

Restoration

Matthijs Musson (Antwerp, 1598 –1678/79)

Jesus in the House of Martha and Mary

ca. 1640-1650

oil on canvas

230 x 340 cm

inv. no. 2565

Previous interventions:

In 1980, when the work entered the BBVA Collection, its appearance was quite different to its current state, especially in the top right, as previous repaintings had modified some elements of the composition.



In 2004, the repainting of part of the window frame, the back wall and the picture on it was removed, but not the cloth that is hanging on the wall behind Mary. The underlying original hanging drapes and tassel in the central part were in good condition though quite modified in the part just above Jesus and Mary.



In 2012, in view of the insensitive interventions made over the course of time, it was decided to undertake an in-depth restoration of the work in order to return it to its original condition. The Artistic Heritage Department commissioned a battery of organoleptic tests, which included exhaustive photographic documentation, preparation of detailed drawings and maps of alterations, taking samples and evaluating them in the laboratory and a study with UV and IR light, after which an intervention strategy was drawn up for each one of the different elements and phases.



Support, preparation and pigment analysis:

The primary supports for Flemish easel painting were board, copper and canvas, and the work from the BBVA Collection is on this last-named support.

As the size of compositions became bigger and bigger, artists increasingly turned to the use of canvas thanks to its relative lightness, its ease of transport—especially as canvases could be rolled up—as well as its lesser cost when compared with boards. Other factors in its favour were its greater resistance to climatic variations and the lesser risk from xylophages.

The standard canvas in use in Flemish painting was linen. This however varied in width depending on the loom size—between 69.5 and 140 cm—which meant that large works often required various cloths to be sewn together. The canvas of *Jesus in the House of Martha and Mary* is made up of three measures of cloth (the central one 122 cm and the two sideones 61 and 46.5 cm) although the seams cannot be appreciated, as they were cut in some earlier interventions.



The primer is always quite similar: the chosen pigments, ground with linseed oil, were extended with a spatula or knife over the canvas. Once dried, any protuberances and knots in the canvas were eliminated with a knife, after which it was smoothed with a pumice stone and then a second coat was applied.

Matthijs Musson used a ground of calcium carbonate and earths in low proportion and a second grey coat composed of white lead, vegetable carbon and calcium carbonate in low proportion, adding red colouring in the greens and greys. The thickness of the ground varied between 80-120 micras and the primer between 80-50 in the brown and cold tones and 20-35 in the flesh colouring, reds and yellows.

The palette of pigments is the standard in use in Flanders at the time: white lead, earths, vegetable carbon, vermillion, red colorant, lead-tin

yellow, azurite, verdigris, silicates and calcium carbonate used as filler. Linseed oil was used as a binding agent.

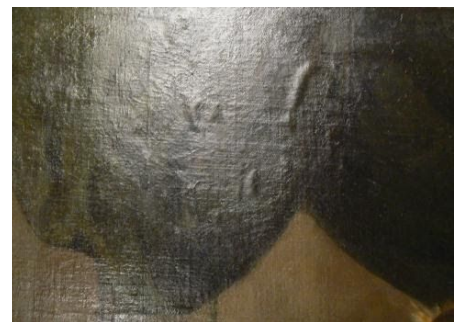
The combination of pigments plays a key role in the transparency of the glazes and in the quality of the impasto. Calcium carbonate was used occasionally to provide body and transparency to layers of glazes without altering the colour.

To avoid possible contrasts of colour, in the working process of Flemish painting, the clothing was painted first, then the backgrounds and architectural elements and lastly the faces and hands.

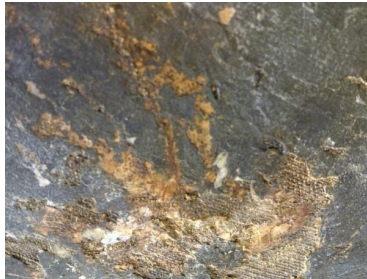
Condition prior to intervention:

Though the stretcher is not the original, as it was in good condition it was decided to conserve it.

The original canvas, in linen from the Low Countries, had been altered and relined at some stage. The format of the canvas, made with three measures joined together, had possibly also been altered, as one can appreciate signs that the right and left edges had been cut. At the same time, given the evident marks of folds, it would seem as if the work had been rolled or doubled before being relined, which was done using organic starch paste. One can notice several blisters due to the loss of adherence and the aging of the adhesive, which recommended removing it, as well as numerous remains of synthetic adhesive corresponding to old patches and strip lining in the seams, which would suggest that the lining was posterior to the appearance of this type of synthetic resins, which were widely used in restoration treatments of supports in the fifties and sixties.



The work, executed with oil paints, has some areas with greater impasto, localised mainly in the clothing and flesh, and areas highly worked with glazes. The polychrome showed signs of erosion and loss of colour that revealed glimpses of the primer below, possibly the cause of old abrasive cleaning.



