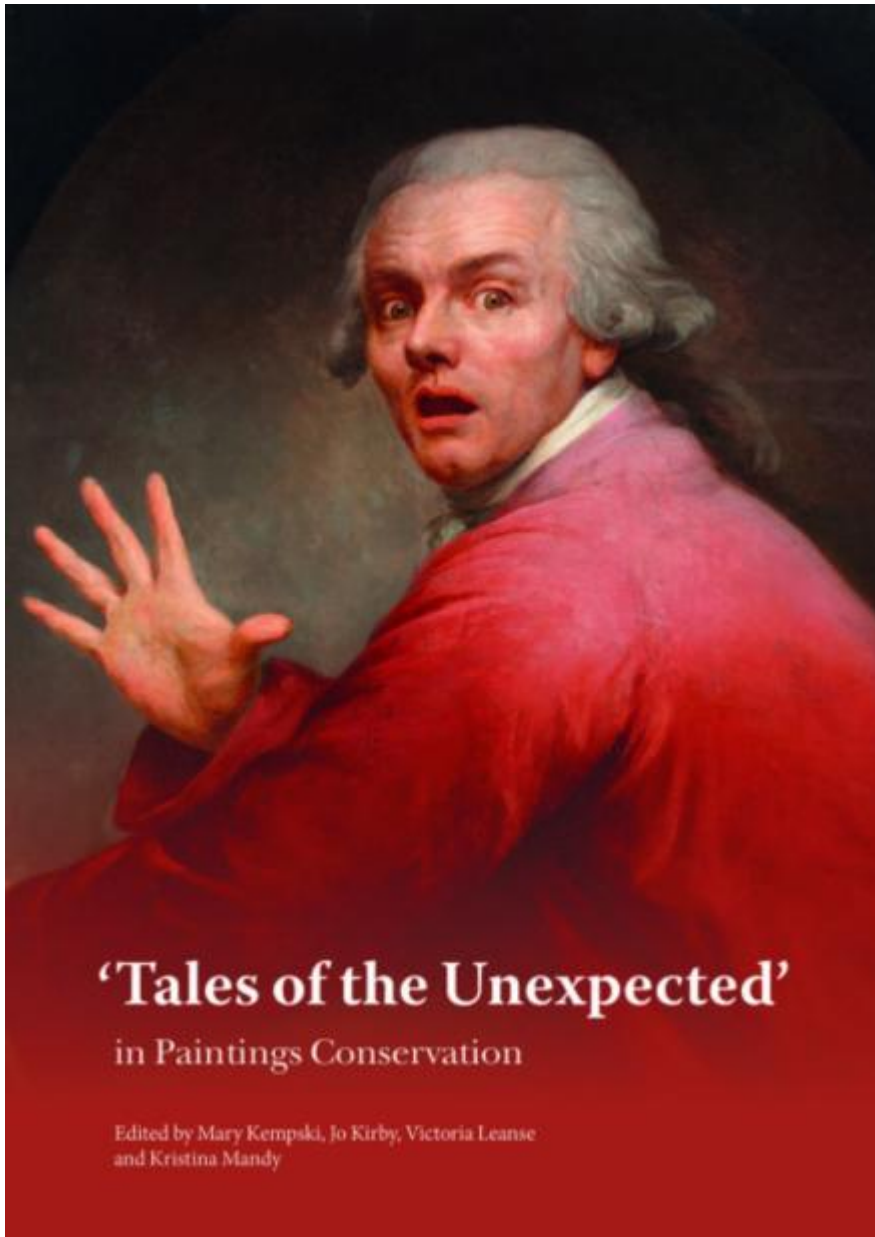


Book Review: Tales of the Unexpected' in



'Tales of the Unexpected' in Paintings Conservation

Edited by Mary Kempski, Jo Kirby, Victoria Leanse
and Kristina Mandy

Reviewed by Raissa Palacios

'Tales of the Unexpected' in Painting Conservation
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Art conservation is full of surprising discoveries that sometimes turn out to be the greatest blisses in the profession. The book 'Tales of the Unexpected' in Painting Conservation is a compilation of the papers presented at the British Association of Paintings Conservator-Restorers (BAPCR) conference 'Tales of the Unexpected' held in London in 2020.

