

**Painting Pairs 2021-22: *A View of Jamaica*, attributed to George Robertson, c.1774
Saffie Patel and Flora Clark**



Painting Pairs is an annual project at the Courtauld in which a conservation and an art-history student collaborate to investigate an artwork, combining art historical and technical research. This study focuses on *A View of Jamaica*, an oil painting on canvas. *A View of Jamaica* is currently dated to c.1772 and attributed to British artist George Robertson (1724-1788), who was commissioned by plantation owner William Beckford of Somerly to paint a series of landscapes documenting Beckford's estates in Jamaica. Beckford was, by the time of his death, the largest landholder in Jamaica, owning fourteen sugar plantations on the island. This painting is from the Harris Museum in Preston, where discussions are being held about the conditions of *A View of Jamaica*'s future display, with interest and interaction from local communities concerned with the handling of colonial-era works.

This study considers the ways in which landscape paintings depicting Jamaica and other British colonies functioned as an instrument of imperialism. The scene in *A View of Jamaica* is one of tranquillity and leisure, avoiding any direct representations of the violent reality for enslaved people on the island. This fictionalised view fits within wider conventions of representing British colonies in accordance with trends in contemporary landscape painting within Britain, as a means of cultural self-fashioning by the planter-class and attempt to present slavery as a universally beneficial and natural system. In this way, *A View of Jamaica* accords with other works by George Robertson. Yet, other works by Robertson far more rigidly adhere to picturesque conventions in terms of their composition and content than *A View of Jamaica*.

The painting is built up in thin layers, and cross sections reveal an optical green made from a mix of iron based yellows and blues. This is very typical of eighteenth-century British artistic

techniques, but earth pigments are not specifically datable. Oil paints would not have been readily available in Jamaica and our research suggests that artists would have travelled with commercially primed canvases and pre-made paints. This research informed the ongoing conservation treatment of the painting, which has involved the removal of an aged natural resin varnish and a previous campaign of retouching. The painting suffered from various impact and rolling cracks, stretcher bar marks from a previous format, and delamination between the ground and the canvas. The cleaning has brought new aspects of the material and compositional features of *A View of Jamaica* to light.

Whilst technical analysis generated a better understanding of *A View of Jamaica*, the extent to which it could help determine an attribution was limited by the lack of previous technical study into Robertson's work. However, gaining a better understanding of the material properties and art-historical context of *A View of Jamaica* opened up questions beyond simply that of attribution. Questions of the materials travelling artists used and how far the materials employed relate to wider processes of employing British painting conventions to document British colonies were prompted by this research, but will benefit from more extensive technical analysis into other paintings produced in colonial contexts.