

The (Un)Communicative Painting

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Conservators sometimes claim that an object dictates how it should be restored, that the damaged painting will tell you what to do. This seems to me both borne from experience and deeply dubious. Conservators indeed act in dialogue with the work of art, assessing its materials, condition, and composition, and this informs or even determines the course of a restoration. At the same time, how could we, as contemporary actors, not inevitably inflict our own subjective and historically inflected choices on the artworks in our care? In doing so, are we wishfully anthropomorphizing the mute picture to speak?

The treatment described here was one in which a painting revealed itself to me gradually over the course of its study, like a dance of veils. Looking ever closer, ultimately looking *through* the painting using analytical tools, I came to understand it as an object that had been fashioned at various moments—one in which multiple potential states existed simultaneously. The decision of which of these to preserve and present was indeed determined by the artwork's nature, but also by the predilections of the conservator and, most crucially, the choices of its owner.

Young Man Breaking a Stick came to me in 2018 (fig. 1). The painting shows a youth seated in an outdoor setting. Nude but for a gray loincloth, his head thoughtfully inclined, he bends a stick over his rosy right knee. The space to his left is in shadow, while the rocky foreground to his right yields to forest, a distant group of buildings, and low mountains beyond. The recent auction catalogue placed the enigmatic artwork's origins in sixteenth-century Emilia, but offered no other information. The fact that it sold for much above its estimate indicated unexpected interest.¹

Even preliminary examination suggests that the painting underwent major intervention in the past. At the upper right, a change in surface texture indicates that a rectangular area of about 5 by 6 inches (12 by 15 centimeters), containing the mountains and village, had been inserted and was thus unlikely to be original (fig. 2). The canvas had subsequently been expanded and lined, perhaps during the mid-twentieth century. The wood of the stretcher, neither old nor new, was stained brown rather than naturally darkened. Hence, while the picture is certainly old, effort had been made to ensure that the entire object displayed a certain "antique" patina, despite the incorporation of newer elements (fig. 3).²

Inspection with a microscope revealed more. While the youth is largely unaltered from its original state, much of his surroundings have been wholly remade. The foreground and rocks are modern inventions. The background at left was clearly applied at a later moment, its dark paint drawn over the figure to give a sfumato

effect. The foliage of the middle ground covers a larger red textile than what is currently visible. The reworking includes tiny, splattered points of color applied to lend visual liveliness, and incised and painted craquelure were added to give the repainting an air of age. Some of these marks imitate drying cracks, with broader lines bordered by exquisitely fine, dark limning (fig. 4). Even intact areas are subject to interpretation: the young man's contours and reddish shadows were repainted and adjusted, and the folds of his loincloth reinforced (fig. 5).

The picture bears multiple layers of varnish, some of which are toned with particles of red and black pigment. Cracks present in the repainted layers indicate that they, too, have aged. Evidence of later cleaning in the distant landscape and sky and retouching in the hair mean that significant treatment occurred following the painting's earlier reworking. The complex stratigraphy suggests multiple campaigns over time.

Study with x-radiography uncovered even more. The inserted canvas at the upper right is of similar weight to the original, but clear gaps exist between it and the rest of the support. These appear dark in the radiograph because the original, lead-containing paint is missing. In the x-ray image, a different composition emerges (fig. 6). Light passages of radiopaque paint, now obscured, surround the figure. To his left appears to be a kind of landscape and sky, an almost architectural form bounds his head and right shoulder, and the far right shows an ambiguous, bright sliver. A curving shape at the man's shoulder corresponds to the red cloth seen in the microscope. Although the foreground has what look like indications of water in the x-radiograph, a small cleaning test in the corner proved this area to be gray rather than blue (fig. 7)—perhaps not water after all. Infrared reflectography, another imaging technique commonly used in conservation, was not revealing in this case as the black pigment copiously used in the repainting impeded the view of the underlying original.

Certainly, this picture provoked questions. Who was its creator, and could their hand be revealed through conservation? Since at least the nineteenth century, connoisseurs have pursued the cleaning of paintings to determine the author of a work. Should the later material be removed so that the painting could be assessed art historically? Perhaps, as the auction results might suggest, the picture was a lost canvas by a great Emilian master such as Correggio, submerged beneath its restoration.

At the same time, the work seemed to urge caution: removing the later additions would introduce new challenges. The condition of the sixteenth-century paint layers is difficult to know, even with technical study. Certainly, they have suffered some wear and loss, and the upper right corner of the composition is missing. Though the

present mountains and village are convincing, it is unclear what was present initially. A cleaning attempting to recover the original paint would, inevitably, destroy the charming picture as it currently exists and efface the capably rendered landscape. The context of this skillful restoration (perhaps done in Italy during the mid-twentieth century) remains unknown. Few conservators today—certainly not this one—would be able to reconstruct what is missing with such virtuosity, should this be desired. It is conceivably this restoration itself that gives the painting its Correggienesque character; perhaps such a pretense was the restoration's goal. Should one, then, preserve the painting in its current form as an object of enjoyment?

