

The Restorer's Point of View

A comprehensive technological examination of the painting has revealed pertinent information that allows us to better define the anonymous artist.

The support consists of two oak boards of different width that were tangentially cut from the trunk and have been butt-joined vertically. The dendrochronological analysis has shown that the tree from which they came grew in southern Germany, which means the Master of the Benda-Madonna selected locally available timber for his support.¹ Although oak panels are less common in works produced along the Upper Rhine, it is not unusual for a small-scale painting (see the essay by Guido Messling). This may be a result of a coeval shortage of oak, and we know that its use was restricted at the time.² According to the dendrochronological analysis, the slightly cropped panel may have been painted in 1487 – however, the loss of growth rings moves the presumed creation year to the 1490s. Remnants of an unpainted edge and raised lip or beard of ground indicate a now-lost ‘engaged’ frame from the time the painting was produced. On the panel’s obverse, several layers of a white chalk and glue ground were applied over a multi-part canvas lining; the dried chalk ground was then carefully planned.

The infrared examination offered insights into the artist’s creative process and the multi-step evolution of the composition. It revealed a thin liquid underdrawing limited to linear outlines of the facial contours and the drapery (*fig. A*). Next, a tonal underpainting was applied that obscured and shifted the forms’ outlines, pushing the underdrawing into the background. Already at this early stage, the artist decided against retaining the empty area on the Virgin’s forehead presumably intended for a large gem (see, for instance, Schongauer’s depictions of



Fig. A
Detail infrared reflectogram

the Virgin). We can trace corrections and alterations at different stages of the painting’s build-up that document the artist’s search for a balanced composition. This is most clearly apparent in the genesis of the Infant Jesus: his head was enlarged at least three times.

¹ See the dendrochronological report by Peter Klein (Hamburg) of 27 May 2012 (<https://rkd.nl/en/explore/technical/5008421>, retrieved 28 Feb. 2023).

² See Michaela Rößger, *Holzversorgung und Holzhandel*, in: Sönke Lorenz and Thomas Zotz (eds.), *Spätmittelalter am Oberrhein. Alltag, Handwerk und Handel 1350–1525*, Stuttgart 2001, 225–9, esp. 226.

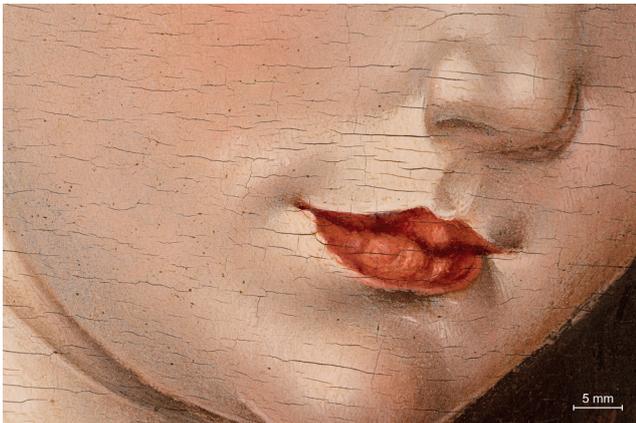


Fig. B
Macro image, face of the Virgin



Fig. C
Macro image, structured handling of the folds of her robe on her chest



Fig. D
Detail of the robe of the Virgin in the *Annunciation* in Karlsruhe

The Master of the Benda Madonna created a carefully differentiated surface finish through a brilliantly executed stylized rendering of materials.

Note the virtuoso handling and contrasting modelling in light and shadow of the Virgin's face, its mother-of-pearl-like lustre enhanced by a grisaille-like underpainting. In the shaded areas we found fingerprints that bear witness to the fact that the artist blurred and deliberately reduced the uppermost paint layer in these areas. Next to these soft transitions he carefully placed pure white paint in order to create gleaming highlights (fig. B).

The surface of the Virgin's blue cloak and her robe is highly structured: the artist created folds in the drapery by dabbing pastose paint in varying density on a light underpainting, and the hatched-modelling of the folds on her chest created an almost relief-like surface (fig. C). The stylised folds are similar to those of the robe worn by the Virgin in the *Annunciation* now in Karlsruhe (fig. D), and their graphic-linear character is closely related to depictions in engravings (see the essay by Guido Messling). Both the blue robe and blue and green details in the brocade cloth of honour behind the Madonna in Vienna have darkened, indicating an interaction between components containing resins and oils and the copper pigments.

One specific feature of the Master of the Benda Madonna's palette is his use of vivanite, a naturally-occurring blue mineral pigment; until now, there have not been many instances where its presence in a panel or canvas painting could be confirmed.³ We identified this hydrated ferrous phosphate in the lead white-containing underpainting of the Virgin's blue cloak and – together with azurite – in layers of blue paint (fig. E).

An important aspect of the anonymous master's painting method is his use of colourless ground glass, which we found in exceptionally well-preserved areas of red lake (fig. F). The lining of Mary's cloak is painted over a streaky purple-coloured interlayer comprising lead white, red lake and a little azurite, layered over a thin opaque base of vivid orange-red vermillion. The whole was then glazed with a mixture comprising red lake and finely ground vermillion, before lead white was used to model highlights, and bodily red lake to create depth. This complex

³ Recent research suggests the pigment was used more frequently than we have evidence for its use, and that the fact that it is difficult to detect in complex mixtures is the reason it is often overlooked. See Marika Spring, *New Insights into the Materials of Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-century Netherlandish Paintings in the National Gallery, London*, in: *Heritage Science* 5/40 2017, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40494-017-0152-3>, 10–1; David A. Scott and Gerhard Eggert, *The Vicissitudes of Vivianite as Pigment and Corrosion Product*, in: *Studies in Conservation* 52/1, 2007, 3–13, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1179/sic.2007.52.Supplement-1.3>.

layering can be found on paintings produced by Early Netherlandish masters and workshops but is somewhat unusual for a German panel.⁴

Note also the virtuosity of the handling of the clouds in the background landscape: the still-wet paint was wiped out with a brush in serpentine lines, almost sgraffito-like, and in some places these lines intertwine, revealing to different degrees the underlying blue paint of the sky (*fig. G*).

The sophisticated and ingenious handling reveals the anonymous painter's unique style, and shows him to have been an original mind.

⁴ See Rachel Billinge, Lorne Campbell, Jill Dunkerton et al., *Methods and Materials of Northern European Painting in the National Gallery, 1400–1550*, in: Diana Davies and Jan Green (eds.), *National Gallery London Technical Bulletin*, vol. 18, London 1997, 6–55, esp. 38–9.



Fig. E
Macro image, detail of the robe of the Virgin with visible light-blue underpainting

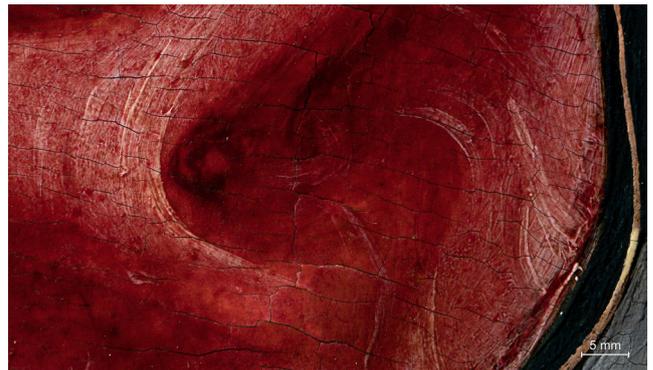


Fig. F
Macro image, red lining of the Virgin's cloak



Fig. G
Macro image, handling of the clouds in the background landscape