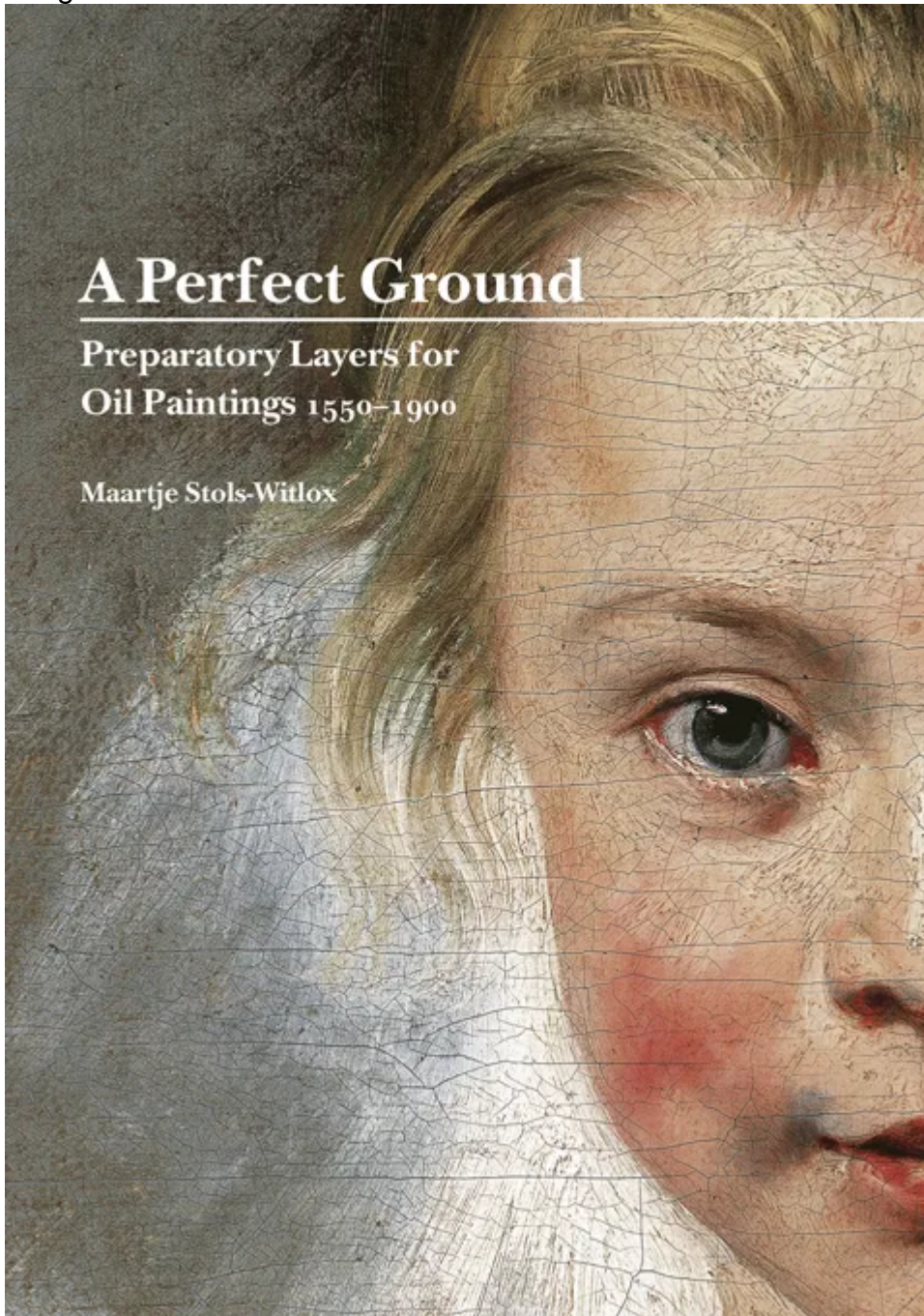


Book Review: A Perfect Ground: Preparatory Layers for Oil Paintings 1550-1900

Submitted by sharragrow on 10 May 2024

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Review by Rebekka Katajisto

***A Perfect Ground: Preparatory Layers for Oil Paintings 1550-1900*, By Maartje Stols-Witlox, Archetype Publications Ltd: London (2017), Hardback £85 / 412 pages (ISBN 9781909492356)**

Artists across the ages have employed an enormous variety of materials and techniques in preparing and applying preparatory layers to artworks to achieve certain aesthetic and physical qualities. A wealth of historical recipes and artists' manuals detail processes that interest artists including those related to stability, texture, application, materials and visual effects. As the first comprehensive account of the materials and techniques that appear in historical artists' recipes regarding preparatory layers, *A Perfect Ground* by Dr Maartje Stols-Witlox is a welcome and much-anticipated addition to this body of literature.

