

The Treatment of Jurriaen Jacobsen ‘Michiel de Ruyter and his Family’ (By Luciana Åkerlund)

I was approached by the Rijksmuseum in the summer of 2013 to work on the family portrait of the celebrated Admiral de Ruyter. The painting had been passed down within the de Ruyter family until it had entered the museum collection in 1914. Although the painting had undergone restoration treatment as recently as 1989, the face of one of Michiel’s daughters was a reconstruction that did not blend in to the surrounding composition and it therefore needed to be readdressed.

For the first half of the project I had the privilege of working alongside Michel van de Laar, a Senior Conservator who worked at the Rijksmuseum for over 25 years. Due to such a short cleaning cycle, our approach was to be as non-invasive as possible and to focus on the areas that were problematic, namely the face of Margaretha.

During the project, we were fortunate to meet the restorer who had treated the painting in the 1980’s. It was humbling to know he was supportive of the treatment decision that we’d made. It was also enlightening to get to learn of the difficulties that he had encountered at the time and of the various materials that he’d used for his restoration treatment.



With a reconstruction of this magnitude, information from the existing original paint is essential. We knew that we would have to fully clean the particular area, removing any existing varnish and overpaint. The removal of the restoration work from 1989 uncovered the remnants of even older fillings and overpaint. This was the base on which the previous restorer had created his reconstruction, but advancements in conservation materials meant that we were able to safely remove this older overpaint and fully uncover the remnants of the original paint below.

We found that Margaretha’s eyes, nose and neck were largely missing, and that her lips were non-existent. However, an exciting and important discovery was a tiny island of original paint

under an old fill, which suggested that her lips should actually be positioned slightly higher up than they had been. The neck of the girl had also been reconstructed too narrow in comparison with the other family members and this had given her a protruding head, drawing further attention to her face.

The restoration of the face was quite daunting as I had no other images of Margaretha to work from, but I still wanted to be as realistic as possible with the features that I gave her. I found that the best source material for this was to come from her little sister Anna and her stepsister Alida, and as there was to be a lot of painting involved, I think that my background in Fine Art was most helpful in this situation. During the initial stages we had a surgeon visit us and give us his opinion on the reconstruction of the face from an anatomical point of view. My approach was then to begin by filling in the abrasion and small losses in the face as this gave it fullness and helped me see the natural progression of the forms.

As Margaretha is positioned at eye-level to the viewer and in a prominent area of the painting, one's gaze is immediately drawn to her face. My aim with the reconstruction was to give her enough of a similarity that she would blend in with the rest of her family without blindly copying the others' facial features. I had been convinced from the start that the reconstruction of the lips was going to be the most problematic, however, it turned out that the eyes were the most difficult element to recreate. Subtle changes in the shapes of the lids, irises and pupils had a large impact on their overall appearance. Although frustrating at times, patience and perseverance were key.

I learnt that although planning is important, there comes a time where you simply have to pick up a brush and begin. Using water soluble materials meant that I had the freedom to remove and re-paint the missing features as many times as I needed to without affecting the surrounding paint.

There were times where I struggled to look at my work objectively as I had spent such a long time working closely on the face. Therefore throughout the reconstruction process, I found that it was important to get other people's opinions on the progress. It was an absolute pleasure working with the conservators and curators of the Rijksmuseum, and I was always grateful for their constructive criticism.

I did find that it was tricky at first to reintegrate the cleaned area and reconstructed face into the surrounding varnish, but I am confident that we made the right treatment decision for this situation. Throughout the retouching process I was aware of the importance of applying a softness to her face so as not to draw attention to the fact that it was largely a contemporary reconstruction, and I have thus far received positive feedback.

Although I had some prior experience working with large-scale paintings, this was by far the most challenging retouching that I had undertaken. It has also turned out to be the most rewarding and satisfying. This proved to be a wonderful learning experience for me as well in terms of the treatment approach and the use of new materials, and by the end of it I had gained an immense amount of confidence in my retouching abilities.

I am very happy with the final outcome, and it's satisfying to know that the painting will now be on display to the public. My thanks go to the Stichting Michiel de Ruyter and the Rijksmuseum for making this project possible!

