

## **Treatment and Examination of Vigée Le Brun's *Lady Hamilton as a Bacchante* from the Lady Lever Art Gallery**

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### **Introduction**

Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun's painting *Lady Hamilton as a Bacchante*, dating from the 1790s, is a portrait from the Lady Lever Art Gallery's collection. This painting was examined and conserved prior to a loan to the Grand Palais in Paris from September 2015 to January 2016 for the first retrospective of the artist's work - *Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun*. A full treatment of the painting revealed the beautiful colours used by the artist and some interesting details about the portrait.



*Photo of the painting before conservation treatment*

## Conservation Treatment

### **Condition before treatment**

Before any conservation work could begin, a report on the condition of the painting was written and photography was done. The dominant concern was the raised cracking in the paint and priming layers in the extensions at the sides of the painting (described in Examination section below), which made this paint fragile and vulnerable to loss. This can be clearly seen in a detail of the raking light image where the light picks up the raised nature of the paint along the left edge.

Additionally, the visual appearance of the painting was quite poor. A thick and discoloured natural resin varnish covered the surface, making certain passages, such as Lady Hamilton's hair and costume, very difficult to read. The yellow colour of the varnish was particularly noticeable in the background, where the bright blue sky appeared green.

In a photo of the painting before treatment taken under ultraviolet (UV) light, the pale green fluorescence of the varnish is very clear, and its thickness is indicated by how difficult it is to read the composition underneath this layer.



*Left: Detail of image taken in raking light with light only from the left side, showing the raised cracking at the edges*

*Right: Painting photographed under ultraviolet light showing the fluorescence of the varnish*

### **Varnish removal**

After a surface dirt layer was removed, a mixture of solvents were used to slowly remove the varnish layer. Additional residues of an older varnish layer were discovered in Lady Hamilton's costume, which made her dress appear brown, rather than the original purple-blue colour. These residues were also removed.

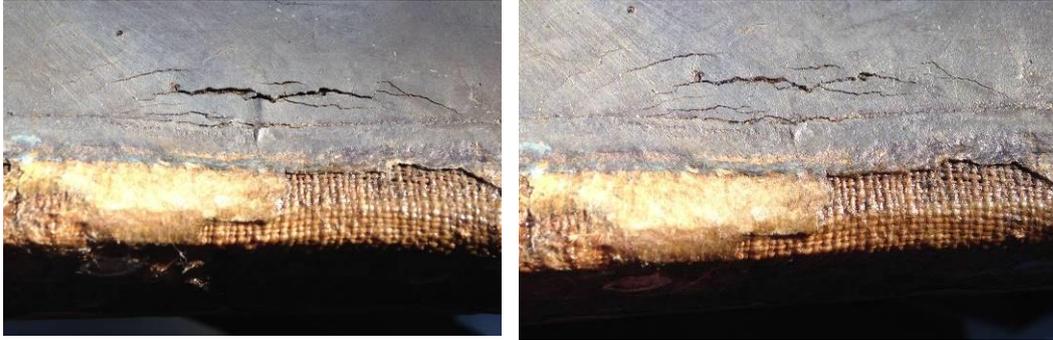
A photograph taken during cleaning demonstrates the large visual colour shift achieved by the varnish removal, revealing the bright colours the artist intended for the composition. Additionally the depth in the portrait was re-introduced, and smaller details in the painting were finally visible.



*Photo of the painting during cleaning, with rectangles of the cleaned areas at the sides*

## Consolidation

Varnish removal also allowed access to the raised cracking along the extensions at the sides. Humidification and the introduction of a consolidant or adhesive into the cracks allowed them to be gently pressed down so that they became level with the paint surface. The extended areas still show a texture and cracking different to the main body of the painting, due to the nature of this area, but they are now better protected from loss or future damage.



Left: Cracks in paint and priming layers near left edge were raised before consolidation  
Right: Cracks brought level with the paint surface after consolidation

## Varnishing and Retouching

A varnish layer was brushed onto the painting to provide a protective coating, saturate the painting, and create an isolating layer between the original paint and later retouching. The few small areas of loss to the original priming and paint layers were filled with a chalk putty mixture and then retouching was carried out. Retouching on this painting was very minimal due to the generally well preserved condition of the paint.