The papers in this volume look at unexpected aspects in paintings from a variety of periods and places of origin and from a range of perspectives such as practical, technical, historical and ethical. For example, in 2019, in the vaults of Trinity College (Cambridge), the triptych Entombment Flanked by Saint Barbara and Saint Catherine of Alexandria was found. During the extensive project that followed, technical and art historical analyses applied to the 19th-century painting helped to rediscover, under layers of overpaint, an early 16th-century composition. Further investigation revealed that the painting was a banco which is the lowest part of an altarpiece.

Other papers in this text fall within a similar vein. One example is a paper written by Emma Boyce Gore which describes the conservation treatment, technical study and art historical research of the Portrait of Sir Thomas Le Strange and its relationship with two other portrait paintings (Sir Nicholas Le Strange and Katherine Hide) from the collection of the Le Strange family of Hunstanton. It is fascinating to see how dendrochronological analysis played an important role in establishing connections between the Tudor panels. Clearly the results contribute to a better understanding of 16th-century painting.

The paper, authored by Marta Melchiorre Di Crescenzo, Catherine Higgitt, Rachel Billinge and Marika Spring, explains the application of long-established norms of technical imaging (X-radiography and IRR) which still play an important role in the examination and diagnosis of artworks. Additionally, the article introduces us to the benefits of newer techniques in the cultural heritage field such as macro-X-ray fluorescence (MA-XRF) and both scanning and reflectance hyperspectral imaging (HSI), which are gradually becoming more common for chemically characterizing painting materials but are still not widely accessible.

Practice has shown us that the individual application of these techniques can, of course, provide invaluable information. However, their combined use enables a better visualization of the artwork allowing us to discover details that may lead to obtaining a wider range of data regarding materials, composition, etc. of an artwork. This results in more accurate conservation treatments. Di Crescenzo, et al. mentioned how the combined application of MA-XRF scanning and HSI was able to unveil a great tale of the unexpected in Leonardo da Vinci's Virgin of the Rocks by revealing a delightful composition underneath the painting as well as more data, demonstrating the potential for non-destructive imaging techniques in artwork research.

"Discovering Beuckeler", authored by Alice Tate-Harte and Rachel Turnbull, offers another perspective by reminding us how pivotal multidisciplinary work is for the conservation profession,

highlighting the importance of following ethical guidelines in the decisions-making process of artwork treatments. This is also clearly seen in the conservation treatment of the painting *The Vegetable Seller*. When the team carried out the cleaning process and overpaint removal, they revealed an exquisite painting that was, in the words of the author, “potentially 200 years older than its catalogued record—an unexpected survival from the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century”.

Miranda Brain and Jon Old's paper “When is a landscape not a landscape? When it's a portrait!” also focuses on the ethical issues to be considered during conservation treatments, specifically when a painting by one artist is found on top of one by another artist. As the authors expressed, “[the] treatment of complex art works is fraught with difficulty” (p. 62). Their paper is a good example of the difficulty found not only in balancing ethical requirements with a conservator's own judgement in decision-making during conservation treatments, but also in understanding that any ethical considerations that yield good practice are dynamic and, consequently, may adapt to different circumstances.

Jae Youn Chung, Mary Kempinski and David Pegg make it clear that the unexpected is not always underneath, but can be in front of, our eyes, specifically in the materials and techniques used to accomplish an artwork as in the case of Dutch painter Jan van der Heyden's secret. Analysis revealed the secret method that allowed the artist to achieve such impressive fine detail in his final paint layers. This revelation is one of the jewels that must be discovered in this book.

Technology, and therefore knowledge, in the conservation profession is always progressing. So acknowledging the importance of having open access to scientific literature that details materials, methods and data—as a means of contributing tremendously towards closing the knowledge-action gap in conservation—is, in my opinion, one of the key points of the *Tales of the Unexpected* conference proceedings.

This book should be considered a great tool, not only for those in the early stages of their career, but for those who have already come a long way in painting conservation. Readers can immerse themselves in the scientific side of conservation where technical analysis and diagnostic tools are used to better understand how and why objects were made and, consequently, how to better preserve them, savouring all the trials and details involved in the rediscovery of paintings hidden or compromised by earlier interventions.

AUTHOR BIO

Raissa Palacios is an objects conservator. Her interest lies in the research of organic and sustainable materials to be used in conservation treatments, improving sustainability in the art conservation profession. Raissa has a master's degree in Diagnosis of the State of Conservation of Cultural Heritage and has worked as a conservator at the National Institute of Cultural Heritage of Ecuador and in Ecuadorian Museums.

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