

Norman Muller '72

A dialogue with paintings conservation student Rita Berg



Norman Muller is a paintings conservator at the Princeton University Art Museum and a graduate of the Institute of Fine Arts, earning his MA in art history and Advanced Certificate in conservation. Prior to his appointment at the Princeton University Art Museum

in 1981, Mr. Muller held positions at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Worcester Art Museum. He has published extensively on fourteenth-century Siense panel paintings, Italian and Northern Renaissance, and nineteenth-century American paintings techniques. Mr. Muller recently corresponded with conservation student Rita Berg about his current investigation into the development of early panel paintings.

Q *In a recent study, you explore the origins of Marian icons in the West and suggest an immediate link between the Christian icon cult and the late antique panel paintings, in particular the depictions of the goddess Isis in Egypt. What are some of your findings that indicate a direct influence of late antique Egyptian panels on Western icons?*

The connection is twofold: 1. Iconographical with respect to the depiction of Mary and Jesus in medieval icons and the origin of the theme in paintings of Isis and Harpocrates in late Egyptian painting. Isis is the only goddess of Antiquity who is regularly shown with her infant son. 2. Technical in that the paintings in our corpus are similar to medieval panel paintings—the support is wood, the ground is gypsum gesso, and the binding medium of the paint is largely egg. Furthermore, in Roman paintings from Egypt, we also find folding doors or wings to shrines or triptychs, and painted haloes on some figures.

Q *Many people may not be familiar with the late antique Egyptian panel paintings. Could you tell us a little about this tradition and briefly describe their materials and techniques?*

The paintings we have been studying are largely Roman in style and date, following the tradition of Greek painting, which was introduced into Egypt in the fourth century B.C.E. The Romans imposed their own style and technique of painting on the Egyptian model, although Egyptian stylistic and iconographic influences are also apparent in some paintings. One of the best preserved paintings we have examined is a wooden “tondo” representing the emperor Septimius Severus and his family in Berlin.



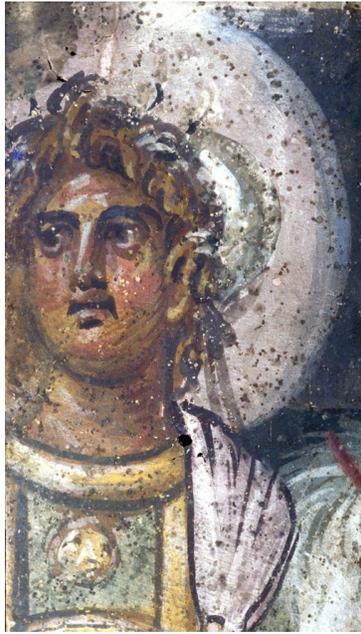
Septimius Severus and His Family, Staatliche Museum, Berlin

While painted in a tempera technique on a gesso ground, we have not been able to pinpoint the exact nature of the paint medium: whether it is egg or some other aqueous binder, such as glue or gum. We do find in this painting an overall grey preparation over the white gesso, which served to modify the tonality of the colors applied on top. The artist also used a four color palette. And unlike so many paintings in our corpus, we are able to date this work to 197 C.E., and have found references to it being a temple offering. Another painting in our corpus,

a fragment representing Isis lactans, was a domestic chapel offering.

Q *How did you become interested in the topic?*

I had spent decades studying early Italian painting techniques, focusing on Sieneese fourteenth-century painting, and collaborating with several experts in the field, such as Erling Skaug, Mojmir Frinta, and Joseph Polzer, all of whom incorporate halo tooling studies in their research. Then, in 2000, Thomas Mathews, John Langeloth Loeb Professor of the History of Art Emeritus at the Institute of Fine Arts, contacted me and asked if I'd be interested in joining him in a study of a small group of ancient Roman panel paintings from Egypt. Not the Fayum paintings most are familiar with, which are mostly painted in encaustic, but Roman paintings of gods and goddesses, painted in an egg tempera technique, an example being a figure of one of the Dioscuri in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo. Because of my experience with Italian fourteenth-century panel paintings, I found the prospect of studying paintings that were the probable progenitors of Early Christian art enticing, and so I agreed to join Tom in this study, with my role focusing on the technical aspects of the paintings.