This was my quandary in treating this painting, of discovering more about its original composition and possibly identifying its creator but losing the layers of reinterpretation. To some degree this question arises during the cleaning of any painting: What to leave and what to remove? Yet considering the goals of preservation here raised a bigger ontological question about the nature of *this* painting. Is the “true” painting the damaged sixteenth-century canvas that lies below additional material (possibly once showing Cupid drawing his bow or a similarly classical subject)? Is it that picture freed of such additions and carefully restored in a modest, modern manner? Or is it the painting that we see remade (maybe during the twentieth century, maybe in Italy for the art market)? All of these variants can exist for contemplation, but only one state is possible for the physical object as presented to the viewer. Here the painting was silent about what to do.

Both conservators and art historians have celebrated the historically accreted artifact—the artwork that has been shaped and altered over time—for its conceptual richness. In practice, however, modern conservation instead tends to favor the ur-object, readily sacrificing later additions to that end. This is especially true for our most important artworks. Witness the recent treatment of the Ghent Altarpiece (1432), during which very early repainting, applied for devotional purposes and for centuries indistinguishable from the work of Jan van Eyck, was painstakingly removed.³ Indeed, it tends to be only in certain rare cases, in which a work is quite damaged and extensively reworked long in the past, that such old reinterpretations are preserved. Prominent examples include Pisanello's *Virgin and Child with Saints Anthony Abbot and George* (ca. 1435–41) in London and the *Dresden Sleeping Venus* (ca. 1508–10) by Giorgione and Titian, both of which retain restorations from the nineteenth century.⁴ The paintings are all but untouchable, for to clean them today would mean presenting them to some degree as fragments.

Ultimately the decision of what to do with *Young Man Breaking a Stick* lay with the painting's current owner, William Zachs, who judiciously chose to leave the old restoration intact. Over several conversations between owner and conservator, the

preservation of this charming, puzzling picture, as grown and altered over time, was favored over a destructive search for “truth” and a (perhaps vain) recovery of origins. This is a course of action suggested by the object, but its layered (and somewhat deceptive) nature could also have been invoked to justify more radical cleaning. The approach came with an informational price. Despite the considerable knowledge won by technical study and assessment by experts, the questions about the painting’s author and context remain unanswered. The young man pictured continues to guard his greatest secrets.



Fig. 1 *Young Man Breaking a Stick*, sixteenth century with later additions. Unknown maker, probably Emilian School, Italy. Oil on canvas, lined, 20 7/8 × 15 7/8 × 3/4 in. (52.9 × 40.2 × 1.8 cm). Restored, 20th century; conserved, 2018. Collection of William Zachs.



Fig. 2 Detail of the area added at the upper right seen in raking light, which reveals its different surface texture.



Fig. 3 The reverse of the painting—the stretcher and lining likely date from the twentieth century.

Matthew Hayes, “The (Un)Communicative Painting,” *Conserving Active Matter* (2022), Bard Graduate Center, <https://exhibitions.bgc.bard.edu/cam/>. © Bard Graduate Center and the author.

