

Dance of the Families (Augsburger Geschlechtertanz) by Narziss Renner in the Augsburg Museums and Art Collections

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Studiengang Konservierung
und Restaurierung von
Kunstwerken auf Papier,
Archiv- und Bibliotheksgut
STAATLICHE
AKADEMIE DER
BILDENDEN KÜNSTE
STUTT GART

Examination and Treatment

The artwork

The large work of art¹, created around 1522, was commissioned from the illuminator Narziss Renner (1501/02?–1536) by Matthäus Schwarz (1497–1574), an Augsburg businessman and head bookkeeper for the Fugger family. It depicts the city's history and chronicles clothing styles in Augsburg between 1200 and 1522 by means of well-known persons and events (Fig. 1).

The object's construction reveals the phases of its assembly and interventions undertaken at separate moments in the past. The painting was executed on a large piece of parchment. Two additional, narrow strips of parchment with an inscription contemporary to the image were adhered to the bottom of the work. All three pieces stem from cattle.² An underdrawing and horizontal lines were applied with a quill and a brown-coloured drawing medium, probably iron gall ink. Other lines were impressed into the parchment as can be seen with reflectance transformation imaging (RTI)³ (Figs. 2–3). There is evidence that the upper edge of the artwork was trimmed at least once after being painted. Traces of at least three different mounting techniques exist (Fig. 4). The current mounting on a modern strainer and the verso canvas lining stem

from the early 20th century. Spot tests revealed a water-soluble lining adhesive that features starch and contains most likely also a protein.

Around the late 19th to early 20th century, the entire painting was coated with a highly glossy natural resin, presumably dammar as indicated by Fourier Transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR) with an ATR crystal. This is a common historical varnish for oil paintings but completely uncommon for miniature painting; UVA-induced visible fluorescence shows uneven and broad horizontal brush strokes that also indicate an improper application. Large areas of overpainting in oil paint and gouache exist on top of the varnish. The severely darkened areas of original paint surrounding the figures were done with a mixture of azurite with a copper containing green pigment (possibly malachite) as determined by Raman spectroscopy. Numerous tears in the parchment support were filled from both sides with a slightly yellow, hard fill material.

Condition

The dark brown discolouration of major image areas is attributable to interaction between the pigments and the binding media and/or the varnish and constitutes an irreversible alteration of

the paint. The considerably darkened varnish also impairs the appearance significantly; it obscures details and diminishes the originally intense colour saturation and brightness of the painting, which is preserved in only a few places. Prominent areas of the object have sustained tears and losses in the parchment, many of which can be directly attributed to a past and improper mounting with iron nails (Fig. 6). The painting exhibits flaking (Fig. 5), numerous abrasions caused by past improper cleaning and large areas of overpainting (Figs. 7–8). The varnish, when assessed in correlation with the significant pre-existing damages to the paint layer, can be interpreted as an attempt at consolidation, with the additional effect of giving the entire work the appearance of an old master oil painting rather than a medieval miniature (Figs. 9–10).

Treatment options

The goal was to improve the preservation and visual appearance of the painting. Three possible intervention options were presented to the Augsburg museums: Option 1: preservation measures including cleaning and stabilization of the painting surface and canvas support. Option 2: closing tears, filling losses, replacement of the

mounting in preparation of future framing including preservation of the separated canvas. Option 3 (chosen): additional to 1 and 2 improvement of the painting's appearance by reduction of the varnish and disruptive overpainting, removal of the lining and old fills, tear repair, filling of losses and inpainting. Each option preserved significant signs of age.

Treatment

The lining was taken off dry and the varnish was thinned out with poultices made of ethanol and methyl cellulose by a colleague from the paintings conservation programme. Subsequently the parchment was humidified in a humidity chamber (~95% RH, room temperature) for several hours to become totally flexible and then was put between felts and weights for several months. The long drying period was necessary because of the high tension in the parchment pieces, which could be diminished and reduced. The felts were the same throughout the drying and flattening process. Tears and losses were closed with Japanese tissue and wheat starch paste. The object will be mounted on a torsion-resistant board using strips of Japanese tissue.



Fig. 1: Artwork (recto), before treatment; normal illumination, polarizing filter. The centre shows 30 couples dancing around a fountain. Beginning with the first couple (illustrating the year 1200 AD) in the lower right and proceeding clockwise, changing clothing styles up until 1522 AD are illustrated. The upper edge shows large areas of overpainting, dating to the second mounting of the painting.

