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RECENT STUDIES OF THE HEXHAM ABBEY PAINTING COLLECTION

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Introduction

“It is difficult to overstate the importance nationally of Hexham’s collection of paintings, which number eighty-four if assessed individually, or perhaps more cogently seven main object groups. English panel painting was deliberately targeted for iconoclastic damage and destruction during the Dissolution, Reformation and Civil War periods, and typically survives poorly. A brief literature survey quickly reveals that the Hexham paintings have been undervalued and understudied.”

This extract from the introduction to a 2017 Hamilton Kerr Institute report on Hexham’s painting heritage survey confirmed the importance of its Abbey collection.¹

The mediaeval religious paintings in Hexham Abbey – like those in Carlisle cathedral – have thus escaped a series of potential mishaps over the centuries. Of course, those you see are only those that have survived: many medieval treasures may have been destroyed in past times.

Evidence from traces of whitewash noted by several conservators in the past century or so give some clue to survival techniques in the face of over-zealous clerical regimes. The strong reluctance to embrace ‘new’ forms of religious worship, both here in the north and in eastern and south west England, may have encouraged concerned worshipers to protect, cover up or hide away artistic treasures that could have been subject to criticism by too broad or strict an interpretation of the second commandment.

The Abbey commissioned this report, funded by a number of charities and carried out by one of the most prestigious conservation groups in Britain. It was intended to provide a long-term plan for the better care of Hexham’s painting heritage. These mediaeval panel paintings had suffered the common fate of religious paintings over the centuries as well as over-painting and defacing by

the religious purists. In addition, conservation work in later centuries had not always been to today's standards.

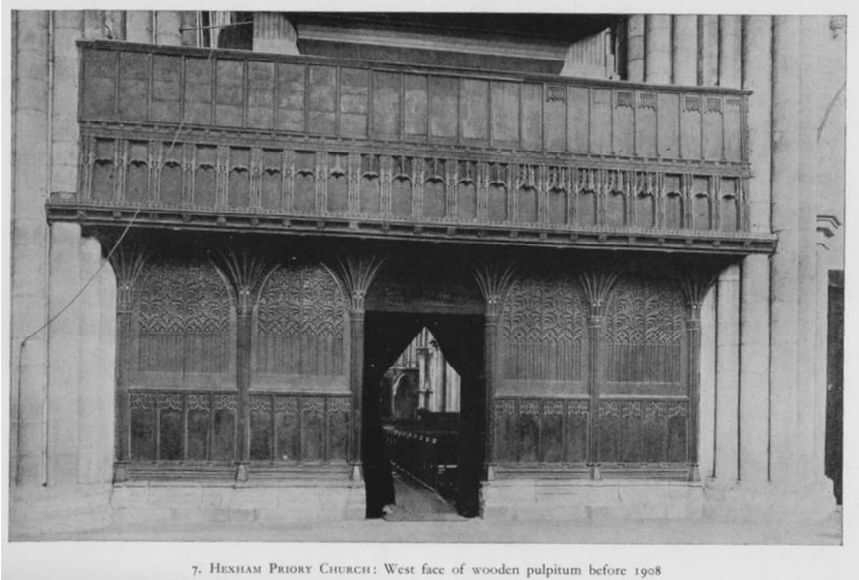
This short paper reviews the history of some of the paintings and reports on scientific work which has examined pigments used in their production and over-painting. It examines in particular the two chantry chapels, the Dance of Death panels in the Sanctuary and a painting on the Smithson Screen east side.

Scope and History

The assembly of fittings, furniture and paintings that the visitor sees today in the Abbey is the result of many re-arrangements, desecrations and local clergy-sponsored 'improvements' that have taken place over the past five hundred years or more.

The seven main groups of paintings include the Passion Series, now in the Abbey Exhibition area, the 'Dance of Death' group, the Smithson Screen panels, which include two fine Annunciation and Visitation paintings, the Etheldreda chapel group and the two further groups in the Sanctuary – the lectern group and the images of the early Hexham cathedral saints. In addition, the Abbey has two chantry chapels, both of which have important images.

