

Identification and Removal of Nonoriginal Layers in the 16th Century Paintings of Funchal's Cathedral Altarpiece

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Abstract: This article is an outcome of the study, decisions, and restoration work undertaken during the integrated conservation project of the 16th century paintings of Funchal's Cathedral main chapel's altarpiece, in Madeira Island, Portugal. After diagnostic research has allowed a complete understanding of the original material of the 12 Portuguese–Flemish paintings, it has been revealed the presence of other superimposed layers, whether actual overpaints or the accumulation of materials occurring in time over the old ones. Identification together with the cleaning and removal of these coatings was a delicate and a complex process. Conservators already suspected the existence of overpaints in some paintings, a close observation of the painted surface showed differences in terms of color, texture, and execution technique in specific areas. Chemical and stratigraphical research together with radiography and historical research on primary documental sources provided important clues about the paintings of the previous interventions and relevant and crucial information for the decision making. © 2016 Wiley Periodicals, Inc. *Col Res Appl* 41, 283–288, 2016; Published Online 11 February 2016 in Wiley Online Library (wileyonlinelibrary.com). DOI 10.1002/col.22027

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THE PAINTINGS HISTORY

The Funchal altarpiece ordered by King Manuel I is the only Portuguese remaining monumental altarpiece from the 16th century that is still in its original location. The 12 paintings of Funchal's Cathedral main chapel's altarpiece had a very unsatisfactory appearance: the surface was very dark because of the many layers of grime, coatings, and materials from the previous interventions. Obviously, the paintings had endured numerous interventions. Since the end of the 16th century to the 19th century, the altarpiece was submitted to "repaintings," "renovations," and "washings" that resulted in changes and additions to its original surface.¹

Since the 17th century in Europe, varied and unexpected products and methods are described in cleaning recipes in handbooks and painting treatises. Soap, bleach, egg white, lime water, butter, ashes, and even urine were some of the products used to clean the paintings at this time.² Hazards of painting cleaning and the concern about the consequences of cleaning are also mentioned in some of these treatises (Pacheco³), the use of acids and alkali mixtures in antique restorations resulted in many overcleaned paintings and irreparable damage. Furthermore, with the purpose of reviving colors, the paintings were impregnated with cooked oils, varnish layers, and bitumen,² which formed a heterogeneous and darkened layer preventing the display of the paintings' original color.

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