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# Perugino's 'Virgin and Child with Saint John'

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## Introduction

The *Virgin and Child with S. John* by Pietro Perugino (No.181) was acquired by the National Gallery in 1841. Purchased from William Beckford, builder of Fonthill, it had formed part of his collection there. He had bought it some twenty years earlier from Pizzetta, 'a picture-cleaner', who claimed to have brought it from Perugia, but who almost certainly purchased it at auction in London on 26 March, 1819. In 1822 the Fonthill property and pictures from the Beckford Collection including the Perugino were acquired by John Farquhar: the Perugino was included by mistake and Beckford bought it back. He parted with it finally when it was sold to the National Gallery in 1841.

That the picture is by Perugino has never seriously been doubted, although the signature in gold on the Virgin's sleeve was, with good reason, not considered authentic (see below). Some critics claim the participation of hands other than Perugino's (such as Lo Spagna, an imitator of Perugino), but to most the authorship is clear. Dating of the picture is something of a problem, as the immediate impression of its being an early work is contradicted by certain features of style and content such as the hair-dressing of the Virgin. Martin Davies dates it at soon after 1500 in the National Gallery Catalogue, *The Earlier Italian Schools* (to which refer for a full discussion of provenance and dating).

Nothing is known of the picture's history until it appeared in the P. Panné sale, London, in 1819, to be bought by Pizzetta. Certainly its technical history, its condition and treatment, are obscure right up until the time when it entered the Gallery in 1841. Since then there is a complete record, as every picture in the National Gallery is fully documented from the moment it enters the Collection. Even so, very little is recorded in the way of treatment, because very little was done. The picture was varnished soon after acquisition with a mixture of mastic varnish and drying oil, which was a quite normal operation. In 1885 it was examined and pronounced 'generally in excellent state', and at the same time some more penetrating remarks were made which will be discussed later. In 1856, its heavy, ornate and most unsuitable gilt frame was glazed for protection of the painting. Finally, in 1945, after storage in Manod Quarry during the war, it was returned to London and polished with a wax preparation.

Essentially therefore, there had been nothing done to the picture for at least 134 years when, in 1975, its cleaning was proposed, and approved by the Trustees.

## Condition before cleaning (Fig. 1)

The *Virgin and Child with S. John* is painted on poplar, the usual support for Italian paintings of the period. Before treatment the panel appeared rectangular, approximately 30mm thick, and the painted surface measured 68.5 × 44.5cm (27 × 17½in.). Inspection of the panel showed that it consisted of two principal pieces, grain vertical, joined vertically just to the right of centre. There was some worm channelling at the back on either side of the join, but it was inactive. It was clear, also, that the top left and right corners were separate pieces of wood, apparently also poplar, attached to the main part of the panel by screws and nails.

To clarify matters X-radiographs of the picture were taken (Fig.2). Separate X-rays are usually joined into a composite mosaic and examined alongside the picture to make comparison easier. The manner of recording X-rays is to place the film in contact with the picture surface: necessarily, therefore, the final mosaic is identical in size to the picture surface itself and a direct inch by inch correlation is possible. It should be remembered that material throughout the entire thickness of the panel is contributing to a two-dimensional image.

Thus, without reference to the picture itself one could not know whether the light circle by S. John's arm was due to dense matter on the front of the painting or some feature further down inside or at the back of the panel: it was, in fact, a seal on the back. By contrast, the bright area at the right of the Virgin's neck was a damage to the paint layers, filled with a lead-based paint. This emphasizes that interpretation of X-rays away from the picture can be misleading.

The principal join in the panel could be seen as a straight line running almost vertically through the right side of the Virgin's head. The prominent wood grain was discontinuous at the line of join as one would expect, but the similarity of grain pattern between the two halves suggested a common origin.

The status of the added top corners became clearer also: the nails and screws were easily visible, and the interfaces between the additions and the main panel appeared to form a smooth curve on each side, a truncated semi-circle. This suggested that the main panel at one time had had a rounded top which had been cut and made rectangular by adding corners. It was tempting to assume straight away that this alteration had been made long after the picture was painted, but until the paint layers could be examined, free from varnish and over-paint, one had to allow the possibility (however unlikely) of the change being made by Perugino himself.

The examination of 1855 either overlooked or ignored the added corners. The connection with an arched form was noticed, but the wrong deduction was

made: 'the picture is surrounded with a painted frame like the opening of a window; the upper part appears to have been originally covered with an arched (moveable) frame, the upper corners being cleaner than the rest of the surface'. The basic rectangular shape of the picture was not questioned.

