The Conservation and Restoration of Veronese’s
The Anointment of David

Michael Odlozil, Sabine Stanek, Václav Pitthard, Martina Griesser
Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, Picture Gallery and Conservation Science Department, Vienna, Austria
michael.odlozil@khm.at, sabine.stanek@khm.at, vaclaw.pitthard@khm.at, martina.griesser@khm.at

Introduction

The large canvas (173 x 364 cm) by Paolo Veronese shows the biblical scene of David being anointed as King of Israel surrounded by a group of figures and animals in front of a landscape, buildings and ruins in the Roman style. It is dated around 1555 and was acquired for the collection in 1564. This exceptional painting was recently treated before it took part in the exhibition Masters of Venice in San Francisco in 2011. Before conservation treatment the painting’s appearance was affected by discolored varnishes and dirt, the surface seemed brittle due to old, overpainted losses and areas of cupped paint layers. The size of the canvas was changed several times, in historic inventories of the Kunsthistorisches Museum it is shown with far more background than we see today.

The support consists of two strips of a strong fishbone weave canvas. Probably during the format changes the canvas was double relined. The shrinkage of the textile during the relining process caused an overlapping of the paint chips. So the surface we see today is very much influenced by the overlapping effect and not only by the strong canvas weave and Veronese’s brushwork.

The grounding is a light reddish brown, the adhesion to the support is quite weak probably due to the canvas shrinkage. The varnish consists mainly of oxidized dammar, we could also detect traces of linseed oil, rosins and resinous glazes of oil colour, white lead and ochre. The varnish was reduced step by step, a very thin layer of varnish remains on the surface as a protection, but also to achieve a more soft and subtle cleaning result.

The surface was covered by old, degraded varnishes and dirt; the underdrawing is quite visible and blue light illumination (1. brown ground: ochre, lead white, carbon black; 2. red glaze: red lake, possibly cinnabar or ochre; 3. dark glaze: ochre, lead white, ochre; 4. remnants of organic layer; 5. cross-section of the sky and yellow drapery layers: orpiment, ochre, chrome yellow, lead antimony yellow) Cross-section of the dark background under visible light

Optical Microscopy, Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM) and Gas Chromatography-Mass Spectrometry

In the cross-section the ground layer of the Anointment is of reasonable thickness and consists mainly of gypsum. Its brownish appearance is a result of browned binding media. In the sky we have an additional, thin layer of lead white under the sky colour built of lapis lazuli and only traces of white lead. Due to this reason the blue of the sky is still very bright and not as greyish as in many other Venetian paintings, where blue builds the better part of the palette.

Under the area of the dark curtain lies an additional dark layer consisting of ochre, probably carbon black and traces of lead white. It seems that this part of the composition has been changed from maybe green (with the SEM two layers of copper-based glasses were detected) to red, since on top of these components we find remains of red lake. The golden-yellow drapery where Veronese used orpiment appears severely altered. Only an idea of its original brightness has survived.

The varnish consists mainly of oxidized dammar, we could also detect traces of various other components like Venetian turpentine, drying oils and even amber. It is very likely that all these are traces from later treatments.

X-Ray radiography

The X-ray image shows some bold white lines that could form the first positioning of the figures on the canvas. The legs of the left man had been altered to a more flexed position, as well as David’s foot had been shifted several times. A person in the left background had been erased. The definition of the curtain, that can also be seen in the IR, is here also very distinct. A line that runs through the shoulder of the prophet indicates that the today hardly visible person above from maybe once was meant to hold a drapery of the curtain. Quite huministic appears the first creation of the goat: who would have fixed us directly – as the only one in the painting.

Infrared reflectography (IRR)

The underdrawing of the work is very sparse. Only very little lines could be found, executed with a brush, that only mark the positioning of the figures. Obviously Veronese creates the final form while painting it onto the canvas. He does, however, sketch the figures and composition on paper before he works on the canvas, as we can see on the sketch that is associated with both the Viennese Anointment and the frescos at Villa Barbaro in Maser. We also find a remarkable detail: a collection of brushstrokes that does not correspond to the visible composition. It is – at a larger scale – an underdrawing for the group of women that we see on this picture. It seems to me that Veronese introduced this group without creating it on a paper before.

Conservation and Restoration

First of all the surface was cleaned. To improve the tension of the support, the painting was removed from its stretcher and a strip-lining was attached to the tacking margins. The areas of cupped paint were consolidated using sturgeon glue and a heated spatula. This improved also a bit the appearance of the surface-relief. The numerous small losses were filled and afterwards the varnish was reduced step by step, a very thin layer of varnish remains on the surface as a protection, but also to achieve a more soft and subtle cleaning result.

During varnish reduction it was also possible to remove most of the inpaints and retouchings. Blanchings and greyness of the varnish disappeared. The bright colours reappeared. In the removal of later additions.

The structure of the surrounding paint was imitated with gouache colours onto the fillings. A layer of varnish was applied and on top the retouching was first continued with watercolour and at last with resinous glazes of oil colour, according to the Viennese tradition. A final varnish of mastic in turpentine was sprayed.