

The Madonna's of Jan van Scorel ¹⁴⁹⁵ 1562

Serial production of a cherished motif

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This appendix discusses research that can only be undertaken by means of first hand study of the paintings. During the exhibition, observations and comparisons were made among Jan van Scorel's Madonnas regarding painting technique, color, and size. Several more characteristic features of the artist's workshop routine came to light by means of close-up scrutiny and exact measuring. Other unexpected discoveries were made during the analysis of the painting process of some of the copies of Madonnas executed outside Scorel's shop.

Details of Painting Technique

It is of course not possible to survey all aspects of Scorel's painting technique in this short text, but one detail deserves to be singled out as a special effect. This has to do with the execution of the Madonna's veil and the child's swaddling cloth, which are sometimes one and the same in Scorel's Madonnas as a fabric continuing from Mary's shoulders to wrap around the child's body. The form of the veil is not a fixed element in Scorel's Madonnas; it even differs in color from painting to painting. The variation in this motif may be accounted for by the fact that the veil is not always underdrawn; as a result, it becomes a surface effect that is reserved for a late painting stage. It is most fully underdrawn in the Tambov Madonna (cat. no. C), while in the Utrecht and Berlin versions of the Madonna with wild flowers (cat. no. B and B-1), the cloth over the Madonna's shoulders is underdrawn, and that across the child's body is not. It is precisely in these last two works that Christ's cloth appears as a rounded shape left in reserve in the paint of the Madonna's blue mantle just to the left of the child's waist and thigh. The sunken areas can easily be seen in raking light in both paintings, and in the *Madonna with Wild Roses*, the delimited shape is especially overt since many of the white highlights of the cloth have been lost or abraded (fig. 1). Infrared reflectography (IRR) and X-ray also show the shape as a delimitation and further confirm that the first layer of color in the sunken area is thinner than the surrounding paint. This is a clever painting device, for the artists use the thinner paint to maintain the illusion of the transparency of the fabric and add only a few strokes of white for the finishing touches. The repetition of this painting routine in the Utrecht and Berlin paintings attests to their common origin in Scorel's shop. Although a related painting technique does appear in the Tambov Madonna, it is much subtler. Scorel uses a delimitation just under the Madonna's chin to suggest the transparency of her veil over her blue garment, and pools of dark red glaze create ridges to edge the yellow cloth that drapes over the child's arm and thigh.

Other motifs that are often left for elaboration in the final paint stage are hands. Hands are underdrawn in the Tambov Madonna (cat. no. C), but they are changed significantly in the final painting, where they are enlarged and refined in form. In the two Madonnas in Utrecht (cat. no. A and B), and the Madonna in Rotterdam (cat. no. A-3), the hands are indicated only in a sketchy way in the underdrawing, or not at all. In the final paint surface, the hands in these paintings follow the Tambov type.

This repeated disjuncture between underdrawing and surface suggests that it is justified to regard the painting of hands as a specialized shop activity. Often, as discussed in the entry on the *Madonna with Wild Roses* (cat. no. B), this required the attention of Scorel himself.

Part of the appeal of Scorel's Madonnas is the flower Mary holds, either wild roses, or daffodils, or the bright four-petaled yellow flowers with lobed leaves in catalogue numbers B-1 and B-3. The latter flower remained unidentified until the opening of the exhibition, when it was recognized as greater celandine (Lat. *chelidonium majus*, Ned. *stinkende gouwe*). The authors would like to thank Loekie Schwartz for making the identification and for sharing with us additional information about the plant. Celandine's medicinal properties would make it appropriate as a general Marian symbol, but it is also reasonable to suppose that the flower was included at the wish of the patrons. Even though Scorel's Madonnas were produced in series, the iconography is specific enough to suggest that each work was done on a commission basis.