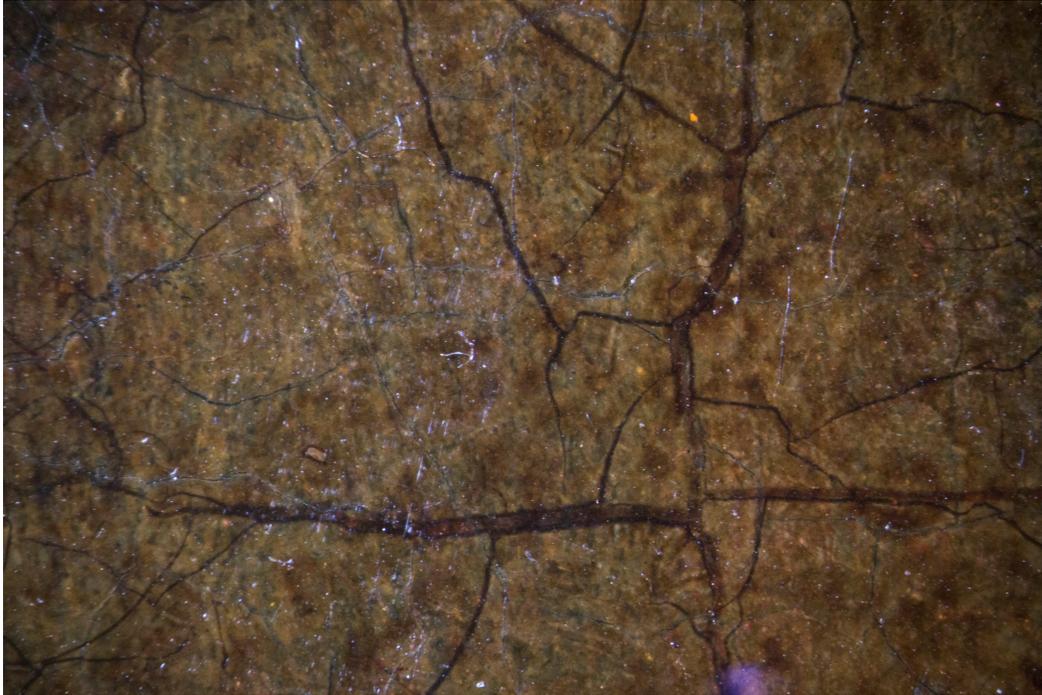


Fig. 4 Detail of the sky with painted cracks, both broader strokes and fine limning.

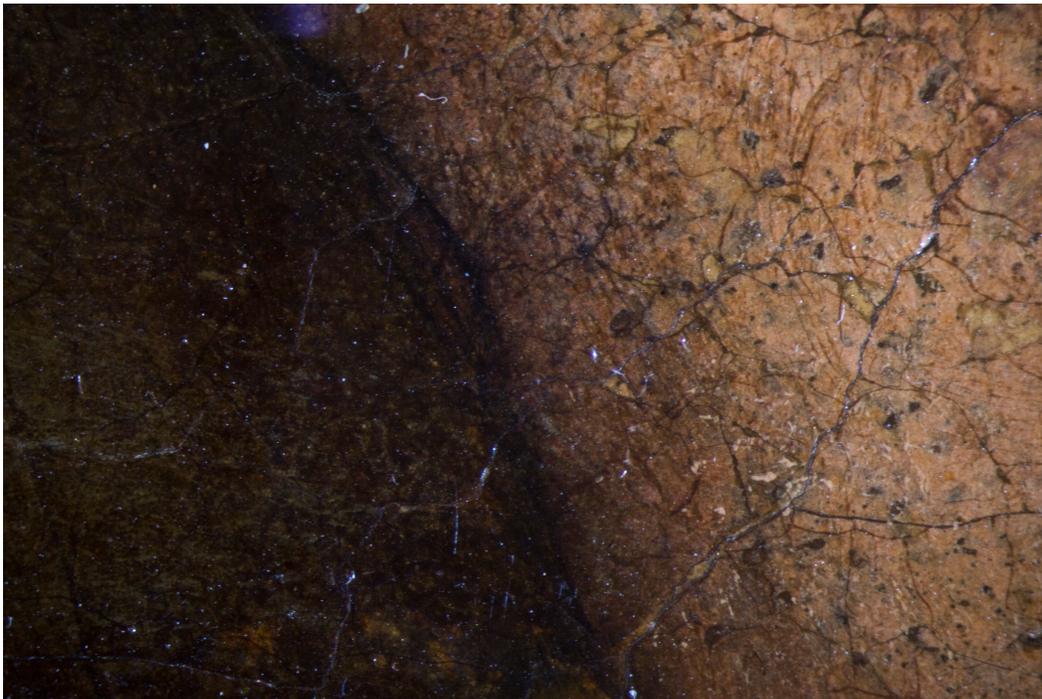


Fig. 5 Detail of the man's leg, where the contour and shading are reinforced.

