

Painting Pairs 2025-26: Finn McGrath and Esther Hughes

Antonio Zucchi

Bacchus, Ceres and Venus

c. 1766-1771

Harewood House

Oil on Canvas

1360 x 675 x 24 mm



Abstract:

This paper outlines the findings of art historical and technical research conducted on *Bacchus, Ceres and Venus*, a decorative canvas painted in grisaille by Antonio Zucchi between 1766 and 1771 for a Robert Adam decorative scheme at Harewood House. The study is the result of a collaborative research project conducted by MA History of Art student Esther Hughes, and MA Conservation of Easel Paintings student Finn McGrath as part of the Painting Pairs Project (2025-26) organised by the Courtauld Institute of Art, London. The painting is owned by the Harewood House Trust, where it hung in the dining room until the room was redecorated in 1848. The painting is believed to have been in storage at Harewood House ever since.

Antonio Zucchi (1726-1795) was a Venetian painter and draughtsman who came to London in 1766 to work for the Adam architectural office, quickly becoming their preeminent decorative painter. *Bacchus, Ceres and Venus* is part of a decorative cycle of four canvases and four roundels all painted in faux sculptural relief on the subject of bacchanalia and classical references to festivity and nature, typical themes for a neoclassical dining room. The research brought together archival investigation, technical examination and art-historical analysis to address questions of artistic agency, material production, original display and historical reception. Archival research and surviving preparatory drawings were used to reconstruct the circumstances of the painting's production and installation, while microscopy and X-radiography provided insight into its materials and techniques. The project also sought to reconstruct the painting's original decorative context and consider how its grisaille technique, iconography and function within the dining room contributed to the social and political meanings of the interior. Finally, these findings informed consideration of the painting's conservation and the possibilities and limitations of its potential redisplay.