

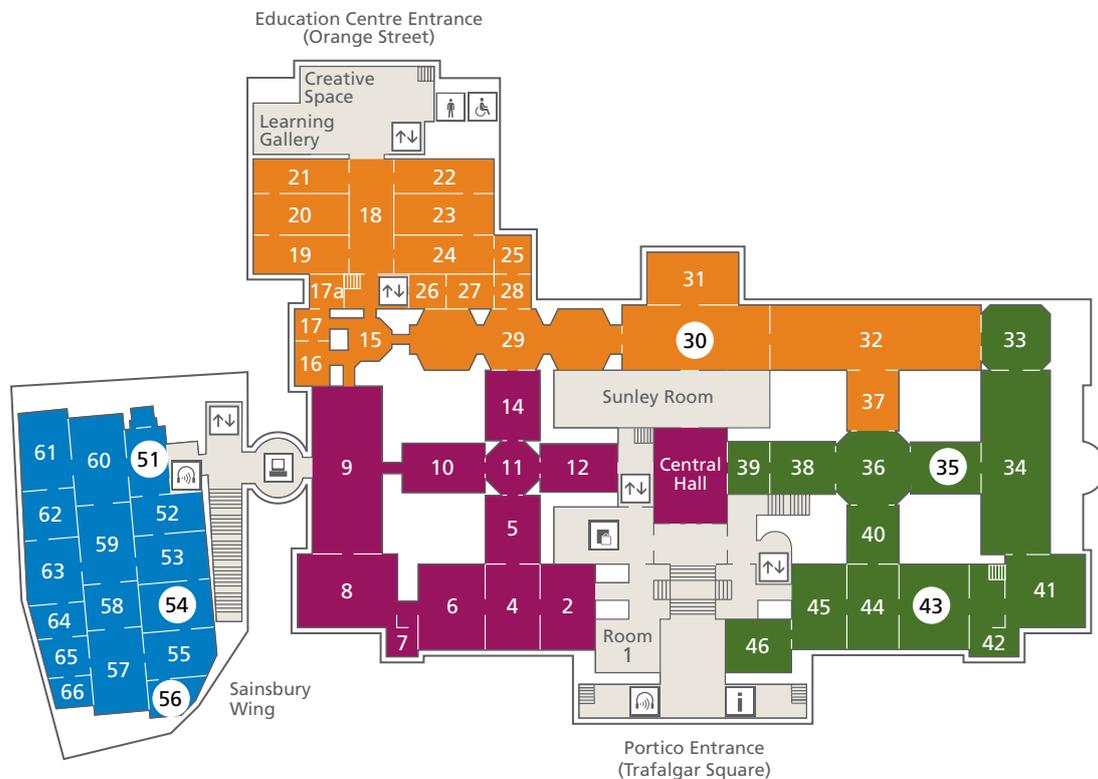


MISTAKES AND MYSTERIES

A trail exploring some intriguing works in the National Gallery's collection

The National Gallery houses the finest collection of Old Master paintings in the UK but what does the term 'Old Master' make you think about the artist? For many it may conjure an image of an irritatingly accomplished, elderly perfectionist, able to complete faultless works with a few deft strokes of a brush – someone we might find difficult to relate to. More often than not, their paintings were the result of much deliberation and many changes of mind and even the most technically skilled painters occasionally made a mistake. If we look closely at paintings we can discover more about how they were made and may even be able to see some of these changes, known as *pentimenti* (from the Italian, 'to repent').

MISTAKES AND MYSTERIES



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We'll start our travels with a surprising little panel in Room 51.

The Annunciation

Duccio, 1311

The space of the setting is a little strange in this scene of the Archangel Gabriel announcing to the Virgin that she is to bear the Son of God. We are looking at the grey wall squarely, face on, but we can also see the arch between the Virgin and Gabriel, which from this angle should be hidden from our view. This is not a mistake. Mathematical perspective

had not been discovered when this was painted and often artists incorporated different viewpoints into the same scene. The gilded background would have looked beautiful in the candlelit Cathedral of Siena. The gold was beaten into thin sheets and applied to a sticky layer of bole, a reddish coloured clay that had been moistened with water. The orange area below the angel's wing should be gilded too but has been missed. Fortunately, this panel was part of a huge 16-foot high altarpiece, the *Maestà*, so hopefully this small mistake would have gone unnoticed.

Journey through to Room 54 and meet a little bird who painted some rather confusing horses.



