

June 28, 2019

Dear Future Conservator,

This letter is for you, like a personalized archaeological marker. It serves as an addition to my conservation treatment report of Jan van Goyen's painting *A View of a Town on a River*, which I restored in 2016, and during which I continuously listened to music by the Canadian folk band the Deep Dark Woods (fig. 1). It's strange, but only now does it strike me how well their band name fits with this painting.



Fig. 1 Jan van Goyen, *View of a Town on a River*, 1645. Before treatment. Oil on canvas, 51 1/2 × 65 1/8 in. (131 × 165.3 cm). Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. © Rijksmuseum.

Born in 1596, Van Goyen was one of the most productive Dutch landscape painters of the seventeenth century. About twelve hundred paintings and eight hundred drawings by his hand of specific Dutch places as well as fantasy landscapes have survived. Toward the end of his career, he used a more restricted color palette and produced a vast number of quickly painted landscapes before he died in 1656. The large canvas *View of a Town on a River* was painted and signed by Van Goyen in 1645 and is an example of his monochromatic

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landscapes. The painting has been in the Rijksmuseum's collection since 1808 and is not currently on view in the galleries.

I would like to share some reflections on this painting's treatment and my profession, which are usually not considered to be appropriate for a conservation report but may give you an idea of the context in which, and by whom, this work was restored—something that I wish conservators from the past had done for me. As the treatment and technical research of *View of a Town on a River* turned out to be satisfying yet unremarkable, fitting its ordinary title, my research does not lend itself for publishing in present-day professional scientific literature.

Conservation training in the Netherlands has recently become a proper scientific study. In 2007 I was one of the first students to enroll in a newly established program at the University of Amsterdam, where I learned that the aim of a conservator is to bring a work of art back to its original appearance as much as possible. After my studies, while working on a Rijksmuseum conservation project of the presidential painting collection in Turkey in 2012–13, it became clear that a work's original appearance (if even possible to achieve) is not valued as much as the clean look of a newly restored painting. The audience there was more interested in the current aesthetic appearance of the paintings than the authenticity of the aged materials. At the time, I was convinced that my ethical values, namely conserving the materiality of the objects, were far more important than how the paintings were viewed by the Turkish people. I realize now what that I then did not understand—that artworks are active on many different levels. Materials are activated by the act of making them. The act of conservation adds another level of activity. And there are many more. Conservators are becoming increasingly aware of the implications of these ideas, as indicated by the growing amount of research into aging processes and interest in conservation history. As a conservator, I am aware of being an active agent. This stands somewhat in contrast with a recurring theme in my studies, particularly objectivity or, to be more precise, the rejection of subjectivity. Being trained as an objective scientific conservator, I was taught not to document any personal opinions or reflections on the treatment and the context in which I work. It is possible that this practice has changed whenever you read this letter.

Two weeks ago, Van Goyen's painting popped up in my memory when, after a long and busy day, I finally climbed into bed. Various unrelated thoughts went through my mind and suddenly I remembered that I had forgotten the name of the prominent tree in the work. I found it strange, as I thought of and talked about this tree often and had always previously remembered its name. Although I was tired, I decided to run through the letters of the alphabet, hoping to recognize the right one. After arriving at the letter Y, I dozed off.

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I restored Van Goyen's painting more than three years prior to the day that I forgot the tree's name. At that earlier moment in time, *View of a Town on a River* was selected to be part of a Rijksmuseum exhibition traveling to Sydney in 2017. The painting was still structurally stable enough for transport when I started to treat it, but it was considered obscured by its yellowed varnish and disturbed by the discolored retouched areas along its original horizontal seam (figs. 2–3). Due to records in the archives, I knew that the painting had been wax-resin lined in 1965, but I didn't know what other treatments had been carried out in the past. After removing the yellowed varnish and discolored overpaint with organic solvents, without visually affecting the underlying original paint, a beautiful, cool tonality of a pale gray sky contrasting with brown and green tree leaves (re)appeared (fig. 4). In present-day painting conservation, the original materiality of a work is considered to be the most important thing to conserve and protect, yet such materiality is infrequently left visible for the public. While removing the unoriginal varnish, overpaint, and fillings, the original horizontal seam connecting the work's two pieces of canvas became visible (fig. 5). I was delighted when I saw the stitching. Its presence made me feel close to the artist, who, besides the work's prior conservators, was probably one of very few people to see the seam. From the cross sections that I took, I learned that Van Goyen applied two thick, oil-based ground layers to the canvas, which covered the seam and provided a smooth surface on which to paint (figs. 6–7). He then applied very thin and vigorous paint layers without a preliminary drawing. X-ray fluorescence spot analysis combined with investigation of several cross sections shows that Van Goyen's paint consisted of lead white, bone black, smalt, verdigris, lead-tin yellow, and several earth pigments. The pressure and heat applied when the painting was wax-resin lined, a moment that occurred more than two centuries later, pushed the original stitching through the ground and paint layers to the front of the painting. Because of this, the paint along the seam was damaged, which led my predecessor to fill and retouch the paint losses that had occurred.