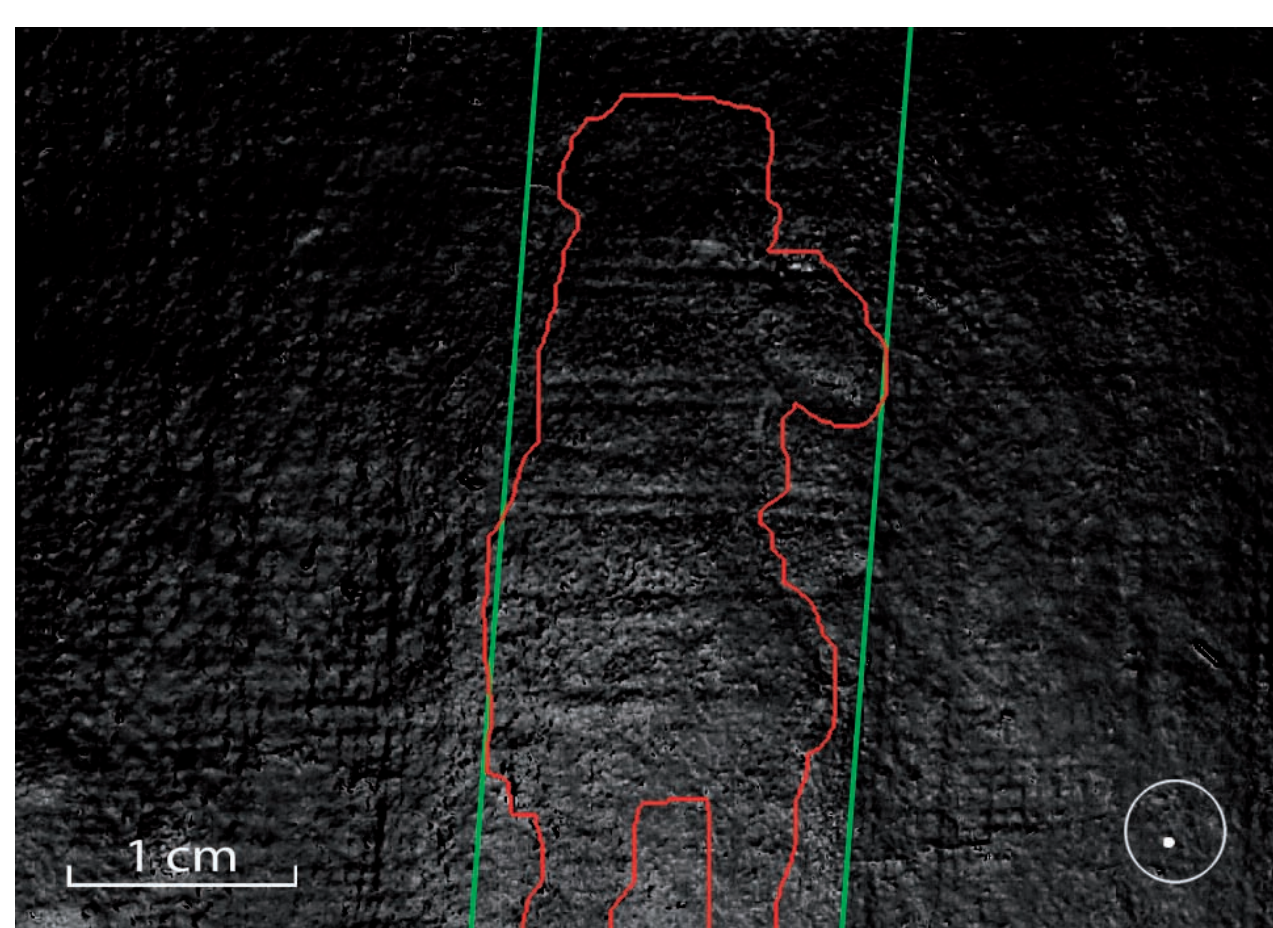


Fig. 2: Detail, upper centre left, RTI image (HSH fitter, specular enhancement). Figure (red) on the ladder (rails in green) of a treehouse; horizontal lines mark the ladder rungs impressed into the parchment at a preparatory painting stage (see Fig. 4). The circle in the lower right corner indicates the position of the RTI highlight.



Fig. 3: As Fig. 2, normal illumination, polarizing filter. The figure's paint layer has been lost, revealing the underdrawing in brown ink.

