

# TRACE PUBLICATION

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### Restorer in Focus

Simon Gillespie has been a restorer for 24 years, specialising in oil paintings, works in tempera and wall and ceiling paintings, Early English pictures and Old Masters.

His experience and enthusiasm for the trade mean that he is a source of countless anecdotes and obscure facts about everything from pigments to English history. A hundred years ago, he tells Trace, there was a craze for a pigment called 'mummy', made from exhumed mummified bodies. Apothecaries used to import ground-up remains from two grave robbers in Egypt, claiming that the powder prolonged life. When medicinal sales lagged, they sold it to the colour men as a dark brown pigment. Another interesting case is of 'Indian yellow'; a pigment made in India from the urine of cows fed on mangoes but now, alas, no longer use.

Gillespie's personal passion is for British 16th century paintings, because they are 'almost' exclusively portraits of interesting historical figures'. One of the greatest finds he ever worked on is the only known portrait of Prince Arthur, elder brother of Henry VIII, which now hangs in Hampton Court Palace. The 15-year-old Arthur married Catherine of Aragon, but the marriage was never consummate before his death, ages 16, making way for his lady-killer younger brother. 'When we first saw the picture it had been altered to look like a Holbein, with overpaint and additional panels.'

Simon Gillespie helped research and acquire paintings for the world famous Berger collection, which is soon to have a permanent home at Denver Art Museum. Nowadays, about half of his time is spent advising potential buyers on the condition of paintings coming up for sale.

### Condition report

These are the professionals' methods of inspection:

- Thoroughly inspect the painting for damage or restoration with a strong torch or in daylight.
- Look at the paint surface in reflected or raking light to locate any bumps or dents, holes or flakes.
- Study the back as well as the front of a canvas. Auctioneers will often let you take a picture out of its frame to look for damage or relining.
- Use UV light to reveal later retouchings. Salerooms will allow you to bring in your own UV lamp, but seek the interpretation of an expert – a thin glaze can easily be misread as overpaint. New paint normally shows dark; old varnish tends to be opaque and greenish, making it difficult to see the paint film.

- X-rays taken in the workshop can show up losses or damage hidden by overpaint. X-ray photos also reveal preliminary sketches and the artist's changes of direction.
- Infra-red scan show the artist's original drawing lines, which is useful to determine attributions.
- Dendrochronology can be used to date a panel, whilst microscopic cross-sections can reveal differing paint layers and pigments. Pigment analysis can be used to provide a terminus post quem for pictures; for instance Prussian blue was first used in 1724.