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Goya's Re-use of a Canvas for 'Doña Isabel'

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Goya's portrait of *Doña Isabel de Porcel* (No.1473, Fig.1 and Plate 7, p.43) [1] was X-radiographed for the first time during its recent treatment in the Conservation Department. Unexpectedly, a male portrait, the execution of which was apparently well-advanced or even completed, was discovered to lie beneath the female sitter. The male sitter is placed lower on the canvas than *Doña Isabel*, and faces slightly to the spectator's right. The X-radiograph (Fig.2) clearly shows his head, and less distinctly the right shoulder and lapel of what appears to be a striped jacket. Below the lapel, and just above and to the right of *Doña Isabel's* hand, is a shape which resembles the ribbon of a decoration, and which must belong to the earlier portrait.

Allan Braham [2] has discussed the discovery of the male portrait and has pointed out that although the head is clear enough in the X-radiograph to be identifiable, the sitter is apparently not the subject of any other of Goya's known portraits. The very minute possibility that Goya used a canvas already painted on and discarded by another artist can surely be dismissed.

Because of the exceptionally good state of preservation of *Doña Isabel* (the only losses are where the canvas turns over the stretcher) it was not possible to make a full investigation of the technique and paint layers by paint sampling. Cross-sections which were taken, mainly from the edges of the cracks, showed the male sitter's jacket to be predominately blue in colour and its stripes, as indicated by the X-radiograph, to be lighter. The paler stripes can also be seen running vertically under *Doña Isabel's* right sleeve. The shape on the right side of the male sitter's chest which may be the ribbon of a decoration (though decorations are normally worn on the left) was shown by a cross-section to be painted mainly in an opaque yellow pigment.

Few conclusions can be reached about Goya's technique and working practices. The effect of painting on top of another portrait, the canvas not having been re-primed, would impose unusual, though perhaps to Goya not unwelcome or unfamiliar conditions. The only other Goya in the National Gallery Collection from which paint cross-sections have been made is the portrait of *The Duke of Wellington* (No.6322). The cross-sections, of which there are only two from edge losses, in that case revealed many different-coloured paint layers which had no obvious connection with the finished image. A thick layer of red and white lead pigments prevented the X-radiograph from showing any distinct image, even that of Wellington himself. It is probable that there was at least one well-advanced picture (not necessarily of the same subject) on the panel when

Goya began the painting of the Duke in its present form [3]. *The Duke of Wellington* panel was probably re-primed with the red and white lead layer mentioned above, whereas the canvas of *Doña Isabel* was not re-primed between the two portraits (Fig.3). The cross-sections show no trace of any varnish or surface dirt between *Doña Isabel* and the male sitter, and they do not make it clear if the background of the earlier portrait was completed.

Treatment of *Doña Isabel* was undertaken for two reasons. Firstly, the varnish layer was thick and very yellow, seriously distorting the colour of the flesh and the black mantilla. Secondly, the paint was cupping and the cracks, which extended through both portraits and into the red ochre ground, were becoming very prominent. It was decided that re-lining was necessary (the picture had been lined at some time before its acquisition by the National Gallery in 1896).

Allan Braham [2] has discussed the inscription on the lining canvas which refers to *Doña Isabel's* husband (Antonio de Porcel, whose portrait, also by Goya, was in the Jockey Club, Buenos Aires, until destroyed by fire in 1953 [1]). During the removal of the lining canvas (Fig.4) Goya's signature with an inscription identifying *Doña Isabel* were found on the back of the original (Fig.5). Hopes that Goya might have also inscribed the name of the male sitter proved to be unfounded.

It is possible that Goya often used for his portraits canvases or panels on which he had already painted, and that it was done from choice. *Doña Isabel* must have been an extraordinary sight as the top of the male sitter's head disappeared under her left eye and cheek, and his right eye under her chin. Goya could have avoided this simply by turning the canvas upside down, which would have meant painting *Doña Isabel's* head on the chest and lapels of the striped jacket, a much more uniform surface. That he did not use a new canvas, re-prime over the male sitter or turn the canvas upside down surely suggests an element of choice.

Notes and references

1. For a full account of the history and provenance, see MACLAREN, N., *National Gallery Catalogues: Spanish School*, 2nd ed., revised by Allan Braham (London 1970), p.12.
2. BRAHAM, A., *The Burlington Magazine* (1981), pp.541–2.
3. The equestrian portrait of the Duke of Wellington at Apsley House is painted on top of another portrait. See BRAHAM, A., in *The Burlington Magazine* (1966), p.618.