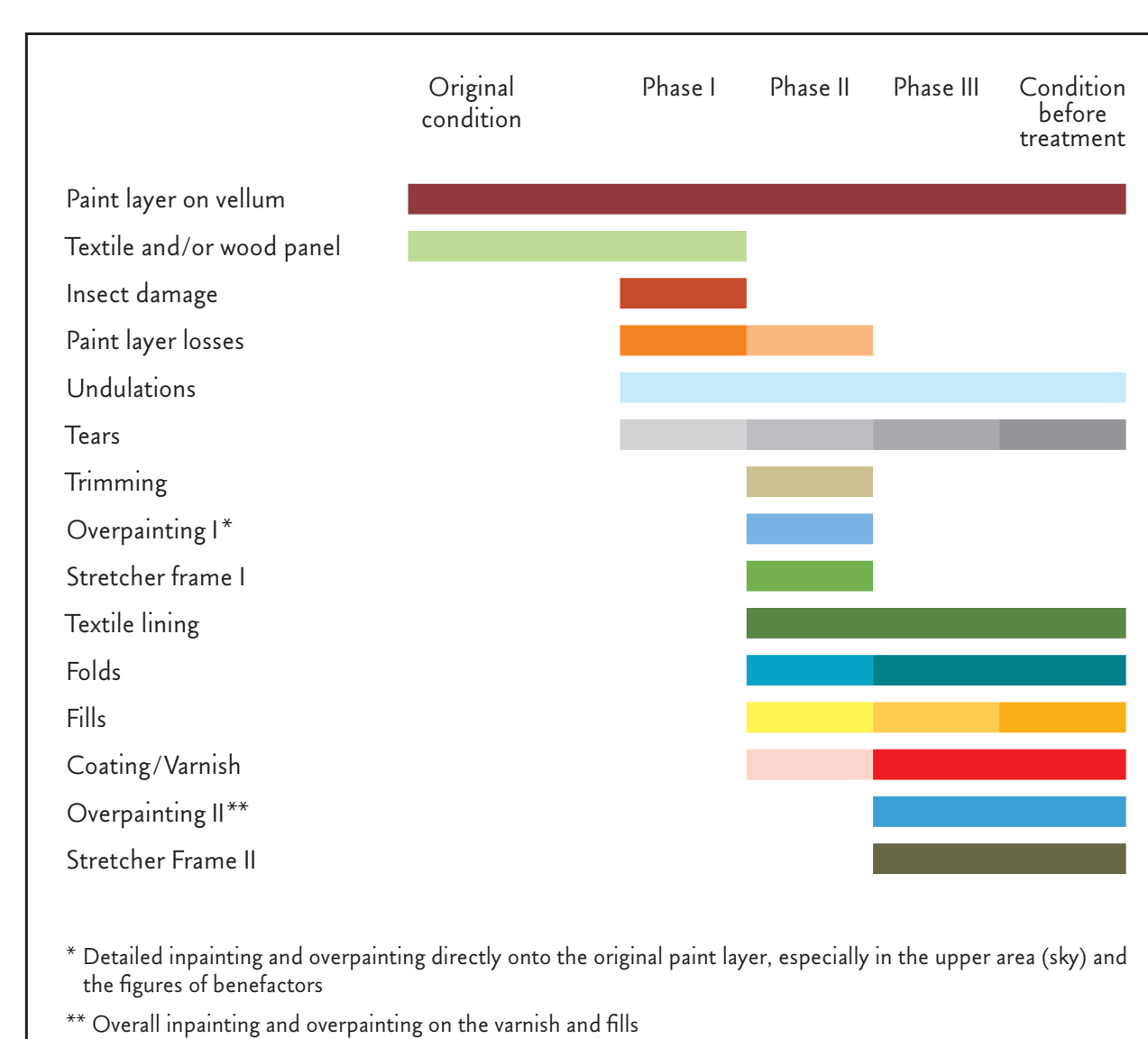


Fig. 4: Historical production stages and associated damages. Some damage became more visible over time (colour shading).