One of the Dioscuri (detail) from the Egyptian Museum, Cairo—note the painted halo

Q *In your investigation, you work closely with Professor Mathews and Egyptologist Vincent Rondot, Directeur de Recherche, Centre Nationale de Recherche Scientifique, Paris. How has this collaboration contributed to your research?*

The collaboration, from my standpoint at least, has been fruitful. By working together as a team, each of us has benefited from the expert knowledge of the other two members. When I began working with Tom Mathews, the material nature of these Roman panel paintings was largely unknown, and everything I was exposed to was new and fascinating. Rondot's deep knowledge of Egyptian iconography of the Late Antique period provided insight and historical perspective to the technical nature of the paintings I was focusing on. And Tom Mathews's broad knowledge of Early Christian and Byzantine art, and his belief that the paintings we were examining were the progenitors of Early Christian art, neatly meshed with how I perceived the technical similarities between Roman panel paintings and early Italian painting. Unfortunately, the Egyptian government did not permit any paint sampling, so our conclusions were based solely on visual interpretations.

Q *What role does conservation science play in your research? How important do you feel it is for a conservator to have access to conservation scientists or other specialists to aid in analysis?*

Conservation science is an integral part of the work I and other conservators do as, in order to make sound judgments about what

steps are necessary to conserve an art object, we need to understand fully what materials and techniques went into its manufacture and how these might have been damaged or compromised over time. By having this information, we can determine just what can be done to stabilize a work of art and ensure that whatever materials we use will not seriously alter its appearance and at the same time be reversible. Furthermore, what we learn about the technical nature of an object can sometimes have art historical implications.

Q *And lastly, what are some challenges in the conservation of early panel paintings?*

From a conservation standpoint, we know very little at the present time about the specific materials the artists used for these paintings, such as the kind of wood supports they favored, and the physical and chemical changes that have occurred to these paintings over millennia. We must have answers to these questions before we determine what can be done to stabilize them. Many of these early panel paintings are in fragile condition, with the paint layer often covered with grime and the paint poorly bound, caused by desiccation of the binding media over time. Introducing adhesives to consolidate the paint could change its visual appearance, darkening the paint, and this must be evaluated when contemplating any conservation intervention. Also, one of the major problems museums face, such as those in Egypt and even here in the U.S., is funding. •

—Rita Berg

Rita is a third-year paintings conservation student

Sieneese painter: Simone Martini

Ever since I began to study the techniques of Sieneese fourteenth-century painting in 1975, this area of art has never ceased to fascinate, and no Sieneese artist of that period has captured my admiration more than Simone Martini, who, to me, was not only a brilliant artist, but a first-rate technical innovator, too. For example, an article of mine of long gestation, titled "In a New Light: The Origins of Reflective Halo Tooling in Siena," was published last year in the *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*. The article focused on the changing perception of halo tooling in Siena from the thirteenth century through the fourteenth century and beyond. In the thirteenth century and long before, halo tooling was viewed as dark indentations against the bright reflecting surface of burnished gold. Then, in the early fourteenth century, Simone Martini experimented with light reflecting off low relief and intaglio designs, beginning with his frescoed *Maestà* in Siena from 1315, and came up with the concept of *granare a rilievo*, or "tooling in relief," whereby the tooling was perceived as painting with light, in which the indentations indicated the direction of the light source and was also used to create three-dimensional modeling. This idea shift occurred around 1320, just when full halo tooling was introduced, also by Simone. A second article of mine, also published in 2012, dealt with Simone Martini's introduction of paper into his frescoed *Maestà* of 1315. This two-page article, titled "Paper in Simone Martini's Frescoed *Maestà*," appeared in *The Quarterly*, the Journal of the British Association of Paper Historians. Simone Martini glued paper to the scroll held by the Christ Child, and also applied two pieces of paper for the book in the roundel representing Saint Jerome, in the lower left corner of the fresco. To me, this is not only the earliest example of the use of paper in European painting, but it is also a fascinating study of illusionism, and a rare, early example of collage. —Norman Muller

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