Interpretation of the X-rays with respect to the paint layers in the top corners was somewhat confused. There were obviously many layers and much overpaint present (this was confirmed by subsequent cleaning) but essentially, if a rounded top was intended by Perugino, then the rectangular window frame must be false and a curved window frame must be underneath, concealed by overpaint. There were indications of such a frame in the X-ray, but only cleaning would reveal it. The basic design of the picture framed by a painted window was not in question, as the framing lower down and at the bottom edge seemed quite authentic: it was simply suggested that at an unknown time for an unknown reason a low squared top had been substituted for a higher rounded one. Cleaning would be necessary to dismiss the remote possibility that the substitution was Perugino's own.

The X-ray mosaic showed an alteration elsewhere in the composition, too, although again it gave no immediate indication of when the change had been made. At the bottom of the picture, immediately behind the window frame, is a parapet on which the Child stands; S. John with his staff stood behind it, next to the Virgin. X-rays showed that the figure of S. John and the sleeve of the Virgin's cloak continued under the parapet as far as the painted frame.

In *The Earlier Italian Schools* Martin Davies noted this fact and suggested that the change followed Perugino's own intentions: 'The paint on this part of the parapet appears to be entirely new; but the alteration appears to have been made by Perugino in the course of his work, since on the one hand the position of the Child's feet has not been changed, and on the other X-rays reveal no clear step in the parapet towards the middle of the picture.' The assumption that the parapet had to step down in the middle if Perugino had wanted more of the figure of S. John to show seems logical but a simpler possibility existed. This was that S. John was not intended to be alongside the Virgin behind the parapet, but to stand in front of it: a later hand could then be assumed for the continuation of the parapet across the picture in front of him. Here, too, a cleaning test would be necessary before the actual state became clear.

Before cleaning could be commenced, the rest of the picture surface was examined to assess the condition and found mostly to be in excellent state. There were a few retouched paint losses such as that in the Virgin's neck, but probably fewer than is normal for a picture of its age. Some passages, such as the Child's right hand, were slightly worn—a condition associated with over-abrasive treatment, probably during a previous cleaning. The paint extending right up to the edges of the panel had chipped away in places.

The gold inscription and decorations were viewed with considerable caution. The inscription on the Virgin's sleeve 'PETRUS PERUGINUS' appeared to be '... entirely new; possibly it follows old indications,



but the spelling *Peruginus* instead of *Perusinus* does not allay suspicion that it is invented' (Davies). Gold applied on top of paint in this way is highly susceptible to wearing, by cleaning and abrasion, and its antiquity should certainly be noticeable after four and a half centuries. Other non-original additions to the paint surface appeared to be some extra branches and leaves to the trees at the left, and the strengthening with heavy black lines of some outlines.

Restorers have always been tempted to 'improve' pictures in this way, to add embellishments of their own surreptitiously—or sometimes openly—leaving their mark upon the composition. Present-day restorers are encouraged to resist such temptation, but, nevertheless, derive some amusement from the excesses of their predecessors.

### The cleaning

Cleaning a picture is the removal, where appropriate, of all surface accretions (such as discoloured varnish, retouchings and overpaint) that are not part of the original. The varnish covering *The Virgin and Child with S. John* had a marked grey-yellow discolouration typical of an aged mastic/oil coating. The effect of this film was

**Figure 1** (Above) Perugino, *The Virgin and Child with S. John* before cleaning.

**Figure 2** (Top right) X-Ray mosaic.

**Figure 3** (Below right) Cleaning tests.



to conceal the characteristic hatched brushstrokes of Perugino's paint, to destroy the delicate recession of landscape to the misty blue horizon and to distort the colour balances of the brilliant pigments.

The blue lapis lazuli (ultramarine), subsequently found by analysis to be the main constituent of the Virgin's robe, is especially vulnerable to discoloured varnishes. Visually its transformation to a muddy green is probably more disturbing than the change suffered by other pigments. But the greater danger lies in its physical characteristics and particle size: it owes its strength of colour to the coarseness of grinding, and this leads to an open and porous paint surface which becomes thoroughly saturated with old varnish residues. Therefore regions of lapis lazuli are often found either to be damaged by previous attempts at total cleaning, or (as was found to some degree in the present picture) to be dulled by irremovable residues.

Another pigment presenting problems to the restorer is the green copper resinate, found in many early Italian landscapes. Its irreversible discolouration to dark brown is well-known and occurs somewhat in the middle-ground landscape of the present picture. It often resembles discoloured varnish which has not been removed, but unfortunately it represents a permanent change which the restorer is powerless to rectify.

