Art Rediscovered

Meet the dedicated art conservators hunting down paintings that were lost to time

BY Alice Gawthrop

AS YOU ENTER the Tate Britain and head into the heart of the Historic and Modern British Art collection, you will eventually come to a portrait of an elegantly dressed man. He sits at a desk and stares out of the frame, right at you, as if to say, "Oh hello, I didn't see you there." It is not the biggest painting in the room, but Arthur Devis's *Portrait of a Man* has a newly-discovered and fascinating secret: it is only half a painting.

Missing from the picture is a woman sitting on the other side of the table from the man. Where she is now, no one knows.

The discovery was made when *Portrait of a Man* was selected to be included in the Tate Britain's May 2023 rehang of its permanent collection. Due to having a yellowed varnish layer, the painting *Portrait of a Man* was also chosen to have a conservation treatment.

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Portrait of a Man
after conservation
treatment work

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(Left) Rachel Scott working on painting conservation at Tate Britain; (Below) *Portrait of a Man* before treatment

"It's important to remember that most historic paintings have actually gone through treatments at several times in their life," says Rachel Scott, a painting conservator at the Tate Britain art museum—the conservator, in fact, who discovered that *Portrait of a Man* was actually only half a portrait. "We chose to remove the yellowed varnish which had been applied by a previous restorer. That's why it came into the studio."

In conversation, Rachel's passion for conservation is not just apparent but infectious. "Art is always changing," she tells me. "As a conservator, you have to think that you're just one of a long line of conservators, just here for a moment in history. A conservator in the future

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might look back on our work and want to change things. They might do things differently, as technology will continue to improve. We're part of the art's history."

It's impossible not to be as excited as Rachel about this discovery, and fascinated by the history of the painting. Who is the man in the portrait? Who is sitting on the other side of the table?

PORTRAIT OF A MAN was painted around 1750 by Arthur Devis, a painter who devoted his career to painting a type of portrait known as a "conversation piece". This is a term used to refer to informal group portraits of families or friends, often in a domestic setting.

The first stage of the treatment was a thorough technical examination. Using raking light (that's the process of holding a light very low down and letting it rake across the surface to throw the painting's texture into high relief), Rachel saw that there was an additional strip of canvas down the left side that had been joined on, and then overpainted by a past restorer to extend the table to the left. An X-ray confirmed this canvas join.

Cleaning tests to remove some old restorations then revealed original paint on the joined strip, which matched the floorboards in the foreground of the painting. It appeared the strip had been trimmed from the bottom of the painting, turned on its side and joined to the canvas to extend the image. "It was bizarre and quite fascinating!" Rachel says.

Rachel shared her discovery with Alice Insley, a curator of British Art at Tate Britain, and suggested a trip to the Courtauld Institute's Witt Library. The Witt Library is an expansive archive of photographs, cuttings and reproductions of Western art. And it was exactly the right place to turn to. Alice happened to be visiting later that day and offered to take a look.

PORTRAIT OF A MAN HAS A NEWLY-DISCOVERED SECRET: IT IS ACTUALLY ONLY HALF A PORTRAIT

"Unbelievably, [Alice] found the other half in the Witt Library!" Rachel shares excitedly. An image of the other half of *Portrait of a Man* was found, cut out of a Sotheby's sales catalogue, from 1978. "She emailed me the photo and I used Photoshop to match it with *Portrait of a Man*, and I could line the two paintings up together, and I found that the additional strip of canvas aligned with the floor boards across both halves."

Now, a hunt for the lost artwork begins. Initial investigations found that the other half was sold in 1978 to a dealer. However, this dealer quickly

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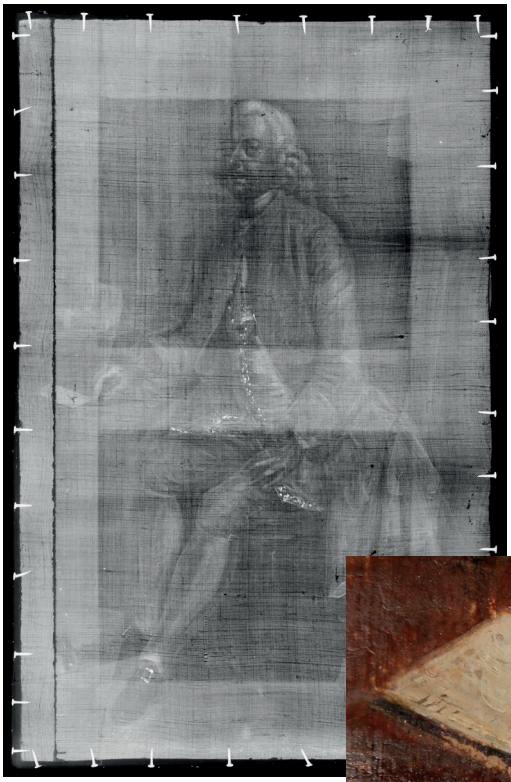

(Left) An X-ray photo of *Portrait of a Man*; (Below) Detail of a letter from cleaning the painting

sold it on and from there, the trail has gone cold. "It could be anywhere. It is fascinating to think that somebody out there has the other half of our painting and doesn't know it. It would be wonderful to reunite them. We would love to do a callout and ask if anyone knows where the other half is," Rachel tells me.