Fig. 2 Detail of the sky along the left edge of the painting, daylight, before treatment. Old yellowed varnish residues are visible as well as discolored retouched areas along the horizontal seam. © Rijksmuseum



Fig. 3 Ultraviolet light, before treatment. Retouched areas along the horizontal seam are clearly visible. © Rijksmuseum.

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Fig. 4 Daylight, during varnish removal. © Rijksmuseum.



Fig. 5 Detail of the sky along the left edge of the painting, daylight, during varnish removal. The original horizontal seam has become visible. © Rijksmuseum.

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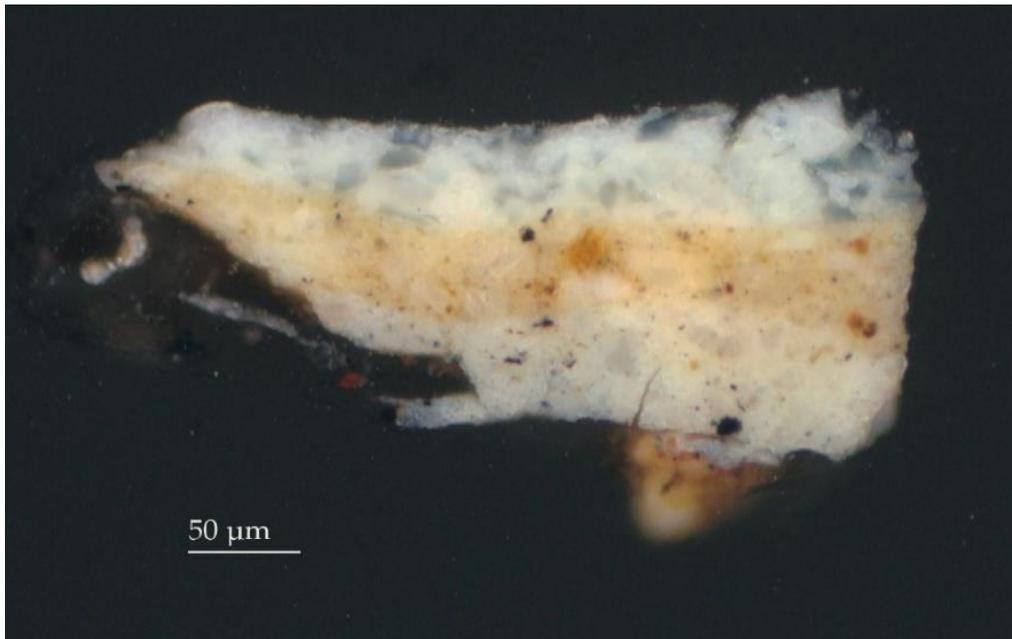


Fig. 6 Cross section, bright field, taken from the pale blue sky along the upper edge of the painting. Two ground layers are visible: a white-gray ground layer with a warmer beige layer on top. The sky is painted with a single blue paint layer. © Rijksmuseum.

