

Painting Pairs 2022-23: *Girl Reading 'The Task'*

Emma Wright and Elisabeth Subal



Abstract

Marrying art historical and technical investigation to fruitfully further understanding of a specific artwork is the purpose of The Courtauld Institute's *Painting Pairs* programme, a collaborative research project facilitated by the Courtauld's Research Forum, alongside its conservation department. Our contribution to this research venture focused on an undated and unsigned oil painting on canvas, *Girl Reading 'The Task'*, which belongs to the collection of the Cowper and Newton Museum in Olney, Buckinghamshire.

Arriving at the conservation studio in very poor condition, our goal was to improve the structural and aesthetic appearance of the painting through a comprehensive treatment plan, whilst also attempting to answer research questions regarding the artwork's material composition, physical history, provenance and subject matter. Might scientific analysis allow us to come closer to dating the painting? Could we ascertain who the sitter of the portrait was? And would we be able to extend back the known history of the work beyond the museum's acquisition date of 1900?

This report aims to delineate our approach, detail the challenges we faced, and disseminate our findings. Visual and technical examination of the painting revealed extensive reworking campaigns of the artist's composition, including the discovery of a figure of a child in the background on the X-Radiograph, as well as the revelation that the writing on the book identifying it as William Cowper's 5,000-line poem *The Task* was not, in fact, original. As art historical provenance trails went cold before 1873, our focus shifted instead towards utilising technical examination to enhance our understanding of the work, alongside unearthing stories of the people and institutions that had touched our painting.

Revealing just how rewarding an interdisciplinary approach can be, the programme also permitted us to reflect on what deems an artwork 'worthy' of display or, indeed, investigation, and what role we play in the history of the object. Whilst at the project's conclusion, more questions appeared to have been generated than answered, we hope that our research will foster further scholarship regarding this enigmatic artwork.