The paint layer was deteriorated, due to the poor conservation of the work—both in origin and throughout the course of its lifetime—and the numerous and often inappropriate interventions it was subjected to. The surface showed signs of several alterations: creases due to an excess of siccative in the binding agent, craquelure, stretched marks, elevations, powdery crumbling areas, loss of original glazes and retouching from previous interventions that covered the original polychrome, highly invasive and inappropriate colouring, the oldest ones in oil and others with varnish pigments. Up to five different types of in-fills were found under the retouching, many in poor condition and others

extending beyond the losses or made on different levels.

For a better localisation and characterisation of the repainting, micro-samples were taken and stratigraphies carried out, as well as photos with visible, UV and IR light.

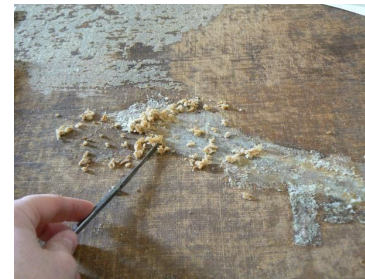
Interventions undertaken:

Once the work was studied and analysed, the following restoration treatments were carried out:

- Support:

The old relining was removed, as it no longer guaranteed the conservation of the original canvas and furthermore posed problems in the decomposition of elements of the adhesives used, a potential breeding ground for biological attacks.

Previously, in order to ensure the stability of the paint layer and to reduce the tensions it was subjected to, the back of the work was protected with Japanese pH neutral paper, using thinned standard organic adhesive. Given the poor state of conservation of the original borders of the work, a double layer of protection was applied along the whole perimeter to prevent the fibres from tearing.



The deterioration of the adhesive elements made it relatively simple to remove it mechanically, and uncovered the existence of remains of synthetic adhesive of patches on the original support. Afterwards the organic adhesive was removed with agar gel, which was also used for the remains of synthetic adhesives from the old patches and the joints of tears and the different

stretches of canvas, which provoked serious buckling of the support. The weakness of the fibres in some areas made it impossible to remove the remains entirely.

The buckling of the support were eliminated with weights and controlled humidity.



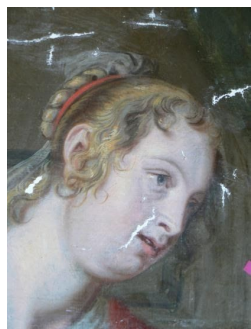
To avoid having to reline the work again, a “thread to thread” adhesion system was used to join the threads of the weave and recover their mechanical function within the overall system of the support. Linen threads were introduced with standard organic and starch adhesive. In other areas in which it was impossible to undertake an effective suture, patches of picked German linen were applied, as well as patches of silk in the small losses, in both cases with BEVA adhesive film. Patches of silk were also placed on the deteriorated edges of the work to reinforce it, prior to strip lining with tensed picked German linen of the same qualities as the original support, with a view to providing sufficient tacking edge to replace it on the stretcher. In this way, the work recovered its tension, thus facilitating its proper conservation.

Once the facing tissue was taken off and the colour was fixed with a thermal spatula, the remains of organic adhesive on the surface were removed. The most invasive in-fills had been previously eliminated to avoid affecting the paint layer.

Afterwards the work was tensed and stapled to the stretcher with stainless steel tacks, after first placing cotton tape around the perimeter to protect the original canvas.



- Primer and polychrome:



Invasive in-fills or those in poor condition were removed, replacing them by others with levelled organic adhesive and calcium sulphate, making numerous linen grafts in the larger losses, many of them around the edges of the work.

Subsequently various in-fills and levelling of fills were carried out across the whole surface with calcium sulphate and organic adhesive, with a view to imitating the texture of the polychrome layer and evening out the losses.

The chromatic reintegration of losses and damaged areas was undertaken with Windsor & Newton watercolours and subsequent retouching with Maimeri varnish pigment. On the other hand, the chromatic reintegration of the curtain was done using glazes and the rigatino technique.

To decide on the most appropriate cleaning system for the surface, cleaning tests were carried out, and micro-samples were analysed to observe the superimposition of the various substrata, which is fundamental in works with complex composition and state of conservation, as in this case there were several superimposed layers of varnishes and finishes, as well as glazes.



Once all the data was obtained on the various types of layers, oils, remains of organic and synthetic adhesives, etc, the work was subjected to thorough cleaning, in order to restore its chromatic and aesthetic integrity. A selective elimination was carried out of the more invasive repaintings, or those that had changed its tonality, as well as the remains of adhesives, removing the layers of ketone varnish which had been altered in the last intervention.

Once the cleaning of the work had been concluded, a protective layer was applied across the whole surface and fine layers of powdered varnish in the reintegrations. Natural dammar varnish thinned with white spirit in a proportion of 1:5 was used throughout the whole process.



A new Hispano-Flemish frame was also built to replace the existing one, which was in a deteriorated state and did not match either Musson's era or style of painting.

Restauración: María García-Frías y Beatriz Lahoz.
Enmarcación: José Manuel García.
Análisis: ARTELAB.