Portrait of a Man, in its current form, is visible in Tate Britain's galleries, and at the end of our conversation Rachel lets me in on a secret. On the painting's left hand side, she tells me, the old restoration had covered up some of the painting's original details—she discovered the ink box contained the beginning of a quill pen, which the past restorer had painted out. "After cleaning the painting I needed to retouch the joined left strip of canvas to return the painting to the way it

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looked and make it whole. We all decided it would be nice to put that quill pen back in, as it was there originally," she says.

IT'S NO SURPRISE that conservators have an artistic streak. Devis himself took to restoring pictures later in his career—he received £1,000 for repairing and restoring the "Painted Hall" of the Royal Naval Hospital, Greenwich, between 1777 and 1778.

It's not all chasing down lost artworks, though. Sometimes, a conservator is lucky enough to discover a painting. This was the case for Helen Kohn and Rebecca Chipkin who, when studying at the Courtauld Institute in 2019, discovered a lost painting by Helen Saunders, one of two female members of the short-lived Vorticist movement.

The pair were analysing a Wyndham Lewis painting called *Praxitella* when they discovered evidence of a hidden artwork underneath. Like Rachel and *Portrait of a Man*, their work began with a technical analysis of *Praxitella*.

After taking many X-rays of *Praxitella* and putting them together to see the whole painting, Helen and Rebecca discovered a composition underneath. "It looks like two superimposed compositions on each other, because the X-ray reveals all of the layers of the painting," explains Rebecca, now a conservator at Studio Redivivus in The Hague.

Helen and Rebecca could see that is was an abstract composition and a Vorticist painting, which gave them a time period for its creation. Vorticism was a London-based modernist art movement started by Lewis in 1914 and then cut short by the First World War. The idea, then, was that the mystery painting beneath *Praxitella* was one of Wyndham Lewis's works, painted before 1914.

Helen, who is currently a research assistant at the Gemäldegalerie Alte

IT WAS DIFFICULT FOR FEMALE ARTISTS TO GET SPACE IN THIS MALE-DOMINATED ART WORLD

Meister in Dresden and PhD student, was doing research on the painting in the Courtauld Library when she came across the key to the mystery. Turning to a copy of the short-lived Vorticist magazine *Blast*, she found an image that was far more similar to the X-ray image than she had dared hope. "In fact, when I turned it upside down, I saw that it was the same composition," she says. "This composition had the title *Atlantic City* written underneath it, and the name Saunders. We had thought that it was a painting by Wyndham Lewis but in fact it was by a female colleague, Helen Saunders."

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Painting conservation treatment at the Tate Britain is painstakingly detailed work

"This was a really great moment," Rebecca chimes in. "Helen was in the library, I was in the conservation department, and she sent me this snapshot of the composition she'd found in the magazine. She said, 'You know, if you turn it upside down it looks like the X-ray.' So I went to Photoshop and superimposed her snapshot over the X-ray and lo and behold, the compositional elements lined up. It was this eureka moment where we were like, 'OK, we've found the painting.'"

The discovery opened up a whole new line of inquiry. Why was someone else's painting beneath Wyndham Lewis's painting? It's certainly a big question, and it comes with many theories.

An important detail to note is that there is an interlayer between *Atlantic City* and *Praxitella*, painted in lead white paint to blank out the colour of the previous composition. The assumption currently is that this interlayer was painted by Lewis, but there is no way

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to prove this. There is a theory that perhaps he did it due to a falling out with Saunders, but Helen suggests the reason might have been more practical.

"*Atlantic City* is a huge canvas and Lewis was always short on money," she comments. "Most likely he painted over it at a time when he needed a large canvas. He was trying to innovate British art, and he didn't think Vorticism had a place in it, so wiping it out was kind of like him saying, 'OK, it's from the past, and now I'm doing something new.'"

Rebecca cautions, "As art historians and conservators, we don't want to say we know for sure why it was painted over unless we have actual evidence."

Regardless of the reason her work was painted over, this discovery shines a long-overdue light on Saunders' work. All of her Vorticist paintings were lost; *Atlantic City* is the only one we know about, and we only recently know of it. What happened to the others remains a mystery, although Helen reveals that astonishingly one painting was used as a carpet!

"If you don't have the paintings, it's easy to minimise the role of an artist," Helen explains. "It was difficult for female artists to get space in this male-dominated art world. This canon was created that Helen Saunders was just someone who was very influenced by Lewis but that she didn't really have her own style. That's something that we are now trying to reverse."

"It's interesting to note that Helen and I didn't start out researching this painting thinking, *We're going to, as women, rewrite the art historical canon,"* Rebecca points out. "It just so happens that this is a female artist whose work was painted over by her male colleague and her role has been diminished. We are trying to, in the most unbiased, art historical and scientific way possible, tell the story of this painting. But in doing so, we are kind of fitting in with a larger thrust to understand women artists' role in history." ■

Bonfire Night

Robert Catesby was the mastermind behind the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, Guy Fawkes was just the explosives expert who was caught by guards

The Houses of Parliament are still searched every year by the Yeoman of the Guard, although it is now more ceremonial than serious

SOURCE: HISTORY.CO.UK

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