*Photo taken after the painting was varnished and the losses were filled, visible here as small white spots*



*Photo of the painting after conservation treatment*

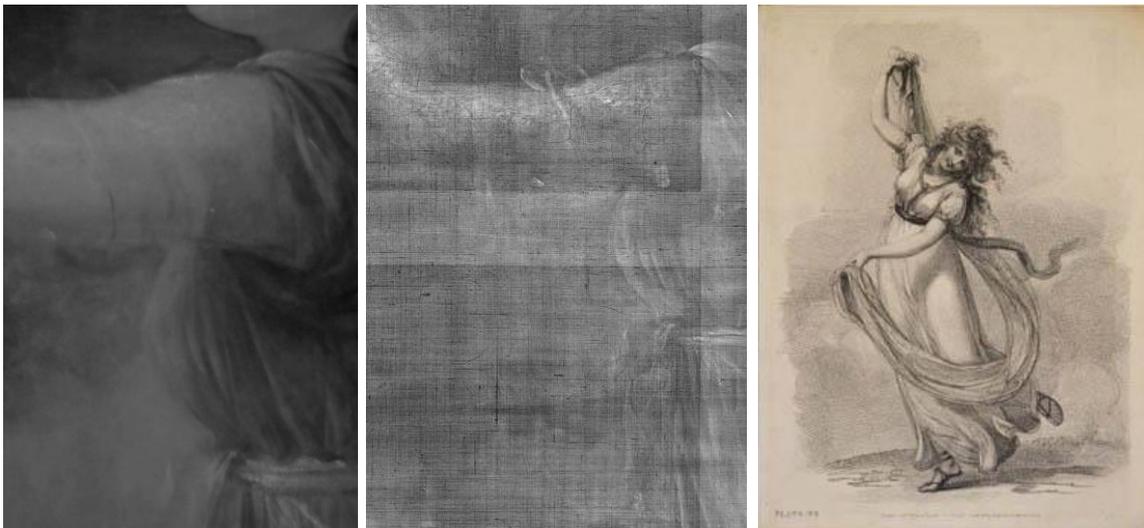
### **Results of Examination of Painting**

The treatment of *Lady Hamilton as a Bacchante* allowed for a technical examination of the work, revealing more about its history and how the composition was painted. This used tools and analytical techniques including microscopes, infrared reflectography, X-radiography, and examination under ultraviolet light.

### **Changes to the sitter's dress and scarf**

Close examination of the paint layers revealed that the composition underwent a few changes during the painting process. Initially Lady Hamilton's dress came out a bit further to the left near her waist and a sleeve was painted on her dress at her left shoulder. Additionally a scarf floated from her right wrist, past her left arm, and down towards the left edge of her dress. When the painting was later reworked, the sleeve and scarf were painted out and the left side of the dress was altered.

The original depiction of the sleeve and adjustments to the costume near the yellow belt are visible in the infrared reflectogram and the X-radiograph taken of the painting. The reworking of the sleeve is also visible from close examination of the painting, as some of the texture and colour of the paint underneath is visible. The appearance of the scarf is less clear using further examination techniques and is in fact more visible to the naked eye in normal light. This scarf was covered up with a thin layer of blue paint and over time, as the oil in the paint has aged and increased in transparency, the scarf underneath has become more visible. A depiction of Lady Hamilton in a similar dress with a scarf can be seen in a print of the etching *Lady Hamilton dancing* by Vanassen.



Left: Detail of infrared image showing the original depiction of the sleeve

Middle: Detail of X-radiograph showing the sleeve more clearly (the stretcher behind the painting is causing the brighter appearance at right and across the middle)

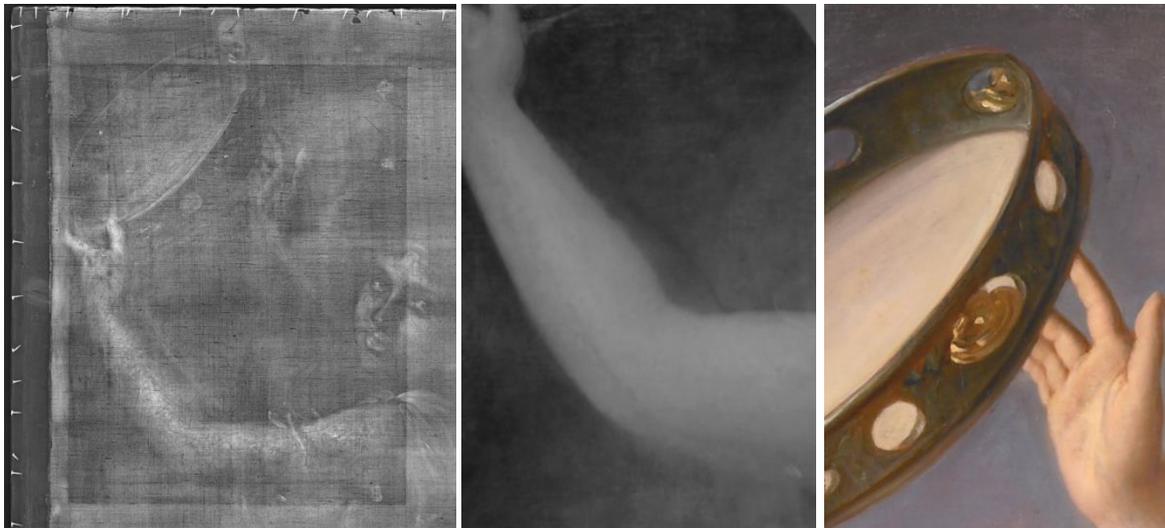
Right: Benedictus Antonio Vanassen (British, active. c. 1788-1810) "Lady Hamilton dancing", Etching from G. Townly Stubbs, "Lady Hamilton., London, 1798, plate 6.