Figure 1
Goya, *Doña Isabel de Porcel* (No.1473), canvas, 32¼ × 21½ (82 × 55), after cleaning and restoration.





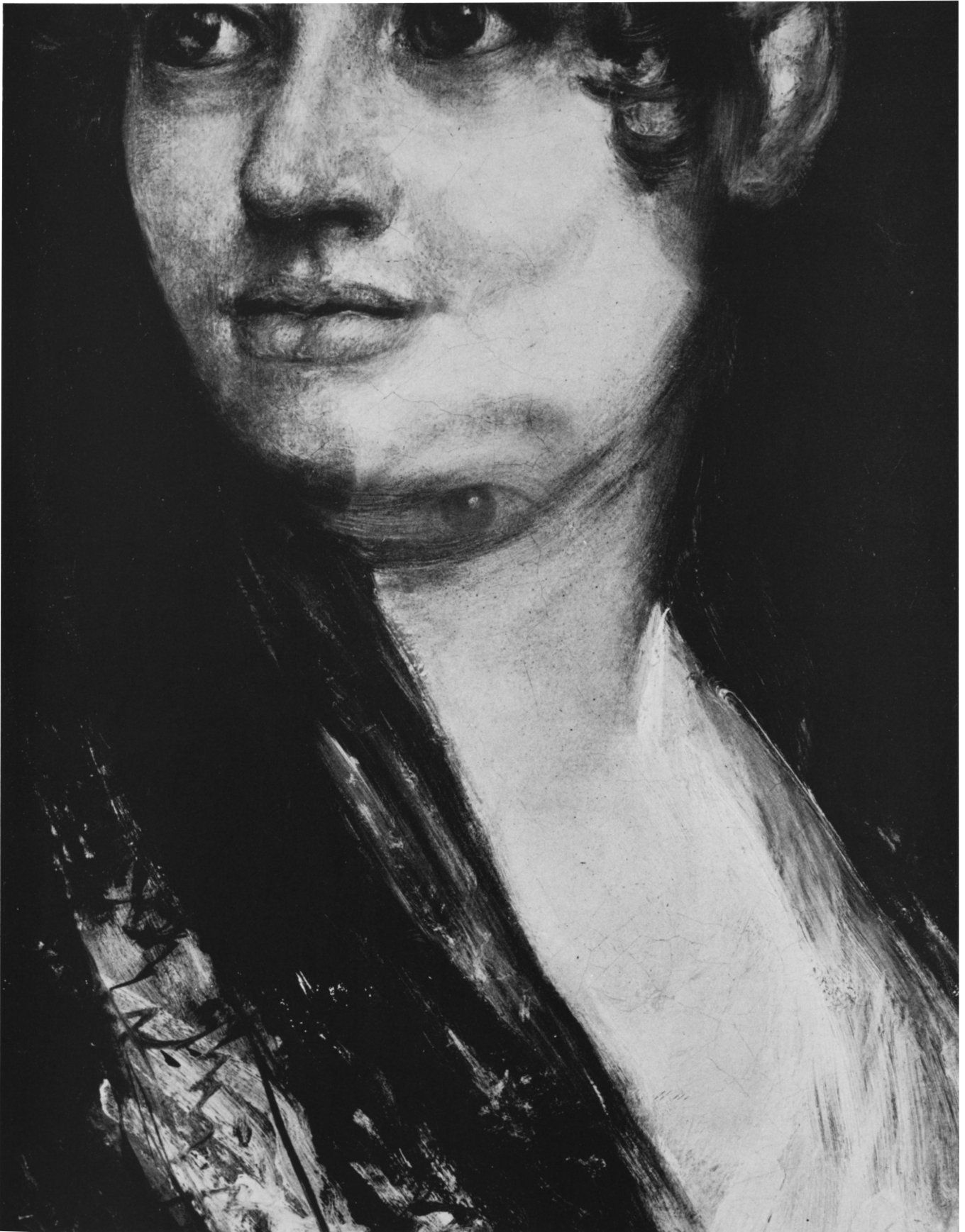


Figure 2 (Left) *Doña Isabel de Porcel*, X-radiograph mosaic after the removal of the lining canvas, showing the earlier male portrait on the same canvas.