The Battle of San Romano

Paolo Uccello, about 1438–40

This decorative battle scene was painted by Paolo di Dono. His nickname was Uccello, Italian for bird, probably reflecting his reputed love of animals. The carefully aligned broken lances on the battlefield, all pointing towards a single vanishing point, tell us that Uccello was fascinated by perspective. But despite the care he took to create a coherent space, there are still a few oddities. The figure of a fallen soldier, though

cleverly foreshortened, is incredibly small. His entire body is almost the same size as the metal helmet that lies in front of the rearing white horse. The background with tiny figures preparing their crossbows is curiously flat, like a backdrop from a stage set. The horses' legs also appear to be in a muddle: which belong to which head? Look closely and you'll find a pair of golden coloured hind legs with no corresponding body.

Let's move along to one of the most mysterious paintings in the Gallery, in Room 56.



The Arnolfini Portrait

Jan van Eyck, 1434

There are many theories about why this double portrait was painted. It was previously thought to show a marriage ceremony, the tiny 'Jan van Eyck was here' inscription above the mirror suggesting that the artist himself witnessed the event. The theory remains unproven. It has also been suggested that the woman is pregnant since a wooden carving of Saint Margaret, patron saint of childbirth, appears on the chair behind her. However, the bulging green dress she gathers up is designed for the full-bellied fashion of the time. The remarkable degree of detail suggests a real space almost photographically recorded but the scene is in fact a careful construction. You can see *pentimenti* around the man's feet and his right hand, which was adjusted to a more upright position, seeming to greet guests who enter the room. These visitors, who would be standing where we now look at the painting, are reflected in the mirror. Yet the little dog, a symbol of fidelity, is missing from this tiny reflection.

From missing reflections to mistaken additions in Room 30.



Saint John the Evangelist on the Island of Patmos

Diego Velázquez, about 1618

Saint John was inspired to write the New Testament Book of Revelation on the Greek island of Patmos. The saint here gazes towards a vision of the Woman of the Apocalypse with a dragon. This figure was seen as a symbolic representation of the Virgin Mary, who escapes from the dragon (representing the devil) who was ready, as Saint John writes, 'to devour her child as soon as it was born'. The darkness of the overall composition concentrates our attention on this illuminated vision but Velázquez may have intended the background to be even darker. At the top right, behind the tree, we see streaks of brown and black where Velázquez cleaned excess paint from his brush off onto the canvas. As the thin paint layer covering them has become transparent over time these marks are no longer concealed.

In Gainsborough's double portrait in Room 35 it is the spot where the brush did not meet the canvas that is more intriguing.

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Mr and Mrs Andrews

Thomas Gainsborough, about 1750

Gainsborough preferred painting landscapes to 'pick-pocketing by way of portraiture'. Tellingly more than half of this canvas is focused on the couple's estate, celebrating the ownership and good management of the land that the recently wed couple had inherited.

On first glance the painting looks complete, but there

is a small gap where the canvas shows through in Mrs Andrews's lap. What would Gainsborough have painted there? Perhaps a pheasant brought down by her husband's hunting gun? Yet the ripe corn indicates that it is not pheasant season and no doubt he would not have been thanked for placing a dead bird on such a beautiful pale blue French skirt. Maybe the hands would have held a workbag for some kind of needle or knot work? But why wait to paint this? Could the space have been reserved for a possible future family addition? The couple had their first child about a year after this portrait was made.

Now, finally, let's join some more newlyweds in Room 43.

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The Beach at Trouville

Claude-Oscar Monet, 1870

Monet was keen on painting *en plein air* (French for 'in the open air'), creating lively oil sketches such as this one directly from the view before him. The subject is his new wife Camille Doncieux (left) and a friend on holiday at the fashionable resort of Trouville on the Normandy coast. They are clearly shown on the beach but how can we tell Monet did not paint the scene in the studio as Gainsborough did? A closer look at the rapidly applied thick white brushstrokes where they meet the grey on Camille's skirt reveals the imprint of another

canvas. This is evidence that Monet stacked his canvases together before they had time to dry, neglecting to place cork separators between them as Impressionist artists often did when transporting several wet paintings at once. Another clue, easier to spot, is between the grey slats of the chair. The sea breeze lifting the flag beneath the scudding clouds also blew grains of sand from the beach onto Monet's palette that can still be seen encapsulated in the paint surface.

Please note that a painting may occasionally be off display. If so, you can view a reproduction of it on Artstart screens around the Gallery where current painting locations can also be found.

If you would like to find out more about mistakes and mysteries in the National Gallery's collection visit our free exhibition *Close Examination: Fakes, Mistakes and Discoveries* running until 12 September 2010. The book series 'A Closer Look' is also available now from Gallery bookshops or you can visit our website at www.nationalgallery.org.uk.