Next pages:

- Curriculum Vitae Luciana Åkerlund
- Pictures reconstruction Margaretha

The painting is exhibited at the Museum of Fine Arts (Budapest, Hu) and will return Feb 2015.

Curriculum Vitae Luciana Åkerlund

LANGUAGES: Fluent in **English, Spanish** and **Swedish**.

EDUCATION

Goldsmiths College, University of London, UK. 2005-2008
Foundation and BA Honours Fine Art (Studio Practice & Contemporary Critical Studies).

Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, UK. 2009-2012
Postgraduate Diploma in the Conservation of Easel Paintings. Graduated: July 2012.

Treated paintings: 17th C Dutch panel (Delft School); unlined 18th C military portrait (D. Morier); lined 18th C military portrait (unknown artist); 20th C oil sketch (P. De Laszlo)

WORK EXPERIENCE

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands (Aug 2013 – Sept 2014)
Partial treatment of a 17th C family portrait of Admiral de Ruyter by J. Jacobsen (1962)

Stichting Restauratie Atelier Limburg (SRAL), Maastricht, Holland (Sept 2012 - Apr 2013)
Treatments: Dutch 18th C church painting, 20th C 'Panorama Burgerhout' from the Rotterdam Maritime Museum, and a 16th C heraldic shield from the Knights of the Golden Fleece (Grote Kerk, Den Haag).

29th Annual Gerry Hedley Student Symposium, London, England (Jan - June 2011)
Organising committee. Conference attended by conservation students and professionals.

Marble Hill House (National Trust property), London, England (Oct 2010 - March 2011)
Environmental survey resulting in a final report with recommendations for improvements.

All Hallows by the Tower, London, England (October 2010)
In-situ work. Treatment of the church's altarpiece, The Last Supper by Brian Thomas (1957).

Guildhall Art Gallery, London, England (Summer 2010)
Treatment of R. Todd's 'Portrait of Sir Norman Prichard'; daily museum activities incl. condition checking, exhibition preparation, environmental monitoring.

Reconstructing Margaretha



Fig.1. The 1989 restoration of Margaretha de Ruyter
(c) Rijksmuseum Amsterdam



Fig.2. During cleaning of the most recent overpaint
(c) Rijksmuseum Amsterdam



Fig.3. Fills and retouchings from before 1989
(c) Rijksmuseum Amsterdam



Fig.4. After full cleaning, before filling of the losses
(c) Rijksmuseum Amsterdam



Fig.5. Filling of the losses
(c) Rijksmuseum Amsterdam



Fig.6. A green base layer for the reconstruction
(c) Rijksmuseum Amsterdam



Fig.7. During the filling of small losses and abrasions
(c) Rijksmuseum Amsterdam

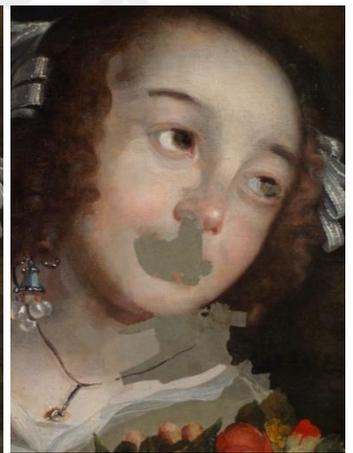


Fig.8. During reconstruction of the nose and eyes
(c) Rijksmuseum Amsterdam



Fig.9. During reconstruction of the neck and earring
(c) Rijksmuseum Amsterdam



Fig.10. During the final stage of retouching
(c) Rijksmuseum Amsterdam



Fig.11. After treatment.
(c) Rijksmuseum Amsterdam

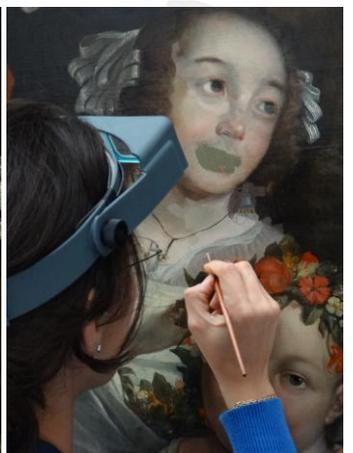


Fig.12. Luciana Åkerlund, reconstructing Margaretha
(c) Rijksmuseum Amsterdam