

# THE POUSSIN PROJECT

*Extracts from The Poussin Project.*

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*Restoration timeline footage and complete project entries available to view online at [ngv.vic.gov.au](http://ngv.vic.gov.au).*

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## Getting started

11 Jan 2011

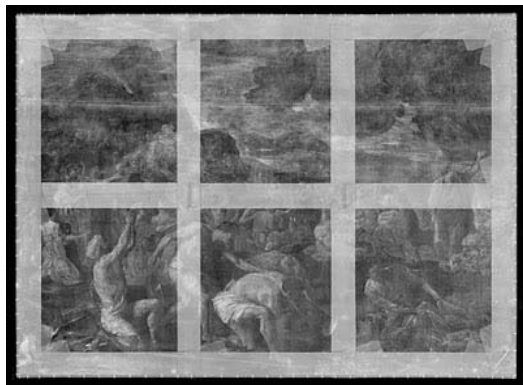
No conservation treatment ever begins by getting straight into the physical act of cleaning or repairing the picture. It is always preceded by a phase of looking, learning and recording. These simple-sounding steps are some of the most important things a restorer needs to do to ensure a successful outcome to a treatment. They are also continuous from the beginning to the end of the job.

The amount of time needed before treatment can begin will depend on the amount of information available about the work and complexity of the problems the painting presents.



## X-raying the Poussin

25 Jan 2011



At the NGV, paintings in the collection are routinely x-rayed as part of the documentation process carried out by the conservation department. The process is usually straightforward but must be carried out according to strict health and safety regulations. Paintings are laid out onto a special lead-lined table containing the x-ray unit. Once the painting is in position large photographic plates in lightproof envelopes are placed on the surface, then covered with a lead-lined cover to ensure that the hazardous x-rays are safely contained. The unit is activated for a short time - like a camera shutter exposing the photographic film - causing the x-rays from the unit to pass through the painting and onto the x-radiographic plate. Once the plate is exposed it is then taken to the x-ray processor for developing. With larger paintings many plates are required to get the whole work radiographed. The Poussin needed thirty separate plates.

The above image is the digitally assembled radiograph for the painting. It reveals not just the painting on the canvas but also the wood stretcher and all the other components which hold the work together. Radiographs can be very useful for determining the condition of those structural components, particularly for paintings on wood panels. However, there are other times when the image of the stretcher can impede our examination of the painted surface. In these cases we are able to digitally adjust the radiographic image to reduce the effect of the stretcher, as we see in the image.

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## The revelations of UV photography 16 Mar 2011



As we draw closer to the cleaning of *The Crossing of the Red Sea* we turn our attention to UV photography. A quick glance at an image of the painting under ultraviolet light is enough for a conservator to learn some of the critical issues regarding its surface, especially the condition of the old varnish and the previous restorer's work.

When paintings are placed under UV light they fluoresce in a particular way which looks very different to their appearance under normal lights. Apart from the overall bluish tone it gives to the picture, we can

often perceive a slightly milky layer blanketing the colours and tones. This effect usually comes from the varnish layers. Old tree-resin varnishes such as dammar or mastic typically fluoresce a pale green colour, and this becomes more pronounced as the varnish gets older. The fluorescence visible on the UV image of *The Crossing of the Red Sea* is what one would expect to see in a fifty-year old varnish.

## Removal of varnish and old retouchings 01 Aug 2011

Cleaning tests had revealed that the old varnish - applied by Horace Buttery in 1960 - could be removed using standard cleaning solutions without risking Poussin's paint surface. So what do we mean by a standard cleaning solution?

Well, first it depends on the type of varnish being removed and the vulnerability of the underlying paint. Critical to the ability to safely remove varnish from most paintings is the condition that oil paint is different to varnish resin in terms of chemical structure. We can exploit this difference by selecting solvents which affect the resin without breaking down the structure of the oil.



For many Old Master oil paintings covered with a traditional varnish such as dammar, paintings conservators will frequently use a blend of an "active" solvent, such as acetone or possibly isopropanol, with a "diluent" solvent such as mineral spirits. The diluent solvent has the effect of controlling the solubilizing of the varnish by the active solvent; essentially, it slows down the rate of removal, allowing the conservator to work in a measured way.

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## The mystery figure in the NGV *Crossing of the Red Sea* 7 Nov 2011

Before the cleaning of *The Crossing of the Red Sea* took place, there was one figure in it which had attracted attention from observant viewers. This figure in blue, nestled in among the throng of agitated Israelites, looked over her shoulder directly at the viewer. She drew attention because there was something odd about her in comparison with the figures nearby: the modelling of the paint in her face was much less refined than those of her companions, and she seemed contorted in a rather unusual way. There was a suspicion that the face was either severely worn or else the work of a restorer.



When we referred to the Stanford replica, it showed a notably different figure. Though it had a similarly shaped body, the head was turned right around so that all that was visible was hair and a pair of ears. The engraving and the tapestry versions of the painting confirmed that Poussin painted the figure turned away from the viewer, so it appeared certain that the face we found on our Poussin must have been the work of a restorer.

Therefore during the cleaning it came as a surprise to discover that the face was in fact original to the painting. Unlike the other areas of restoration, the paint of the face was not soluble in the cleaning solution, and when examined under high magnification it appeared consistent with the surrounding original paint with a similar craquelure, brush and pigment characteristics. But how could it possibly be by Poussin when the other copies and replicas told us the figure was turned the other way?

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The answer appears to be that the face looking at the viewer was the first idea Poussin had, but after concluding that for some reason it did not work, he painted it out, replacing it with the head turned around the other way. If you look closely at the blue-clad body of the figure in the original, you can also see how the initial positioning of the body was different to its final appearance. The body was originally painted in a side-on pose, with just one shoulder visible. When Poussin decided to turn the figure's head around he also turned the body around, adding the other shoulder which would have been obscured in profile in the first incarnation. The later-added shoulder and side of the body now appears different to the main part due to abrasion of the surface.

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## IMAGE CAPTIONS

1. Nicholas Poussin, *The Crossing of the Red Sea*, detail
2. Nicholas Poussin, *The Crossing of the Red Sea*, x-ray photograph before restoration treatment
3. Nicholas Poussin, *The Crossing of the Red Sea*, UV Photography before restoration treatment
4. Varnish removal swab
5. Attributed to Charles Le Brun, *The Crossing of the Red Sea (After Poussin)*, detail

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