Abstract

This abstract summarises collaborative research as part of The Courtauld Research Forum’s 2021 *Painting Pairs*: *Art History and Technical Study* project*.* The study focuses on a painting from a private collection titled *A Portrait of Her Lady and Four Children* by an unknown artist. The partnership combined conservation material with art-historical research to form a detailed, holistic analysis of the painting’s evolution over time both as a physical and cultural artefact. Structural and compositional changes revealed in technical images taken using X-radiography and infrared reflectography highlighted a semi-circular piece of canvas was sewn into the lower edge of the canvas at some point and a child was later applied over the woman’s drapery. These unusual features were contextualised in relation to the pressures the landed gentry were under to produce a male heir during late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth Britain while research into the display of portraits in architectural settings led to a hypothesis about why patrons might be motivated to modify their portraits in such a way. Furthermore, technical analysis of the painting’s pigments led to a tentative dating of the portrait to the turn of the eighteenth century. This dating aligned with archival documentation regarding the painting’s provenance which was discovered in inventories and payment schedules consulted at Hertfordshire Archives. Together this information supported a possible identity for the sitters as being Mary Countess Cowper (1685-1724) and her four children: Lady Sarah Cowper, Lady Ann Cowper, William 2nd Earl Cowper and Spencer Cowper. The infrared reflectography, which revealed the latter addition of the youngest baby, also aligned with documentation of the birth of Spencer Cowper. Other idiosyncratic compositional features, such as the interior architecture and sitters’ dress, is aligned with the frescoes of French decorative painter Louis Laguerre, whom the Cowpers commissioned to decorate Cole Green House, offering a possible motivation for this consciously classicising aesthetic. The unusual depiction of a mother with her children in the absence of the father, is contextualised in terms of historical precedents such as Van Dyck’s *Charity* (1627-28) and Raphael’s *Aldobrandi* *Madonna* (1509-1510) which illuminates the social cachet associated with ideological matriarchal compositions.