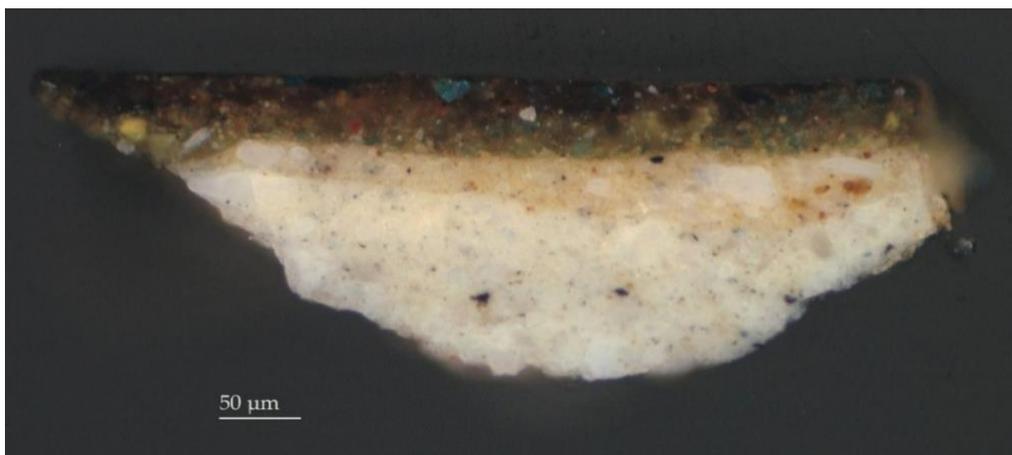


Fig. 7 Cross section, bright field, taken from green tree leaves along the right edge of the painting. Two ground layers are visible: a white-gray ground layer with a warmer beige layer on top. The leaves are painted with a single greenish paint layer. © Rijksmuseum.

The practice of leaving damages visible is less accepted in painting conservation than other fields. Should we strive for greater acceptance of showing or presenting damages? The conservation theorist Cesare Brandi (1906–1988) would have proposed to do so. Present-day practices in Western Europe regard the aesthetic experience or readability of a painting as more important (since a painting serves foremost an aesthetic purpose), unless the work's damage is considered to have historical value. But shouldn't we see all damages as equally important from a historical sense? Generally, younger damages are more readily covered up and younger restorations are more readily taken off. The same trend can be seen in

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archaeological conservation. This is problematic because at some point the young will become old. And what if a damage reveals evidence of the original making of the painting? Underdrawings that become visible through aged transparent oil paint layers are often left visible for the visitor. To what extent can the exposed seam on Van Goyen's painting be regarded as a similar historical trace of the object's making? Although the artist likely did not intend for this stitching to ever be visible, did he think about the future of his painting after he had made it? I am absolutely positive that he never would have imagined his painting hanging in the external storage of a museum next to a depressing highway exit in a provincial modern Dutch city, where it is currently located. As managers of change, do we accept change enough when it interferes with our aesthetic experience? What is acceptable change? What kind of and how much change needs to occur for an artwork not to be an artwork anymore? Will we ever find a consistent guideline? Reflecting on questions like these during conservation treatments sharpens my thoughts and influences the way that I approach a painting. I am curious to hear your thoughts, too. Make sure to write them down.

Of course, these questions are discussed with curators, collection managers, and scientists on a regular basis. These discussions should also be opened up to others that have associations with objects like artists, scholars from other disciplines, and the public. The conservation of an object is a moment to engage with various stakeholders and share opinions. Here lies a great social task for museums, with their wide and diverse audiences. It is something that I also have to accept, even though I prefer to work on a painting in solitude.

If the value of materiality is considered to be more important than an aesthetic experience in your present moment, then I am pleased to tell you that the filled and retouched areas that I applied to conceal the original seam can easily be removed with water. The final varnish that I applied will not yellow, but you can use organic solvents if you want to remove it (fig. 8). While treating the work, I noticed that the little leaves of the large central tree were painted with just one quick dot of brown or green paint (fig. 9). Somehow the leaves seem to vibrate, slightly changing position at every moment. While treating the work, I wondered what type of tree this might be as well as how I could find out, since the location of the painted landscape is unknown. The tree turned out to be rather easy to identify. I searched online for "seventeenth-century Dutch tree" and found an image of a poplar tree with similar quivering leaves despite its static state as a photograph (fig. 10). In the following days, I began to see poplar trees everywhere around me in the Netherlands, confirming my belief that Van Goyen's tree was indeed such a tree.

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Fig. 8 Daylight, after treatment. © Rijksmuseum.



Fig. 9 Detail of the large central tree, daylight, after treatment. © Rijksmuseum.



Fig. 10 A poplar tree. Photo: Rasbak, [CC BY-SA 3.0](https://commons.wikimedia.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/), via Wikimedia Commons.

These thoughts must have gone through my dreams that particular night two weeks ago, because “poplar” was the first word to come to mind when I woke up the next morning. I am absolutely sure that I will never forget the name of this tree again. It is unconsciously ingrained in my memory.

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I will end this letter by recalling Herodotus's *The Histories*, a work written in the fifth century BCE—research is set down to preserve the memory of the past by putting on record the astonishing achievements both of our own and of other peoples.

That is what I have tried to convey to you. 😊

Wishing you all the best,
Nienke Woltman