Sizing of Composition Replicas

Just as the lunette shape proved to be a typical form for Scorel's Madonnas (cat. no. A, A-3, B, B-1, and C), the sizes of the paintings were shown to have a certain significance. This concerns compositional replicas and has more to do with the size of the compositional elements than the panels themselves. To make the size comparisons, tracings on large sheets of mylar plastic were required along with measurements of selected motifs. Since these had to be absolutely accurate, they were taken from X-rays. The Rotterdam Madonna (cat. no. A-3) is 70 % of the size of the Madonna in Utrecht (cat. no. A), as was already known at the time of the exhibition. Not surprisingly, then, the comparison of measurements between catalogue numbers B and B-1 also yielded a proportional relationship, this time with ratios varying from .82 to .86. The composition of the other replica in this series is, like the painting in Berlin, 80 % the size of the prototype, for comparisons revealed that the figures of the Madonna and Child in cat. no. B-1 and B-2 are an exact 1:1 match. For the smaller Madonna replicas, a method such as squaring must have been used to achieve the reduced size that is so consistent in all its parts. Unfortunately, the drawings used for this purpose have not survived, nor does squaring appear in the underdrawings of these paintings. We can only assume that a proportionally reduced drawing served as the model for both cat. no. B-1 and B-2, or that B-1 was the source of a cartoon for B-2 (a cartoon is a pattern



Fig. 2 Jan van Scorel (attributed to), *Triptych with the Virgin and Child and St Anne* (centre panel). Tracing of the underlying composition on the left side of the middle panel, cat. no. A-4

Tracing: Molly Faries



that is either perforated or traced for transfer). As a general rule, however, it does appear that Scorel's shop pieces are proportionally smaller. Replicas that are the same size or larger can, for the most part, be categorized as copies produced outside the shop, as is the case for instance with cat. no. C-1; and these are usually rectangular in shape.

The possibilities for first-hand study of the *Triptych with the Virgin and Child and Saint Anne* (cat. no. A-4) provided a number of surprising results. The infrared reflectograms had never been printed before, and the large-scale IRR assembly made for the exhibition showed some aspects of the underlying composition much more clearly than the documents used in the catalogue. Although it was not noted before, the foreground figures of the Madonna and Child and Saint Anne have been underdrawn. The lines are thin and difficult to see, but some traces of chalk underdrawing appear in Anne's shoulder, headdress, and arm holding the apple, as well as the child's face, arm and hand, and the Virgin's red garment, hair

Fig. 1 Jan van Scorel
(and workshop),
Madonna with wild roses
(detail), photo taken
during restoration,
cat. no. B

