A Study of Regional Painting Practice: Technical Analysis of Three Late 16th Century British Painted Memorial Portraits

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Introduction
Much attention is currently being paid to the influx of foreign craftsmen and the practices of court-favoured commissions; however I believe that the truly authentic British School of painting of the period is to be found in the churches and homes of the regional aristocracy. Although the evidence of court portraiture has offered a view of common materials and techniques used, perhaps more representative example of authentic painting was that of funerary monuments and memento mori, commissioned by the aristocratic classes outside London and the court.

The Stradling family memorial panels (see Figs.1-3) were painted by a likely heraldic-trained craftsman, ‘Byrd’, in 1590, commissioned by Sir Edward Stradling V to hang in the family chapel constructed by his father. This research examined the painting technique used in the execution of these works, including pigment palette, application, brushwork, underdrawing techniques such as pouncing, gridding and scoring, and the use of patterns. A range of investigative methods were employed in this study, including X-Radiography and Infra-red Reflectography, with identification of pigments and materials present using microscopy and instrumental analytical methods such as SEM-EDX and XRF.

Surface Examination
Microscopic examination and instrumental analytical methods indicate that the craftsman first applied an initial ground of coarse chalk to smooth the surface of the wooden panel, likely English oak due to the local nature of the commission. A thicker, smoother lead white ground layer was applied on top of this (see Fig.6), followed by a tinted ochre priming layer.

Infra-red Reflectography revealed details of facial features such as the nose outline which exhibited possible sketch lines (see Fig.7), with microscopic examination resulting in the discovery of possible pouncing remnants of pouncing lines along facial features, gridding along the floor-boards likely in an attempt by the artist to create gentle perspective (see Fig.5), and score-tlines along details of the coats of-arms (see Fig.8). The tracing of the facial profiles suggested that a pattern was used in their execution (see Fig.8).

Base colours were first applied, followed by highlights in areas of detail such as the costume embellishments, jewellery and heraldic shields (see Figs. 10-19). Gold leaf still survives in areas of the shields and was likely present in the jewellery of the figures since severely abraded.

Current Conclusions
Compared with technical information collected by institutions such as the National Gallery London, the National Portrait Gallery London and Tate, all of which have carried out and documented technical analysis of works of a similar period and origin, we conclude that Byrd’s palette includes almost a full range of pigment in use during the period. Due to the nature of these works, the wide range and sometimes considerable cost of the pigments used is surprising. The Stradling family had strong connections to the Elizabethan court, and so it is by no means unimaginable that they would have had access to a more refined court painter if desired.

In continuation of this research, careful examination and documentation in a technical context of the further existing examples of such painted funerary works would be extremely interesting in comparison against the information gathered from the Stradling panels and could be extremely important in presenting an authentic view of painting practice in Tudor Britain.

Pigment Analysis
The pigment palette detected was consistent with evidence gathered from other paintings contemporary to these works, including copper based blues and greens, vermilion, red lake, red lead, earth pigments and a carbon-based black.

Four painted sites were isolated for sample analysis, incorporating the red of the inscription border and green of the drapery in Edward V and Agnes, the blue plume of the knight’s helmet in Thomas and Jenet and the purple sleeve from Edward IV and Elisabeth. It was felt that these areas of paint layer were suitably representative.

The relatively simple layer structure of the samples support the evidence provided by photomicrographs and microscopic examination suggesting that thin paint layers were applied initially, with overlying detail applied in areas of decoration indicated by evident layering.

Of the four sites sampled, the blue was constructed of azurite and malachite with lead white (see (Figs.24-25), the red of vermilion and red lead (see Figs.22-23), the green with a large range including red lake, terre verte and earth pigments and a combination of red lake and azurite (see Figs.26-27). The appearance of the pigments under microscopy suggested hand-grounding, with large uneven fragments evident.

In this study, including X-Radiography and Infra-red Reflectography, with identification of pigments and materials present using microscopy and instrumental analytical methods such as SEM-EDX and XRF.