

Painting Pairs 2021-2022

The diverging and converging histories and techniques of a pair of pendant portraits by Sir Henry Raeburn in the Courtauld Gallery Collection

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“Painting Pairs” is an annual collaborative research project between the Easel Paintings Conservation and History of Art departments at the Courtauld Institute of Art. It pairs a second year postgraduate conservation student with an MA or, in this case, PhD History of Art student to carry out research on assigned paintings. This is a study of Sir Henry Raeburn’s portraits of George (1729-1803) and Margaret Malcolm (1742-1811), members of the gentry who lived in Dumfriesshire, in the Scottish Borders. Both paintings are owned by the Courtauld Gallery, although they entered the collection at different times. *Margaret Malcolm* was purchased in 1947, while *George Malcolm* was purchased in 2000, with the intention of displaying them together. The paintings were likely painted between 1795 and 1805, although the Courtauld Gallery database dates them erroneously to 1778.

Grant Lewis executed the art historical background research, charting their shared physical histories, their relationship with the sitters and tracking the complexity of their context as one pair of many versions. Possibly up to five versions of these paintings exist, scattered across Britain and America in mostly private collections; the Courtauld pair being the exception. *Mr and Mrs Malcolms* appear in auction house sales catalogues and records throughout the twentieth century, making their provenance and historical trajectories difficult to track. The Courtauld’s *George Malcolm* was purchased to join their *Margaret Malcolm*, believing it was this painting’s pendant pair. Research carried out for this project supports this hypothesis.

Technical analysis completed by Alegria Spencer further supports the pairing of these paintings, and elucidates their diverging and converging treatment histories; it also confirmed the assumption that the paintings were by Raeburn himself, as not all of the versions were. Analysis revealed idiosyncrasies in Raeburn’s techniques, particularly in an unusual use of ultramarine; yet, technical analysis of the

paint layer structure complicated the relationship between the two paintings. Slightly different grounds and a divergent approach to painted underlayers suggests that the paintings were possibly painted at different times, or the artist was looking to create tonal variation between the two paintings. The reasons for these discrepancies cannot be conclusively determined, but the project has nonetheless shed light on Raeburn's techniques, his approach to building and maintaining his clientele, and the diverging and converging physical histories of this enigmatic pair of paintings in the Courtauld Gallery's collection.