Most of these paintings have been moved several times and, in several cases, we do not know their original location, which may not have been in the main part of the Abbey at all – for example perhaps in the now-demolished Eastern Chapels or even in St. Mary's Church in Hexham market place. At one stage, several groups were 'parked' above the Smithson Screen (fig. 1) and only in the re-ordering of the Abbey, following wide-ranging conservation work by Messrs Head & Son in the early 1900s, did some semblance of order return.



7. HEXHAM PRIORY CHURCH: West face of wooden pulpit before 1908

Fig 1 The row of mediaeval paintings above the (empty) niches on the 15th century Smithson Screen

The Ogle and Leschman Chantry Chapels

The likely date for the Ogle chantry chapel would be shortly after the demise of Robert Ogle in October 1409. Although a visit by the London architect and artist John Carter in c. 1785 has given us many sketches of the Abbey's treasures, we know little about its history until the 1800s when major restoration work by John Dobson in the Abbey saw the dismantling of the Ogle chantry paintings in 1858. These paintings languished in a joiner's attic for some years until they were obtained in 1862 by an architect, Mr F. Wilson. In 1895 the paintings were bought from Wilson's widow and later sold to Mr. Cruddas of Houghton Castle. Providentially, they were returned to the Abbey in 1960, by the will of Miss Eleanor Cruddas. During the intervening time, considerable overpainting had been carried out on the important figures of The Virgin & Child, Christ The Man of Sorrows and St John the Evangelist.



Fig 2 The Ogle chantry figures

The examination in 2017² showed that this over-painting masks some remaining mediaeval pigments, and some original blue azurite can be seen in small corners, for example as shown in Figure 3 surrounding part of Victorian added wax candle image. These three paintings are the first priority for future conservation due to the significant flaking seen on the outer edges.



Fig 3 Showing 19thC candle addition



Fig 4 Showing sample area and flaking paint wear

These tiny samples, see Fig 4, less than a printing full stop in size, were encased in resin and then microscopically examined under various lighting conditions. Some samples were further examined using scanning electron microscopy.



Fig 5. Ultraviolet fluorescence photograph of a sample (c 0.6mm across) taken from part of the Virgin Mary panel background

The layers identified from the top downwards:

- 1. Ground layer of mixed chalk (coccoliths present) and calcium sulphate, confirmed using scanning electron microscopy coupled with energy dispersive x-ray spectroscopy**
- 2. Remnants of paint, dark in colour, possibly azurite**
- 3. Varnish layer**
- 4. Oily layer (which does not fluoresce in ultraviolet light)**
- 5. Another medium rich layer, which may constitute a re-grounding layer for the upper repaints**
- 6. Blue layer of French ultramarine - clear evidence of post-1840 overpainting**
- 7. Varnish layer**

The French Ultramarine layer – a cheaper substitute for the original mineral – was only synthesised in the mid 1800s, but there are traces still of the original mediaeval blue azurite copper mineral.

Turning now to the Leschman chantry on the other side of the chancel, this also needs priority work on all its paintings due to flaking paint. The main painting is of Christ Man of Sorrows. Interestingly, this shows an under-drawing visible through the paint layers and extensive presence of early pigments and gold leaf on background decoration. This chantry chapel was built to commemorate one of the last priors of Hexham, Rowland Leschman (d1491) shown, incidentally, not only in his stone tomb cover but also shown kneeling

before the rising Christ, and is the only known representation of a Hexham prior.



Fig 6. Leschman Chantry. Christ, Prior Leschman and instruments of the Passion

The figure of Christ has had deliberate damage inflicted and seventeenth-century graffiti is also visible. Traces of whitewash are also remaining despite considerable cleaning in 1960s as part of extensive work at that time. Examination of the paint layers shows a ground base layer as being chalk-based, an unusual characteristic for English church paintings of the time.

Above the main panel, are images of St Peter, St Paul and St Andrew, all of which are in poor condition and all showing signs of some re-touching and non-original white-wash.