Cleaning of the *Virgin and Child with S. John* was carried out with small cotton-wool swabs and the usual solvents and reagents at the restorer's command. Details of the specific proportions of, say, isopropyl alcohol, turpentine and other solvents are not particularly meaningful since they may well be varied for different areas of the picture. For especially tough and intractable passages of retouching paint, solvents and reagents can prove useless: the restorer has then to resort to mechanical removal by delicate scraping with scalpels.

The purposes of cleaning this picture were partly aesthetic, but more to establish the true status of particular areas, principally the painted frame and the parapet. Thus small cleaning tests were first done on the left edge near the Child's elbow and on the right edge level with the Virgin's shoulder (Fig.3). These were thought to be far enough from the disputed top corners to be able to determine absolutely the nature of the framing on each side. The right edge was found to be essentially unaltered in this region, but the left edge had been repainted: a narrower frame of cooler lighter colours was found underneath.

Cleaning tests done higher up near the added corners showed a much more complex situation (Fig.4). Normal solvent cleaning, sufficient to remove the varnish, made no impression on the rectangular frame and other areas of obvious repaint. Therefore more powerful solvents, ammoniacal reagents and mechanical methods were used. Strips were cleaned, uncovering successive layers of false paint. The following layers of overpaint were identified before original paint was reached: first, blue-green retouching (which formed the visible sky inside the rectangular frame), then a thin layer of gesso priming, a light blue layer and finally a grey-green layer forming a curved spandrel inside the square framing.

These levels represented successive attempts by one



or more restorers to alter an arched conformation (albeit truncated) into a convincingly rectangular one. The first idea had been to compromise by creating within a square frame a grey spandrel which echoed the rounded shape of the original panel. This idea was clearly abandoned in favour of extending the blue sky up to the newly painted frame. The intervention of the thin gesso layer before the final sky-coloured layer was obviously needed to adjust the paint surface to the level of the added corners.

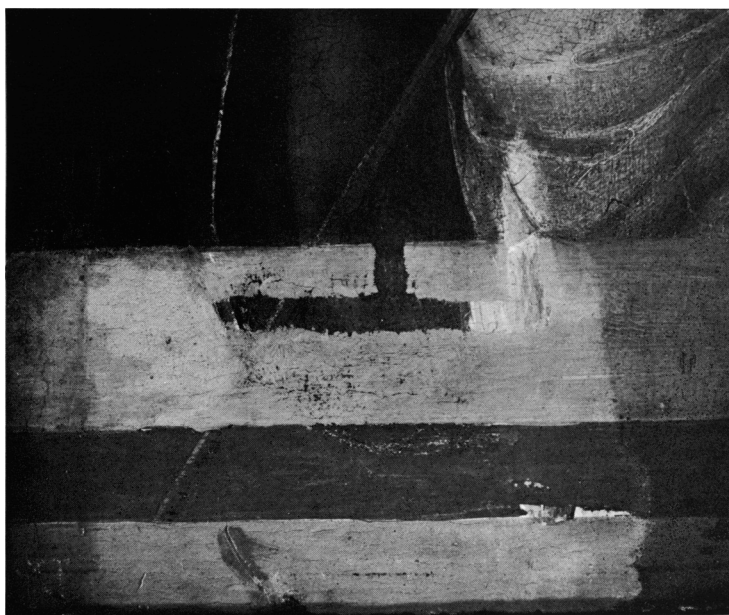
The earliest paint revealed thus far (the rectangular frame and the grey spandrels) ran over both additions and original panel. These must be false if the panel had indeed been arched, so, at the top edge, a thin strip of spandrel and frame was very slowly scraped away with a small scalpel. Eventually, a curved frame was revealed following the line of the rounded top; and the colours matched those found in the original test made lower down that side. This was the original painted frame: tests had established beyond doubt the exact nature of the arched design. All that remained was the laborious task of removing all the rest of the overpaint.

Attention was now switched to the parapet. Immediately the varnish was removed, the coarseness of the part of the parapet covering S. John and the Virgin's robe became fully apparent. A cleaning test (Fig. 5) confirmed it: the new paint came away easily, revealing the continuation of S. John and the Virgin's robe underneath.

At the same time, the cleaning test overlapped slightly the already visible part of S. John and his brown drapery. The drapery proved to be yet another restorer's invention, painted merely in the varnish. Underneath S. John was clothed in an almost negligible wisp of diaphanous material quite different to the clumsy folds given him later. Removal of those and the false parapet showed him to be quite intact and none the worse for his many years of concealment.

The design of the picture was subtly altered by these changes. At the top the improvement was rather spoilt because so much of the arch was missing, but at the bottom the gain was immediate. S. John with his staff now stood in front of the parapet and the Virgin's robe lay across it. The composition of the three figures suddenly assumed a dimension of depth that it lacked before, and the parapet became an individual feature rather than merely a curious extension to the window sill.