Photograph: MennoDooijes
Amsterdam

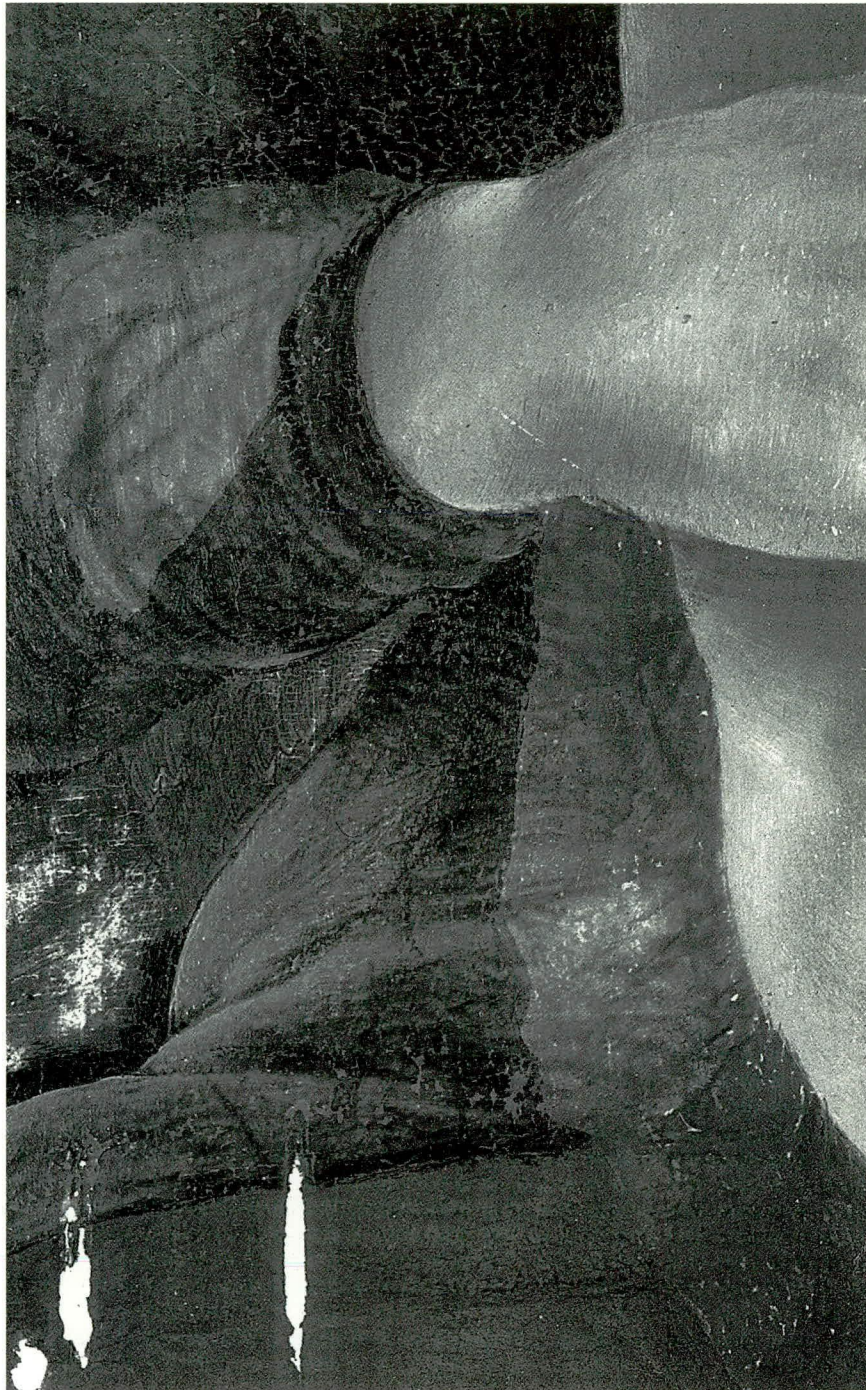


Fig. 3 Jan van Scorel
(attributed to),
*Madonna with
daffodils and two
donors* (detail),
cat. no. B-2
Infrared reflectogram
assembly (MolArt)

seen in raking light underneath the purplish robe of the male donor, the central figures were most likely completely finished in paint before the donors were added. The IRR examination of the donors did not reveal any underdrawing. This is highly unusual for Jan van Scorel, for his portraits almost always contain a highly distinctive underdrawing. Yet these portraits are typical of the master in their luminosity and fine detail. It is possible that Scorel painted the portraits directly from the sitters and added them to a Madonna type that was by then a stock workshop item. Thus, in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Madonna, technical study has disclosed once again how thoroughly Scorel's workshop was built into the painting process.



and eyes. The lines are exacting and look very much as if they could have been traced. This is significant, for the tracing taken from the prototype of this composition in Utrecht (cat. no. A), is an exact 1:1 match for the Madonna and Child. There is no lengthening of forms. The lines, moreover, mark out surface features, such as the edges of folds, Mary's hairline, eyelids, and eyebrows. These lines had to be taken from an image in finalized form, suggesting that the artist had direct knowledge of Scorel's finished painting. There is also a close correlation in color between Scorel's original (cat. no. A) and the version copied in the Saint Anne triptych.