The first chapters of the book establish the often-confusing terminology of grounds and give an overview of the recipes including their authors, geographical origin, publication type and their impact. The subsequent chapters follow a structured narrative, thoroughly examining the chronological developments spanning the period between 1400 and 1900 in Northwest Europe, shedding light on the evolution of preparatory layer recipes. From panel paintings with preparatory layers of chalk or gypsum bound in glue, the development into coloured grounds on canvas and more complex ingredients is established.

Discussion unfolds regarding the materials described in these recipes and the functions of each ingredient within the mixture. Different aqueous and oil-based binders, pigments, size layers, fillers and solvents used in ground layers are explored. It is shown that artists were often highly aware of issues of flaking, water-sensitivity and brittleness when choosing their materials.

The subsequent chapters delve into the application and texture of preparatory layers, with discussion of tools and consistency of the ground mixture. This is followed by investigations of the colours that were employed by artists, in which Stols-Witlox outlines general trends in ground colour for each period. Considerations of the influence of ground colour on the subject matter and painting technique are particularly interesting.

Evidence of professional primers is found from the 16th century onwards. The author explores the significance of professional primers and the role of commercial suppliers, which often led to a reduction of the artist's influence on the process. Further chapters investigate the deterioration of ground layers as detailed in historical sources. There was great awareness of the impact of different materials, colours and absorbency on the long-term stability of grounds.

A series of more specific topics is examined; historical recipes for size layers, flour paste, lead-white processing methods and 17th-century streaky imprimatura. Each subject is accompanied by reconstructions based on historical recipes. In the case of lead-white processing, cross-section images demonstrate the differences in particle characteristics from each process and how to identify them.

A concluding chapter synthesises the findings, with the following appendices delving into the authors' recipes; comparative overviews; and recipes for canvas, panel, stone, copper, paper

and board preparation as well as further selected topics. The inclusion of annotated and general bibliographies, along with a comprehensive index, enhances the scholarly value of this volume, making it an essential addition to the bookshelves of researchers as a go-to handbook of preparatory layers of easel paintings.

Historical recipes can often be ambiguous, omitting seemingly crucial practical information while including details we may deem unnecessary. Perhaps due to this, the use of reconstructions in the context of ground layers is a tool not yet fully realised until now. The reconstructions in this book have been undertaken with historically informed and appropriate materials, still a concept that is fairly new in our field. Cross-referencing and contextualisation of recipes clarify some of the ambiguous information that can be found in recipes and help to understand the relationship between the theory and practice in the daily life of the artist.

The detailed observation of reconstructions compliments the historical source analysis and information gained by the examination of actual paintings.

Altogether this offers valuable insights into the chemical, physical and visual characteristics of the materials used. As the author notes herself, this publication would make a fantastic model for research into other topics concerning artists' materials and techniques.

The research is not merely limited to paintings on canvas and panel, but also discusses less traditional supports such as stone, copper, board and paper. In my experience, I have found many sources on these materials inaccessible or untranslated.

In conservation literature, the results of technical examination are often presented in individual case studies with little context, making it challenging to draw general conclusions on ground layers. Therefore, the drawing together of recipes in their respective timeframes and contexts in *A Perfect Ground* was particularly refreshing. Furthermore, the book is structured in a clear way, with informative bar graphs and tables summarising the findings. These illustrations effectively convey trends and regional differences, the periods during which each material was introduced and other key findings in easily digestible and accessible ways.

A Perfect Ground is the manifestation of Stols-Witlox's continued study of historical artists' recipes, reconstruction of recipes and the examination and analysis of ground layers on actual paintings. With thorough examination of approximately 1,000 texts, coupled with reconstructions and data from real paintings, it succeeds in its core aims of outlining the material characteristics of grounds, chronicling their use and presenting reasons for these materials' use in grounds. It is a crucial read for both students and researchers within art history and conservation, as well as any paintings conservator. This compendium, with such an extensive overview of preparatory systems, can be a helpful tool in making more informed conservation decisions. By understanding the composition of ground layers, we are more likely to comprehend their internal condition as conservators. *A Perfect Ground* does not only enhance our understanding of ground layers but also becomes a helpful tool in reconstructing artworks by providing recipes from such a wide timeframe.

Author bio

Rebekka Katajisto is a third-year student of conservation of easel paintings at the Hamilton Kerr Institute, University of Cambridge. Her current research interests lie in medieval paintings, with ongoing projects exploring a 15th-century cassone painting and a 15th-century rood screen. (Headshot of Rebekka © University of Cambridge)

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