

Painting Pairs: 2022-2023

Saint Sebastian and Saint Anthony Abbot (c. 16th century)

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Unknown Artist, *Saint Sebastian*, oil on panel,
39.45 x 20.05 cm, Ham House, Surrey.



Unknown Artist, *Saint Anthony Abbot*, oil on panel,
38.80 x 19.75 cm, Ham House, Surrey.

ABSTRACT

This report details the findings of research on *Saint Sebastian* and *Saint Anthony Abbot* (artist unknown). These oil-on panel paintings have no established date of creation or a certain location of origin. Research into these unknowns was carried out as part of the annual ‘Painting Pairs’ project which is run by the Courtauld Research Forum.

The paintings previously had an early-sixteenth-century, Venetian attribution, but technical analysis soon called this into question. SEM-EDX analysis indicated the use of smalt, a pigment essentially used from the late-sixteenth century onwards. Initially, this result seemed at odds with the fact that the saints (in their manner of figuration) resemble earlier iconographic types. However, additional research demonstrated that, well into the late-sixteenth century, there was a continued market for paintings which featured religious figures in a more traditional, late-mediaeval style. It is proposed that this could be the case for *Saint Sebastian* and *Saint Anthony Abbot*, since the brushstrokes evince a mid/late-sixteenth-century technique while the figures themselves are more traditionally posed.

Dendrochronological analysis confirmed that the wood used was Baltic oak, a species typically used in the Low Countries and less frequently used in Germany, France, and Spain. This finding was at odds with the results of vibrational spectroscopic analysis, which confirmed the presence of a gypsum-based ground. Gypsum use is primarily associated with Italy and parts of Spain and Portugal. However, despite the evidence to the contrary, it was proposed that the two paintings might be German or French in origin. Important gypsum mines were located in both regions, and alternatives to chalk (namely gypsum and dolomite) were employed in at least a few German paintings. This suggestion, though tenuous, was supported by art historical evidence which shows that the *all’antica* style of posing figures (as evident in *Saint Sebastian*) was first developed in fifteenth-century Italy but spread north of the Alps in the sixteenth century; this stylistic ‘migration’ occurred via returning Northern European artists who had spent time training in Italy. In fact, the posture of the Sebastian of Ham House most closely resembles that of the Sebastian in Hans Holbein The Elder’s *The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* (c. 1516).

Considering that both Saint Sebastian and Saint Anthony Abbot were known protectors against plague, another avenue of research involved finding other artworks in which the figures appear together. Many such works were originally part of altarpieces. Additionally, for some of these works (notably the German and French examples), it can be shown that they were commissioned for the *explicit purpose* of protecting the owner from an ongoing epidemic. In light of this finding, it was considered that the traditional posing of the saints in the Ham House paintings might have been favoured by a patron seeking to conduct long-established devotional rituals in a private setting. This theory is supported by some aspects of the paintings’ construction, though other features indicate that the pair might have been *later* modified in order to fit into a small devotional setup. It was considered that these apparent modifications might relate to the religious tensions that arose between Catholics and Protestants in sixteenth-century Northern Europe; at this time, iconoclasm and the repurposing of images was not infrequent.

While both technical analysis and art historical research generated a tantalising array of possibilities, the establishment of a firm attribution for *Saint Sebastian and Saint Anthony Abbot* was limited by the inherent material complexity of the paintings and the number of preexisting unknowns. Nonetheless, this project demonstrates the importance of a multidisciplinary research method in investigating eccentric works such as these which do not easily fit into well-established or traditional categories of attribution.