

NEWSGRAM

News in brief from the Conservation Center

Issue 23, March 2013

INSTITUTE of FINE ARTS
NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

Re-Evaluating a Master

The technical examination and treatment of Venus and Adonis by Paolo Veronese

This fall, the Conservation Center was home to a large *Venus and Adonis* by the sixteenth-century painter Paolo Veronese. Standing nearly seven and a half feet tall and just over five and a half feet wide, the painting is of the same scale and type as Veronese's three great mythological scenes now located in New York—*The Choice Between Virtue and Vice* and *Wisdom and Strength* (mid-1560s) in the Frick Collection, and *Venus and Mars United by Love* (early 1570s) in The Metropolitan Museum of Art. *Venus and Adonis* is part of the Samuel H. Kress collection at the Seattle Art Museum, where I had been studying and treating the painting for two years as a Mario Modestini Fellow and a Samuel H. Kress Fellow.

Venus and Adonis and I came to the Conservation Center in September for the culmination of the project, where I had the great privilege of working daily alongside Dianne Dwyer Modestini, Paintings Conservator, Kress Program in Paintings Conservation. Together, we completed the monumental task of retouching the very damaged painting before it traveled to Florida to be displayed in the exhibition "Paolo Veronese: A Master and His Workshop in Renaissance Venice," currently on view at The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art.

Unlike Veronese's mythologies in New York, the attribution of *Venus and Adonis* has been inconsistent. Its early provenance, too, is unclear; while the other three paintings can be traced to the famous sixteenth-century collection of Emperor Rudolph II, the first definitive record of *Venus and Adonis* is in the Cook Collection in England, where it was catalogued in 1913 as a work from the school of Veronese. Count Alessandro Contini Bonacossi acquired *Venus and Adonis* for the Kress Collection in the late 1940s, and it was restored in Mario Modestini's studio in Rome before being shipped to America. The painting received a varnish made with pine resin from the Villa Borghese gardens that Modestini and the conservators in his studio were forced to use on several paintings acquired from the Cook Collection due to a dearth of available supplies following World War II.



Venus and Adonis before treatment



Venus and Adonis after treatment



During removal of the darkened pine resin varnish

The painting was on continuous display since it arrived in Seattle in 1954 but it remained unstudied and untreated. In the mid-twentieth century Mario Modestini, Roberto Longhi, Bernard Berenson, and other scholars associated with Kress considered the painting a great work of Paolo Veronese. In the approximately sixty years since *Venus and Adonis* was restored in Rome, the pine resin varnish degraded to a dark yellow-brown that obscured the painting's brilliant colors. Widespread passages of old restoration, left in place when the painting was last treated, also discolored and no longer matched the surrounding original paint. The painting's critical fortune suffered a gradual decline and it came to be called a workshop production.



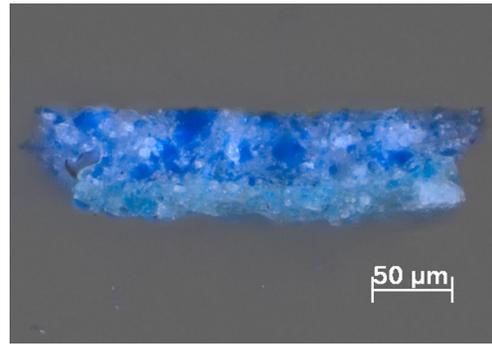
Veronese's signature, as it appears on the lower right-hand side of the canvas

I went to Seattle with the tasks of treating the painting and studying its materials and technique to allow for a newly informed evaluation of its relation to other works by Veronese. In particular, I set out to compare *Venus and Adonis* with the similar paintings in New York, a technical study of which had just been published by Dorothy Mahon '80, Silvia Centeno, Mark Wypyski '95, Xavier Solomon, and Andrea Bayer in the first volume of *Metropolitan Museum Studies in Art, Science, and Technology*. The authors generously consulted with me on several occasions when I brought paint cross-sections I had prepared in Seattle and X-rays of the painting to the Sherman Fairchild Paintings Conservation Center at The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



X-radiograph showing the seam between left and right canvases

The canvas support of *Venus and Adonis* is identical in assembly, weave, and thread count to that of the Frick's *Virtue and Vice* and The Metropolitan Museum's *Mars and Venus*—the supports of all three paintings are made from two pieces of plain weave canvas sewn together, the wider of which (the full sixteenth-century loom width of approximately a meter) is on the left. The luminous blue sky of *Venus and Adonis* was painted in the same technique used in the two Frick paintings—a layer of azurite was applied under the



Cross section from sky showing the ultramarine layer over azurite layer

surface layer of ultramarine, with a little lead white in both layers. Layering ultramarine over other blue pigments was one of several means by which artists used this most costly pigment to maximum impact and economy. Accordingly, in all three paintings the azurite layer underlies the foliage, while the ultramarine layer is applied around the leaves. A good deal of ultramarine was also used to rich effect in combination with red lake in Venus's lilac gown. The study of the New York pictures found many similarities among the three paintings, as well as differences that confirm they were not made as a set. I have found that in terms of material and technique *Venus and Adonis* has as much in common with Veronese's three New York mythologies as they do with each other.

One of the most confusing parts of the composition is the tapestry, fastened in the bower behind the figures. Analysis of cross-sections revealed that this area was painted in layers of azurite, smalt and red lake. Because the smalt layer has decolorized, the area does not look the way it was originally intended. We now understand that the tapestry must once have been a rich purple fabric with subtle color shifts defining the pattern.

While the varnish removal was fairly straightforward, and the removal of old restorations slightly more complicated, the retouching phase of the project was by far the most challenging. During cleaning the painting's condition was revealed to be worse than antici-



Detail illustrating the use of ultramarine around the leaf edges



Detail of the tapestry showing discoloration of the smalt layer

pated. Luckily, however, the faces of Venus and Adonis are remarkably well preserved. The damage and abrasion of the paint surface suggest the painting suffered a nineteenth-century lining and harsh cleaning—likely with caustic soda. The flesh-tones, where subtle shading had been lost, were particularly difficult to restore. To reconstruct Adonis's right knee, lost largely down to the canvas, we even used a studio model (thankfully found in house!), posed and lit like Adonis.

The treatment has already initiated a re-evaluation of the painting. Scholars who were able to see the painting while it was at the Conservation Center agreed that it is largely by Veronese, likely from the decade of the 1570s. I am now working on an article detailing the treatment and findings. *Venus and Adonis* is on view at the Ringling Museum until April 14th, at which time it will return to the Seattle Art Museum to reclaim its place in the galleries of the permanent collection. •

—Katie Patton '12

Katie is a paintings conservator currently living in Rome



A live model was photographed for the conservators to refer to while reconstructing Adonis's right knee

In The News

Congratulations to our first-year student Amy Brost and her husband, photographer Harvey Wang, on the arrival of their baby boy, Leo, born January 18, 2013.



photo credit: Tim and Diane Knightswander, Katie Patton '12, Harvey Wang