On a lighter note, only twenty-five pieces of silver are included in the instruments of the Passion images that surround the rising Christ, not the biblical thirty. Opposite faces of the dice also do not add up to the usual seven dots.

To give an idea of the extent of the conservation work, just for these four paintings, simply to consolidate the paint and do surface cleaning is estimated to take over 60 hours of work. A further 60 hours would be needed were the varnish and overpaint layers to be removed as well.

The Dance of Death Sequence of Panels

There are four panel paintings on oak, representing Death as a skeleton associating with secular and ecclesiastical personages. These four panels, made in c.1500, showing Death visiting a Cardinal, a King, the Emperor and the Pope, are currently also located in the chancel. In February 2017, a panel painting bearing a dark and heavily discoloured image was discovered languishing in a corner of the triforium of the Abbey, having been missing since the 1990's. This latter painting, in very poor condition, is believed to be part of the sequence – perhaps with many others now lost – and represents a 'caller' or commentator for the sequence. Carter³ also sketched this image in Tudor dress (Fig. 7)

Although wall frescos can be seen in several churches, the Hexham four-panel sequence is unique in Britain though a few individual painted wood panels depicting skeletons can be seen in, for example, Sparham in Norfolk. The existence of at least a part of the Holbein-type social sequence is highly unusual. Hodges⁴ described a Mr. Hutchinson's visit in 1774 who admired the panels in the north end of the church and, in particular, "...the five centre ones..." which "... are a portion of the scenes from the "Dance of Death," and have frequently been commented upon." It is not known for certain whether there were originally additional images in the sequence apart from these "four plus one" in Hexham.⁵



Fig 7 Carter's 1790s original sketch of the "introducer or caller"

Antiquarian John Carter⁶ drew these paintings while at Hexham in c1790. Carter's sketches are a valuable record as comparison of his sketches to the surviving paintings can be very instructive. For example, when looking at his image of the so-called 'caller' in the Dance of Death, it is notable that the image is comparatively similarly damaged as to how it is found today.

The 2017 conservation examination records that part of a wood panel used for repair of a painting in a separate Abbey series bears a similar back-of-panel

identification mark to that of this fifth panel, maybe indicating that there were other Dance of Death images now scrapped. Advanced non-destructive diagnostics and multispectral imaging were performed to facilitate the identification of the recently found panel by Theodorakopoulos (Fig. 8).



Fig 8 From left to right: the panel photographed in the 1960s, in June 2017, after red-green-blue reconstruction of selected spectral images and after elimination of the varnish discoloration and further spectral correction
Recent Advanced Technical Studies



In 2017, a multispectral imaging study enhanced viewing of the paint layers in the visible and near infrared range of light (Fig. 9). It provided information about the pigmented layers under the discoloured varnish. Data processing included the collection of reflectance imaging spectra at selected pigmented areas, which supported paint characterisation by comparison to in-house and published databases of reflectance spectra of medieval pigments.⁷ (ref. 6). With further statistical analyses (Fig 10), one can also simulate the removal of discoloured varnishes to facilitate enhanced viewing of the painting (Fig. 8).

Fig 9. Spectral images from blue light (front) throughout the visible range to infrared (back) comprising the spectral cube of the recorded panel

The enhanced colour image visualization (Fig 10) was obtained by merging images acquired at three wavelength bands representing the red, green and blue light respectively. Then, reflectance imaging spectra were extracted at selected pigmented areas and compared to spectral databases of medieval pigments. The same study was performed in a section of the second Dance of Death painted panel, where Death visits an Emperor. The study showed that the reflectance of similar coloured paints of the latter, are comparable with those of the recently found panel painting. Taking the historical sources presented above and these findings into account, Hexham Abbey can consider the recently found painting as the fifth panel in the Dance of Death series.



Fig. 10 Pigment reflection statistical colour map on the left. Black and white maps show white, yellow (ochre) and red (madder and Egyptian blue) paints from the left to the right.

St Etheldreda's Panel

This panel is situated in a prestigious position on the Oriel on the east side of the c1490 Smithson screen. The paintings on this side of the screen, which include apostles, saints, archbishops and bishops, need significant cleaning and perhaps varnish removal, but the quality of the best survivors on this side of the screen shows what a fine result would be delivered.

