RESTORATION OF THE BRIELLE NIGHT WATCH

BLOG 3. REMOVING OVERPAINTINGS AND RETOUCHINGS

Over the past few weeks I have been working to remove the overpaintings and the retouchings from the original paint layer. One question that I was often asked was: *how do you know that you're not dissolving the original paint when you remove the overpaintings?*

In 1660 the militiamen were painted using oil paint. In simple terms, paint consists of pigments and a binder. In this case that binder is an evaporating oil. The oil has totally hardened in oil paint from 1660, so it has a very different solubility than the overpaintings (also oil paint) applied during the 20th century. Different solvent tests allows me to mix the mildest solvent to dissolve the overpaintings.



It's actually the binder that dissolves. You have paint layers that contain a lot of binder, and paint layers that contain less binder. The dark earth shades need a lot of binder in order to be made into paint. Light pigments such as the various whites and the cadmiums need less binder. Dark areas are therefore more delicate.

What are particularly delicate are the glaze layers. These glaze layers are really a sort of coloured varnish, and are sometimes applied in order to create extra depth or detailing in the paint layer. You can track those glaze layers down by looking carefully at the image, by viewing it under UV light and by examining it with a microscope.

In areas where you suspect there are glaze layers, you need to use very mild solvents.



a solvent test under UV light.

By looking with UV light you can see the difference between the original paint layer and the overpaintings on top of it because they fluoresce in a different way. You can also observe the different layers of varnish under UV: layers of varnish that are placed over the original paint layer, and other layers of varnish that have been applied later.



If a layer of paint has been applied over a flaw there is also a clear indication that this is been applied later. The microscope (in the council chamber we use a USB microscope (Dinolite)) also clearly shows if there is paint in the craquelure. This is also an indication that this involves paint that was applied later over the top of a cracked surface.



Whilst removing overpaintings you can check with UV light from time to time to see how the surface is fluorescing and whether there are still any overpaintings on the original paint layer.



As you can see, the original paint layer emerges from under the overpaintings, often with a number of smaller flaws.

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