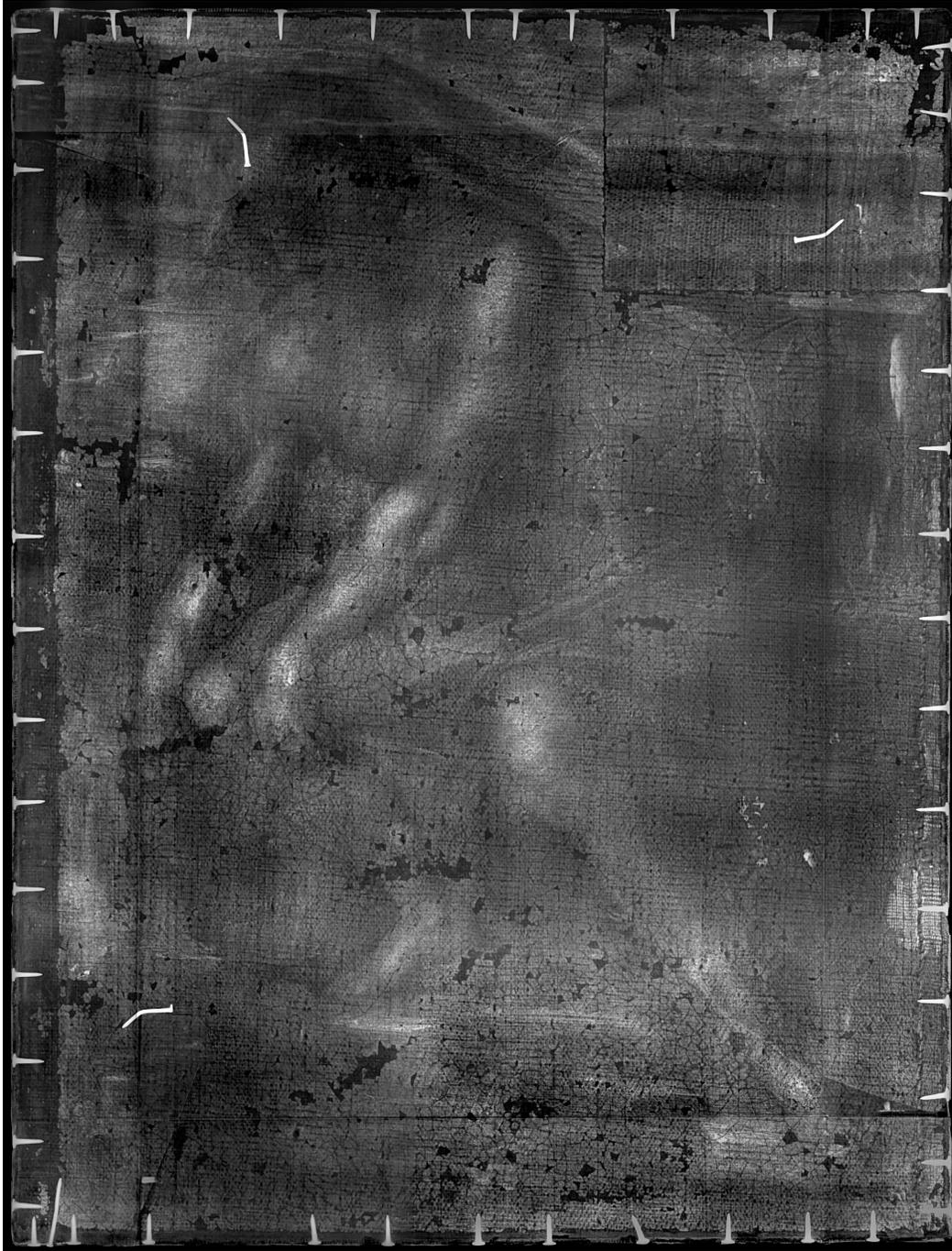


Fig. 6 X-radiograph of the painting.

Matthew Hayes, "The (Un)Communicative Painting," *Conserving Active Matter* (2022), Bard Graduate Center, <https://exhibitions.bgc.bard.edu/cam/>. © Bard Graduate Center and the author.



Fig. 7 Detail of the lower right corner—a cleaning test revealed the original, gray paint.

Notes

¹ Christie's New York, Auction 15655, Old Masters Part II, April 19, 2018, Lot 221, <https://www.christies.com/lot/lot-emilian-school-16th-century-a-young-man-6136920/>.

² The painting is executed on a medium-weight, plain-weave canvas that has been lined using a glue-paste adhesive to two identical, slightly more open plain-weave canvases. Such double linings were occasionally employed, especially in the mid-twentieth century, to render the fabric support more rigid. It is stretched on a keyable stretcher with shouldered bridled joints at its corners; this appears to be contemporary with the lining. The light-colored softwood has been stained a darker brown, and its surface is coated, perhaps with wax or shellac. The nails of the tacking edge are slightly rusted, while the tape covering them appeared relatively new. The lining is hence not recent, but not extremely old.

³ On the former, see chapters 3 and 4 in Bart Fransen and Cyriel Stroo, eds., *The Ghent Altarpiece: Research and Conservation of the Exterior* (Brussels: Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage, 2020).

⁴ See Jill Dunkerton, "L'état de restauration des deux Pisanello de la National Gallery de Londres," in *Pisanello: Actes du colloque organisée au musée du Louvre par le Service culturel les 26, 27 et 28 juin 1996*, ed. Dominique Cordellier and Bernadette Py (Paris: La Documentation Française, 1998), 657–81; and Marlies Giebe, "Die 'Schlummernde Venus' von Giorgione und Titian. Bestandaufnahme und Konservierung – neue Ergebnisse der Röntgenanalyse," *Jahrbuch der Staatlichen Kunstsammlungen Dresden* 23 (1992): 91–108.