

RESTORATION OF THE BRIELLE NIGHT WATCH

BLOG 2. THE STORY OF THE DAMAGE

The first thing you notice when you enter the council chamber of the Old Town Hall in Brielle is the enormous militia group portrait placed on the floor against the wall. There is work in progress here. The painting is being restored. But how much restoration is actually required? The image is covered in damage.

As discoloured layers of varnish, retouchings and overpaintings are removed, the true state of the painting becomes clear. Old damage that occurred in the past and that has been retouched becomes visible once more. When we look carefully at the layer of paint with all the damage, we can see differences between the various flaws. The flaws each tell their own story.

Damage caused by hiding the painting in 1800

In around 1800 this canvas was cut out of its frame and rolled or folded up and placed in the attic of the town hall. This damage is very noticeable. It manifests itself as long vertical cracks, and one very big flaw through the middle of the image. The paint is missing in those places. The missing paint has been filled with white gesso during the restoration by Hesterman in 1916, and then retouched. These eye-catching white flaws lie across the entire image like a film.

Because the canvas was cut out of the frame, the edges of the painting are missing. The image was originally larger. During the restoration in 1914 the canvas was lined with a support canvas and restretched.

This can be clearly seen in this detail: at the edge only part of a hand and a musket rest can be seen.

Damage caused since the 17th century

There is also damage had been caused by climatological conditions and by the movement of the canvas. You could describe these cracks as ageing craquelure. This craquelure often occur in the places where the frame is located on the back and by how the canvas has been stretched. But it can also be caused by minor accidents. A good example of ageing craquelure is this slightly spiderweb-like craquelure. There have been knocks on the back of the canvas in those places, causing the craquelure to occur on the front.

The damage caused by restorers' interventions

Unfortunately restorers sometimes also damage a painting. In the black areas of the image you would say that the paint layer here and there has been rubbed away to some extent in the past. The black pigments and the dark earth pigments in general require a lot of binders in order to be made into paint. These colours are therefore very vulnerable to solvents. When removing discoloured varnish, a restorer is dissolving resins and oily binders. Nowadays restorers have a choice of many more types of solvent and the knowledge regarding the removal of varnish has increased massively (see the work of Wolbers and Stravourdis in this regard).

In this picture you can see that on the raised parts of the craquelure in the black area the paint has worn off. This is referred to as 'rubbing away'.

Damage caused by vandalism

And then there is one more type of damage that I would like to mention in this context, which are the eyes of the child in the foreground. This is probably vandalism. The paint layer is still intact around the eye socket, but the eyes themselves have been scratched out. Unfortunately this is not uncommon with portraits. It appears that some people simply cannot cope with someone looking at them out of a painting. And so the eyes are scratched out. Sadly.

Josien van der Werf

16 February 2015