The two areas of major interest dealt with, the rest of the picture surface was now cleaned. For the most part it was simply a matter of removing varnish with occasional retouchings covering small damages. However, the gold inscription was the subject of particular attention since the authenticity of signatures is a sensitive area in art historical research. It became quite obvious upon removing the obscuring layer of varnish that this inscription was indeed false, but the possibility of its overlying a genuine but worn signature had to be considered. Careful removal of the false gold did reveal original gold underneath; but it was only the remains of a decorative pattern similar to that found higher up on the edge of the Virgin's robe. There had been no inscription. It was the final invention of one of those resourceful restorers who had done the rest: unfortu-



nately he did not know how Perugino usually signed his own work.

### Restoration and reframing

The picture was now clean, freed from varnish, retouchings and overpaint (Fig. 6). The only parts remaining that were not original were the added corners. The screws and nails were carefully drawn out and the additions removed. The panel could now be seen in its true condition for the first time, and the condition of all that remained was excellent.



**Figure 4**  
(Top left)  
Cleaning tests,  
top left corner.

**Figure 5**  
(Below left)  
Cleaning test,  
lower edge.

**Figure 6** (Above)  
The picture after  
cleaning, before  
restoration.

Routine retouching of the few small damages in the picture and around the edges was carried out. Colours were matched using pure pigments with a synthetic resin, the acrylic Paraloid B72, for the medium. The resin chosen had the properties of remaining colourless and permanently removable, and the retouchings were confined rigorously to the areas of damage. A polycyclohexanone resin MS2A, was used for the final varnish.

The picture retouched (Fig.7), the only problem remaining was how to frame and exhibit it. Responsibility for framing lay not with the restorer but with the Deputy Keeper in charge of Early Italian paintings, Allan Braham. Of several possibilities, only two were seriously considered. The first was to exhibit the panel as it was, unframed, mounted on a simple backing of suitable material. The only frame around the composition would be the painted one in the picture itself and the incompleteness of the panel would stand revealed. The second choice was to reconstruct the missing arch and frame the picture in its original shape.

The second alternative was the one adopted. The shape of the complete top was deduced by extrapolation

of the existing curve and a reconstruction made on a separate piece of wood which fitted exactly against the cut edge. The correct colours for the sky and frame were painted on the added piece, but no attempt was made to conceal the join with the original panel. This compromise allowed the composition to be viewed in its original form while making it quite obvious to the discerning eye where the original ended. Finally a simple round-topped wood frame with a carved and gilded inner edge was made to give unity to the completed design (Plate 4, page 16).

### Conclusion

The cleaning and restoration of *The Virgin and Child with S. John* posed almost as many questions as it answered. Why had the panel been cut? It may even have been cut at the bottom as well, since the outer part of the painted frame at the sides does not continue around to the lower edge. A likely explanation is that a past owner cared less for the picture than for a particular frame (perhaps even the heavy gilt one surrounding it before the present restoration) and had the panel altered to fit the frame. Such a course of action would be unthinkable today, but was by no means ruled out in previous centuries.

Why was S. John covered up with drapery and the parapet? Perhaps for reasons of prudery: but then why wasn't Christ covered, too? All that can be said is that an owner's or restorer's idea of S. John's appearance did no accord with Perugino's. Who could the owner be who sanctioned these alterations? Surely the concealment of S. John could not have been at the behest of William Beckford, whose particular style of profligacy was well known? It is tempting to attribute some changes to Pizzetta although the panel was probably already rectangular when he acquired it. He was 'a picture cleaner' and might feel a strong professional temptation to indulge his fancies on the composition. But this is only speculation and it is unlikely that the solution could be so neat: the answer will probably never be known with certainty.

Cleaning has revealed the high quality of the painting and, in spite of the loss of the inscription, confirmed an attribution that was never really in question. The technique is exceptionally fine, the regular hatched brushstrokes which follow the form being typical of the handling of egg-tempera painting. Chemical analysis indicates that the medium for the flesh areas is egg. This fact, together with the use of green underpainting for the flesh tones (becoming almost outmoded by 1500) suggests that *The Virgin and Child with S. John* should be dated somewhat earlier than Perugino's three panels from the late Certosa di Pavia altarpiece *The Virgin and Child with Ss. Raphael and Michael* No.288, also in the National Gallery, whose handling seems more mature, probably in oil, and with no signs of green underpaint for the flesh.

These three panels form an ironical postscript. They have not yet been cleaned, but it is known that their arched tops are false and that the panels were originally rectangular—the very reverse of the change that had occurred to *The Virgin with Child with S. John*.

**Figure 7**  
The picture  
after cleaning  
and restoration.