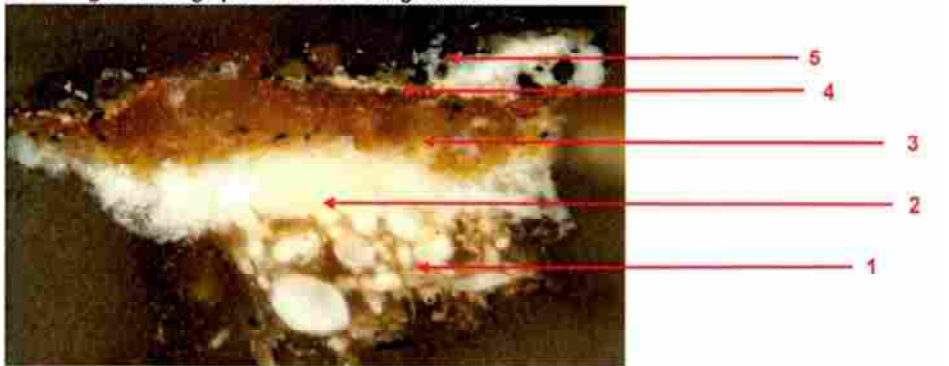
Some analysis of Queen Ethelreda's Crown (Fig. 11) shows that she merited several layers of real gold leaf (not a cheaper material as seen in less

prominent locations in the Abbey) as seen in the micrograph (Fig. 12) taken at 20x magnification in normal light.



Fig 11 Portion of St Etheldreda's crown

Normal light – micrograph taken at x 20 magnification



Stratigraphy

1. Wood/ground mix.
2. Chalk ground. SEM/EDX would be needed to assess whether there is any calcium sulphate present
3. Yellow ochre and char black mordant, includes some vermilion particles
4. Gold leaf applied in more than one layer
5. Black outlining, char black with some chalk

Fig 12. Cross-section sample from crown (Fig 11), approx 0.5mm width

Conclusion

Hexham Abbey occupies a unique place in northern church history. The surviving paintings reflect its history from mediaeval times and are now becoming recognised nationally as a major collection.

The scientific analyses by two different organisations using differing technologies demonstrated the pigment similarities between the recently-found painting and its four contemporaries in the Dance of Death group. This ties in with historic commentaries from the eighteenth century.

In the past centuries at irregular intervals, these paintings have been the subject of important conservation studies. Following the technical studies referred to above, and subject to available funding, a programme of further conservation work to secure this heritage will continue, beginning with the Ogle Chantry trio and the Leschman Chantry paintings. Alongside this renewed awareness is continuing monitoring of the environment in which this precious collection resides.

The scientific reports that the Abbey now possesses give a task list for the care of all the paintings. Already changes in cleaning practices have been implemented. Starting with the chantry chapels and the east side of the Smithson Screen, the process of fact-based conservation can begin. In addition, the 'fifth' Dance of Death panel can rightfully take its place in an enhanced presentation.

*"Hexham's important panel paintings rightly deserve to be better known. They are important survivors that attest to significant regional trends in painting techniques and materials that have to date not been studied and which merit more attention."*⁸

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¹ Wrapson L & Kimbriel, C S (2017) *Condition assessment and proposed conservation plan for medieval panel paintings. Hexham Abbey*. Report Hamilton Kerr Institute, Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

² Wrapson, L (2018) *Analytical Report. Late Mediaeval paintings at Hexham Abbey*

³ Carter, J. *British Library MS Add 29933, fols. 104-145*

⁴ Hodges, C C (1888) *The Abbey of St. Andrew, Hexham*, p47

⁵ Clark, J M. (1950) *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, Glasgow University Publications no 86, Jackson, Son & Co, 1950

⁶ Cosentino, A FORS Spectral database of historical pigments in different binders *E-conservation Journal 2,(2014) pp53-65*

⁷ Wrapson (2018) *op cit*

