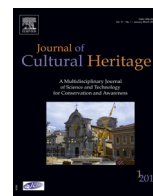




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Case study

The sixteenth century panel *Virgin with the Child and an Angel*, confluences of material characterization and iconography

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ABSTRACT

Attribution of the panel *The Virgin with the Child and an Angel* today in the Art Museum of Girona is under study due to the existence of two hypotheses, both of them not thoroughly documented, pointing Jan Massys and Bernardo Luini as potential authors. Attribution process is an important issue in many museums and collections. In this article, the question is addressed by combining material and iconographic information, paying special attention to the information yielded by minor components, and by following the material characteristics of the existing restoration interventions. In addition to imaging and classical analytical techniques (SEM and FTIR), the capability of a new developed *Laser Ablation-Inductively Coupled Plasma-Mass Spectrometry* system for minor elements and thin layers detection is also discussed. Results confirmed a 16th century palette and revealed the use of specific pigments such as Verditer and Smalt. Analytical results combined with iconographic characteristics, permitted the contextualization of the painting in North Europe in the circle of production of Antwerp between 1500–1550. This conclusion does not allow the direct attribution to Jan Massys but minimize the probabilities of Bernardino Luini as author.

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1. Introduction

The painting *Virgin with the Child and an Angel* is today part of the permanent collection of the Art Museum of Girona, together with other representative paintings of the local Northern Catalan Renaissance of the 16th century. The old catalogue pointed out to the Italian Bernardino Luini as the author although recently, it has also considered the candidacy of the Flemish painter Jan Massys.

Bernardino Scapi, o de Scapis, also known as Bernardino Luini (ca 1480–1532), was a North Italian conservationist painter from Leonardo's circle. He was known for his graceful female figures and celebrated for his mythological and biblical themes [1]. He is considered one of the most significant Milanese painters of the Italian Renaissance although little is known of his life.

Jan Massys, also known as Jan Matsys or Metsys, (ca1510, Antwerp–8 October 1575, Antwerp) was a Flemish Renaissance painter known for his history paintings, genre scenes and landscapes. He trained under the guidance of his father Quentin Matsys, an already important painter founder of the Antwerp School. In 1544, Jan Massys was banned from Antwerp and started an obscure 10 years period travelling. He returned to

Antwerp before the end of 1555 living there until his death [2]. During the first period before his exile, he collaborated with his father and developed a very similar style. From this period, few painting are attributed with certainty. The first dated painting is a *St. Jerome in his cell* (1537), which is completely in his father's style [2]. From the second period, little is known and only two paintings bear a signature and a date, both from 1552 entitled *Virgin with Child* and *Nativity*. Finally, from his last period back in Antwerp, most of the paintings are signed and dated and, therefore, do not present problems regarding authorship.

Both artists proposed have some unclear stories and little documentation is available. This situation complicates the objective of achieving a contextualization of the painting under study.

2. Research aims

Attribution can be considered a quite common problem faced by many museums and collections professionals. The article is focused on the research process followed to recollect all the available evidences that permit the contextualization of the panel. In particular, the objective is to combine the information related to the material composition and the iconographic characteristics of the panel aiming to give some light about the potential author. During the analysis it became of paramount importance the acquisition of minor components information using sensitive techniques such as

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the LA-ICP/MS, specifically developed for the study of large artworks.

Among the different techniques based on the use of a laser as a micro-sampling tool, LA-ICP/MS has proven itself as a powerful option, which provides isotopic information of the elements selected in a large range of concentrations due to the low detection limit of the detector [3–5]. Despite the fact that LA-ICP/MS requires the use of an ablation cell to collect the material ablated, which can complicate the calibration process, the deterioration produced is minimum originating ablation craters of 100–200 microns of diameter, not visible at the naked eye and disclosing the stratigraphy beneath the surface.

Despite its potential capabilities, there are no commercially available instruments for LA-ICP/MS, including ablation cells, that permit the direct analysis of large objects like artworks. Concerned by this limitation, few approaches have been developed recently mainly focused on the design of prototypes with open cells that could be placed on the object surface [6–8]. However, most of these application tests have been performed on metallic, ceramic or glass artwork but in practice, studies about its application to the analysis of paintings are not available [5–7,9–13].

To accomplish this goal, a specific optical system and ablation cell were designed and coupled to the ICP/MS. The capability of the developed LA-ICP/MS system for the analysis of paintings was evaluated in terms of damage produced on the artwork and its potential for stratigraphic composition determination. Results by LA-ICP/MS for the determination of very thin layers in easel painting (taking advantage of the low detection limit of the ICP/MS technique) were compared with those obtained by SEM-EDX.

3. The painting

The painting (Mda250.256) is composed of one single panel (74 × 75 cm) depicting a principal figurative group in the forefront composed by The Virgin and the Child together with an Angel. Behind the figures, in the background, it is possible to distinguish two areas: a dark and shapeless area which encompasses the figures, most likely result of an over painting; and the opposite light area where an architectural landscape can be observed. Regarding the palette it seems important to point out the execution of the Virgin dress in a dark brownish colour, a characteristic not very commonly found in 16th century iconography (Fig. 1).

Visual examination of the panel clearly indicates the presence of undocumented restorations performed in the past. The support presents a good state of preservation and has been complemented with the addition of a cradle. In addition, partial reduction of the support can be observed by the left lateral and the lower margin. Inspection of the overall surface highlighted the thinness of ground and painting layers and showed the presence of numerous areas of original material loose, intervened in the form of big retouching areas done in a neutral tone together with some punctual retouching carried out in an illusionistic manner. The surface appears slightly matt at normal illumination probably due to the application of a modern varnish.

The existing documentation is limited but includes the traditional attribution to Bernadino Luini but also the suggestion made by Dr. T. Fagg in the 80s, who considered the painting stylistically similar to the Jan Massys' panel *Holly Family with Saint Elisabeth* (ca. 1520 Carnegie-Museum of Art, Pittsburgh) [14]. Even though the current attribution gives the authorship to the latter, one of the most important research undertaken in Jan Massy's life, published



Fig. 1. *Virgin with the Child and an Angel* Left: Visible image; Right: Infrared Reflectography.

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