Through further study of the IRR of the middle panel of the Anne triptych it was possible to discern some forms in the first composition more clearly (fig. 2). Under the figure of the Virgin is another, much smaller figure of Mary; her head is ovoid in shape; the hair on her shoulders has been delimited by paint, and her cloak was dark in color. The Christ child stands on her lap; his feet and bent knees indicate that he is turning and walking in the direction of a figure to the right – most probably a smaller figure of Saint Anne. The underlying figure remains obscured in IRR by the dark green paint on the surface. The underlying figures belong to a known compositional type in which the Virgin and Saint Anne sit next to each other, and the child either stands or walks from Mary's lap to Anne. Two very similar compositions can be found in a painting and sculpture in the *Museum Het Catharijneconvent* in Utrecht (s81 and ABM bh 313), dating c. 1525 and c. 1500–25 respectively. The IRR of the middle panel of the triptych also shows two figures bending over behind Mary and Anne. If they can be identified as Mary and Anne's husbands, Joseph and Joachim, then the overall composition can be interpreted as a Holy Kinship. In the final painting, the husbands have been repositioned in the window just above Anne. The extended Holy Family appears in the background: Mary Salome and Zebedeus with their two children, John the Evangelist and James the Great, and Mary Cleophas and her husband Alpheus with their four children, James the Less, Joseph the Just, Simon Zelotes and Judas Thaddeus. The background figures on the left wing may represent the so-called cadet branch of the Holy Kinship: Elizabeth and Zacharias with their son, John the Baptist. Cleverly, despite the transformation of the main figures, the artist retained the original meaning of the painting in the final version of the work. The Holy Kinship was a frequently painted subject in the early sixteenth century, but the first version of this triptych was quite conventional in style, and even old-fashioned in appearance. The insertion of Scorelesque figures may have been done at the patrons' request, and it does imply a homage to Scorel

and the fame of his paintings. There are regrettably too few features of the Holy Kinship triptych to arrive at a precise date, but it may have been painted not long after Scorel's prototype (cat. no. A), which is datable to c. 1527–30.

Additional Study with Infrared Reflectography

During the exhibition, it was possible to use the newly developed Molart PtSi IR focal plane array camera to study some works anew and others for the first time. Re-study was advisable, because of the camera's known advantages of high resolution and better maintainance of contrast in the infrared (see note 23 in the catalogue for additional discussion of the infrared reflectography equipment used in the research for the exhibition). The camera revealed very little, however, in the way of new information. In the Utrecht *Virgin and Child* (cat. no. A), it is easier to see that the original position of the child's standing foot was frontal in the PtSi documentation of the painting than in the 'classic' reflectograms made by the IR vidicon. The better legibility does not appear to be the result of greater transparency of the blue, but a greater transparency of white pigment in that area of the painting. Re-study of the Berlin *Madonna and Child* (cat. no. B-1) did result in a greater transparency of the blue, but the difference in this case can probably be explained by the fact that the original IRR documentation was done with a filter that let in too much visible light. The PtSi IRR documentation of the *Virgin and Child* in Rotterdam (cat. no. A-3) that was carried out specifically for the exhibition clearly showed the areas of dark undermodeling under the Madonna's sleeve and around the child's legs. IRR has revealed this technique, which involves the addition of black to the paint, in some of Maarten van Heemskerck's early works; but its only possible additional use in this group of Madonnas is in the red sleeves of the Berlin studio replica (cat. no. B-1).

The *Madonna with Daffodils and two Donors* in the Thyssen-Bornemisza collection in Madrid (cat. no. B-2) was documented in its entirety by IRR for the first time. The study confirmed the additive nature of the composition, as can also be surmised from the basic appearance of the work. A rather loose underdrawing in black chalk was made visible in the figures of the Virgin and child (fig. 3). This part of the composition is, of course, a repetition and may even be at a third remove from Scorel's original, if one assumes that the Berlin version of the composition (cat. no. B-1) served as the intermediary model. Since the Madonna's blue robe can be