

Painting Pairs 2022-23

Evelyn De Morgan, *The Barred Gate*, c. 1914-19

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Evelyn De Morgan, *The Barred Gate*, c. 1914-19, oil on canvas, 66.4 x 50.8 cm,
The De Morgan Foundation

'Painting Pairs' is an annual collaborative research project between Easel Painting Conservation students and Art Historians at The Courtauld Institute of Art. The following study focuses on *The Barred Gate* (c. 1914-19), an unfinished oil painting by Evelyn De Morgan. The painting is owned by The De Morgan Foundation, where discussions are increasingly being held regarding De Morgan's enigmatic paintings and working process. To our knowledge, this is the first artwork by Evelyn De Morgan that has been examined using in-depth technical analysis.

Evelyn De Morgan (1855-1919) was a British female artist who defied the expectations of her class and gender to become one of the most impressive artists of her generation. Her richly coloured canvases depicting beautifully draped figures convey messages of feminism, spirituality and the rejection of material wealth. *The Barred Gate* portrays a king clutching a purse of money, climbing the rocky steps to heaven and being halted by the barred gate. The moral of this painting is assumed to be that one must give up the pursuit of wealth and fortune in order to obtain higher happiness. The artwork is believed to be one of the last pictures that De Morgan painted and is allegedly unfinished according to a label written by De Morgan's sister, Wilhelmina Stirling, on the verso. As stated by Sarah Hardy, The Director of The De Morgan Foundation, the painting was caught in a warehouse fire in 1991 and thus has never been displayed nor treated.

This study will investigate the materials and techniques employed in *The Barred Gate*, as well as its art historical significance within De Morgan's oeuvre. The investigation of symbolic motifs in the painting, including the money bag and crown, has allowed us to place this work in dialogue with various thematically similar paintings by De Morgan. The unfinished nature and distinct lack of detail has also led us to the conclusion that *The Barred Gate* was indeed painted towards the end of De Morgan's life. Moreover, this report assesses De Morgan's sketches to provide a better understanding of the artist's training at The Slade School of Art and meticulous working method. Additional literary materials, such as the Roberson Archive and De Morgan's correspondence, have further shed light on the artist's specific choice of materials and experimental techniques including "The Process".

In terms of technical examination, paint cross-section analysis using microscopy and SEM-EDX indicated De Morgan's use of pigments such as zinc white, vermilion and lake pigments. In ultraviolet light, there is evidence of a thin uneven surface coating characteristic of a natural resin varnish. Upon closer inspection, it appears that this resinous media has been selectively brushed on sections of the gate, drapery and background - perhaps suggesting that this was part of De Morgan's technique rather than an intended final varnish layer. This research has informed the ongoing conservation treatment of the painting, which has involved the challenging removal of disfiguring soot and dirt layers on the surface.

Overall, both technical analysis and art historical investigation have provided a unique insight into De Morgan's artistic intentions, materials and techniques. Undoubtedly, the results of our research demonstrate the significance of exploring overlooked paintings and shedding light on female artists who deserve to be more widely acknowledged.