue smalt particles.

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