

## Interiors



As one of Britain's leading art conservators, Simon Gillespie spends much of his day up close to some of the world's greatest masterpieces

Pictures: SIMON GILLESPIE STUDIO

# Up close and personal

Zita Whalley speaks to Camden resident and one of Britain's top art conservators Simon Gillespie, about the things he learns when treating great works of art

**F**or those of you missing your loved ones right now, here is a little story of hope: In the late 70s, when art conservator Simon Gillespie was undertaking his apprenticeship, he was treating a large 17th century portrait of a woman sitting on a chair.

As he started to clean the painting, the Camden resident noticed the bottom right-hand corner had around three squared feet cut out of the original canvas, which had been previously hidden by a century worth of overpaint.

"We sat on the painting for about nine months wondering what to do with it," Simon recalls.

It was at that time another painting came the studio's way. It was roughly three squared feet and of a boy playing with his mother's silk dress behind him, who happened to be the woman

sitting on the chair in the first painting. After who knows how long the pair had been separated for – probably for financial gain Simon suggests – the mother and son were together once again.

"What are the chances of reunion like that?" I ask Simon as we chat on the phone.

"About one in a million," he replies.

As head of his own conservation studio and as the resident conservation expert on BBC Four's Britain's Lost Masterpieces, Simon spends much of his days up close - forensically so - to artworks created by the world's greatest artists including Rembrandt, Picasso and Rubens, as well by contemporary greats such as Banksy.

There are three branches to what Simon does: conservation, restoration, and helping with authentication and attribution,



Art conservation and restoration is painstaking and meticulous work

all of which is painstaking and meticulous work which lets him get to know the person who painted it, as well as the life of a

painting. "A Tudor painting can't be brought back to when it was painted because it has lived such a life and was hung in the most

extraordinary places," says Simon.

For example, the painting may have been commissioned by the



**The artwork Simon Gillespie Studio treats are from all periods in all styles. Paintings in this picture (L-R) are by modern artist Gillian Ayres and Baroque artist Artemisia Gentileschi**

owner of a baronial hall and passed down by inheritance over the centuries, ending up forgotten about in storage, perhaps in a stately home barn.

“And some of the paintings commissioned by churches in Venice have never been cleaned in 400, 500 years,” he goes on to say. “You can see the history of a painting, and we try to preserve that history as much as we can.”

The artwork he restores has been damaged by the wear and tear of time; by mistreatment such as over-cleaning, being painted over or cut up, as the portrait of the mother and son had been.

His studio has worked paintings damaged by forklifts many a time and recently they treated four paintings that had been pierced by the same forklift, creating identical damage in each of the canvases.

Simon also once treated a family portrait painted in the 1600s by a Tudor painter which depicted nine siblings - four boys and five girls. All the children, bar the smallest of the girls, had their eyes scratched out, and Simon suspects this was done by that smallest of girls, perhaps in a fit of childhood rage.

But the real detective work lies in the process of working with art historians on authentication and attribution, where the elements of the painting are thoroughly analysed. Simon and his team use specialised photography such as infrared and X-ray, and study the artwork at hand looking at techniques and materials to see if they are consistent with a

particular artist to help determine who painted it or whether it is the real deal or not.

“There are some incredibly good fakers,” he says. “Normally, a faker will recognise an artist they like and get to know their technique and copy it year-to-year, week-to-week, but eventually, he will get caught.

“Sometimes pure fakes are painted on top of old paintings that were modern at that time,” he adds. “Fakers from the 18th century didn’t predict that we would someday have the knowledge to analyse their techniques.”

Depending on the problem and the artwork, Simon may call on an expert of a particular artist or period, or of a particular problem, say a wood specialist who can analyse warpage and tree rings. “We’re a bit like the doctors on Harley Street where people come in with all sorts of ailments,” he says. “Some treatments are carried out quickly, but a massive heart problem is quite invasive with a lot of people involved.

“For a major treatment on a famous painting, we try to cross-reference with people who have a good knowledge of the issue.”

Simon also studies the technique of a painter and looks out for “tell-tale signs” to figure out if the painting was painted by the hand of a faker, a great master or by their studio team.

“Some of the greatest painters were so miraculous at what they did and their paintings are extraordinary works of art. No matter how good the students



**Simon’s work contributed to the rediscovery of a masterpiece by Artemisia Gentileschi, a Baroque artist who was “written out of history” largely for her “gruesome” subject matter** Picture: OLIVER ROBINSON

working in their studios were, they were not as great.

“They didn’t live and breathe what they were painting,” Simon goes on to say. “For them, it was a job. They were craftsmen and they were employed because they were good copyists.”

He gives the example of Flemish painter Rubens whose large workshop team were tasked with completing the larger, years-long commissions. Although these paintings wore his signature, they

didn’t carry the tiny details that have become the painter’s trademark. “When Rubens painted the eye of a portrait,” Simon explains, “he would turn the brush around and use the handle to scratch the eyelash into the wet paint.

“It’s a little technique you can see,” he adds, “and nine times out of 10, he’s done it.”

Simon says it is a privilege to work on paintings made by the world’s greatest artists, even

though at times, he doesn’t realise what he is working on until towards the end of the process (case in point: the Raphael which sits on his desk that came to him looking like a 20th century poster covered in dirt and overpaint). However, getting up close to these masterpieces offers him a simpler pleasure too.

“A good painting, in good condition,” he says, “is a cracking thing to look at.”

[simongillespie.com](http://simongillespie.com)