### **Extension of the canvas and changes to the figure and tambourine**

Soon after the figure was painted, before or during the painting of the sky and background, the canvas was extended on both sides by 3-4 centimetres. This was done by lining or adhering the first painting canvas onto another larger canvas. Then priming material was added onto the bare canvas at the sides to bring the surface up to the level of the priming on the original canvas. It is unclear exactly why the small extensions were done; perhaps the size was changed to fit a different frame, or the artist thought that the composition required extra space at the sides.

Most of the sky paint appears to carry on into the side extensions in a single campaign of brushwork. The difference in colour in some areas of the background between the extensions and the rest of the painting is mainly due to the different priming and texture of the extensions. At the upper left the cloud appears different because the blue layer in the sky is missing under the cloud in the side extension.

Around this time Vigée Le Brun also reworked the sitter's left arm to bring it lower and outward and moved the tambourine further to the left. The right arm was moved a little to the left as well. These changes can be seen in both the infrared reflectogram and the X-radiograph, and the alteration to the tambourine's position is visible in normal light. Perhaps the alterations to the arms and the tambourine were done as a result of the extensions to the canvas allowing more space for the composition.



*Left: Detail of X-radiograph showing alterations to the figure's arms and, less clearly, the movement of the tambourine (the stretcher is causing the brighter appearance at the edges)  
Middle: Detail of the infrared image showing the different position for the left arm  
Right: Detail of painting showing paint related to the first position of the tambourine visible to the right and below the instrument*

### **Reworking of the dress**

During the conservation treatment, an older layer of brown paper tape was discovered on the edges of the painting, which dates from the lining and extension of the canvas. This kind of tape was historically added to paintings to cover and protect the edges of the original canvas after lining. Interestingly, most of the brown paper tape was covered with paint using brushstrokes that carry on from the main body of the image, indicating that the artist herself was responsible for this paint application after the lining had been done.

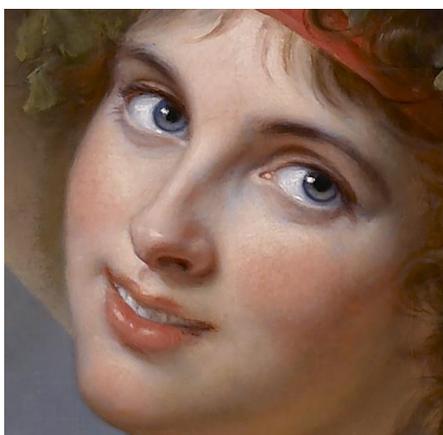
This layer structure is particularly significant along the bottom edge where the canvas was not extended, and where the different stages in the dress are visible. The layer structure shows the original canvas and preparation followed by the dark blue colour of the first depiction of the dress. Then we can see the purple and pink tones of the reworked dress, which go over the older layer of brown paper tape, just visible underneath a more recent layer of tape below.



*Left: Damage along bottom edge reveals the layer structure in the painting of the dress  
Right: Detail of the figure's dress showing the pink, blue, and purple colours used*

### **Aspects of Paint Technique**

Overall, the paint layers revealed that Vigée Le Brun was an excellent technician with paint. The artist sometimes used touches of blue paint under the flesh tones of Lady Hamilton's face to create cooler shadows contrasting with the generally warmer tones. Her generally minimal use of paint can be seen where she used a thin layer of purple paint over the sky to the right of the volcano to create the effect of another mountain behind.



*Left:Detail of sitter's face showing use of blue paint / Right:Detail of thin paint in volcano area*