Figure 3 (Above) *Doña Isabel de Porcel*, infra-red detail. The right eye, eyebrow and forehead of the painted-over male portrait can be seen. Doña Isabel is painted directly on top of the unknown male portrait. There is no priming between the two, nor any dirt or varnish.



Figure 4 Photograph during removal of lining canvas. Goya's inscription and signature can be seen through the glue on the back of the original canvas. The inscription on the lining canvas is mis-spelt: 'Cobos' instead of 'Lobos'.

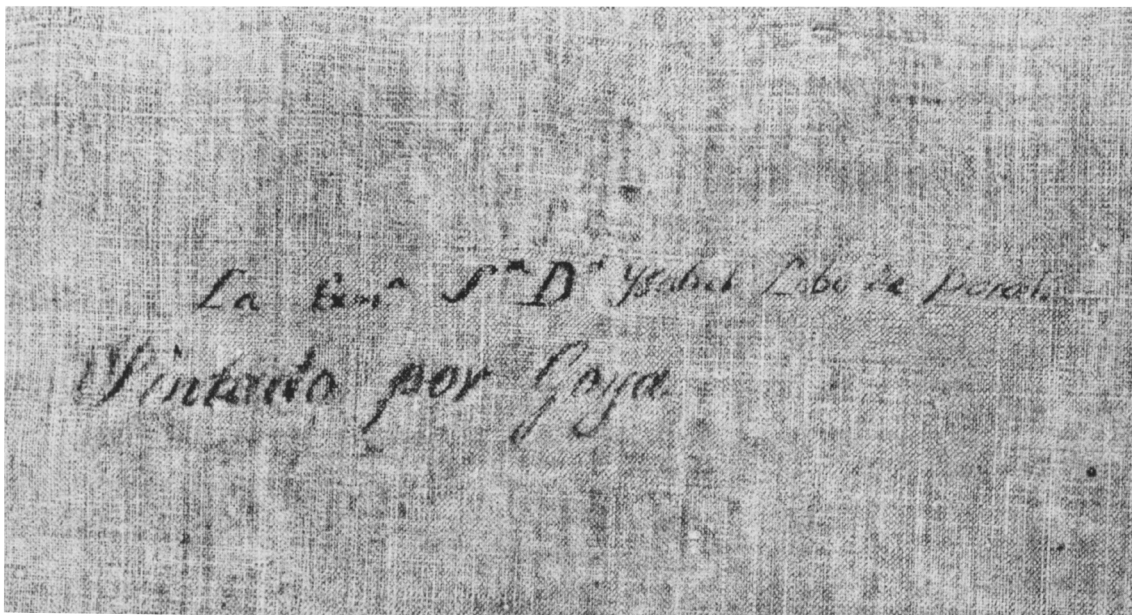


Figure 5 The inscription and signature on the back of the original canvas after the removal of the lining canvas and glue.

Plate 8 A simulated display of the West Wing Rooms set up on a Tektronix colour graphics terminal. Colour is used to attract attention. Each room is divided into two areas: a circle in the centre for temperature and the rest of the room for RH. If the room is green all is correct. Blue means too high a value, orange means too low. Thus in Room 4 orange shows that the RH is too low (46%), but temperature is within spec. since it is green within the circle. In Room 14 both RH and temperature are too high (67% and 23°C).

Plate 9 Medium weight canvas with strips of prepared grounds.

- i. Flake white oil grounds.
 - ii. Winsor and Newton acrylic primer.
 - iii. 'Bassano' oil ground.
 - iv. 'Doerner' emulsion ground.
- Area on left impregnated with Ketone N – refined beeswax and area on right with dammar – refined beeswax.



Plate 7 (Left) Goya, *Doña Isabel de Porcel* (No.1473). After cleaning, re-lining and restoration.

Plate 8 (Right) Full caption on facing page.

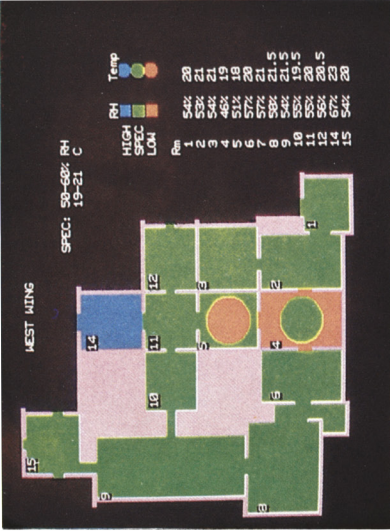


Plate 9 (Below) Full caption on facing page.