Fig. 5: Detail, upper part, centre, normal illumination, polarizing filter. The figure in a blue dress shows significant paint loss, revealing an underlying layer of discoloured paint

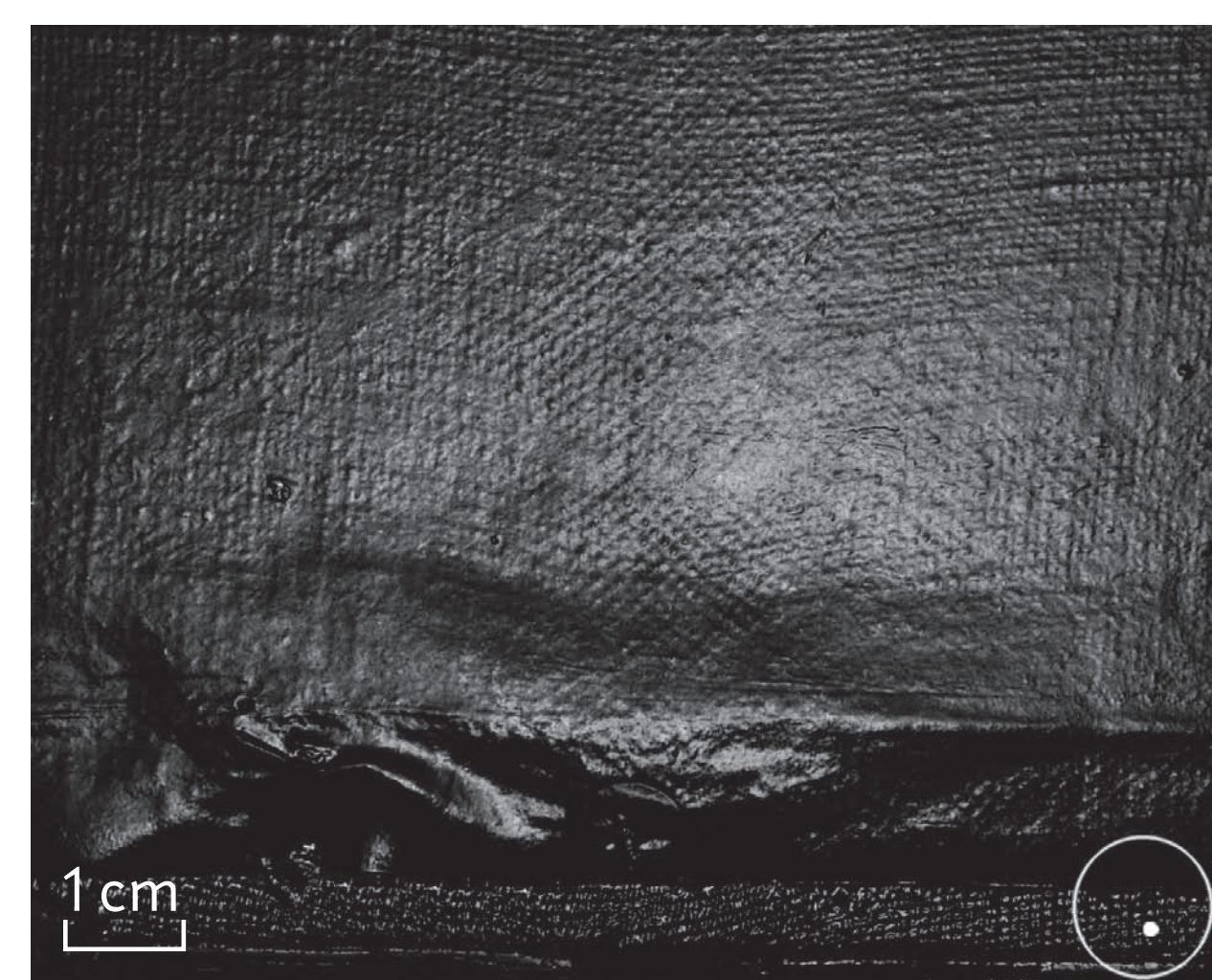


Fig. 6: Lower left corner, RTI image (HSH fitter, specular enhancement). The parchment shows the imprint of the lining canvas (vertical and horizontal lines) and a textile covering the front of the painting (diagonal lines) impressed during the lining while the likely moist parchment strongly pressed. The parchment edge has detached from the canvas at the lower edge. The circle in the lower right corner indicates the position of the RTI highlight.



Fig. 7: Lower edge, detail. In normal illumination (right), the iron gall ink inscription is in some places worn off and hardly legible through the discoloured varnish. Under UVA-radiation (left) a varnish drip mark that originated during application is visible and the inscription is easier to read due to the visible fluorescence of the substrate. Evidence of a previous mounting is visible on the lower edge.

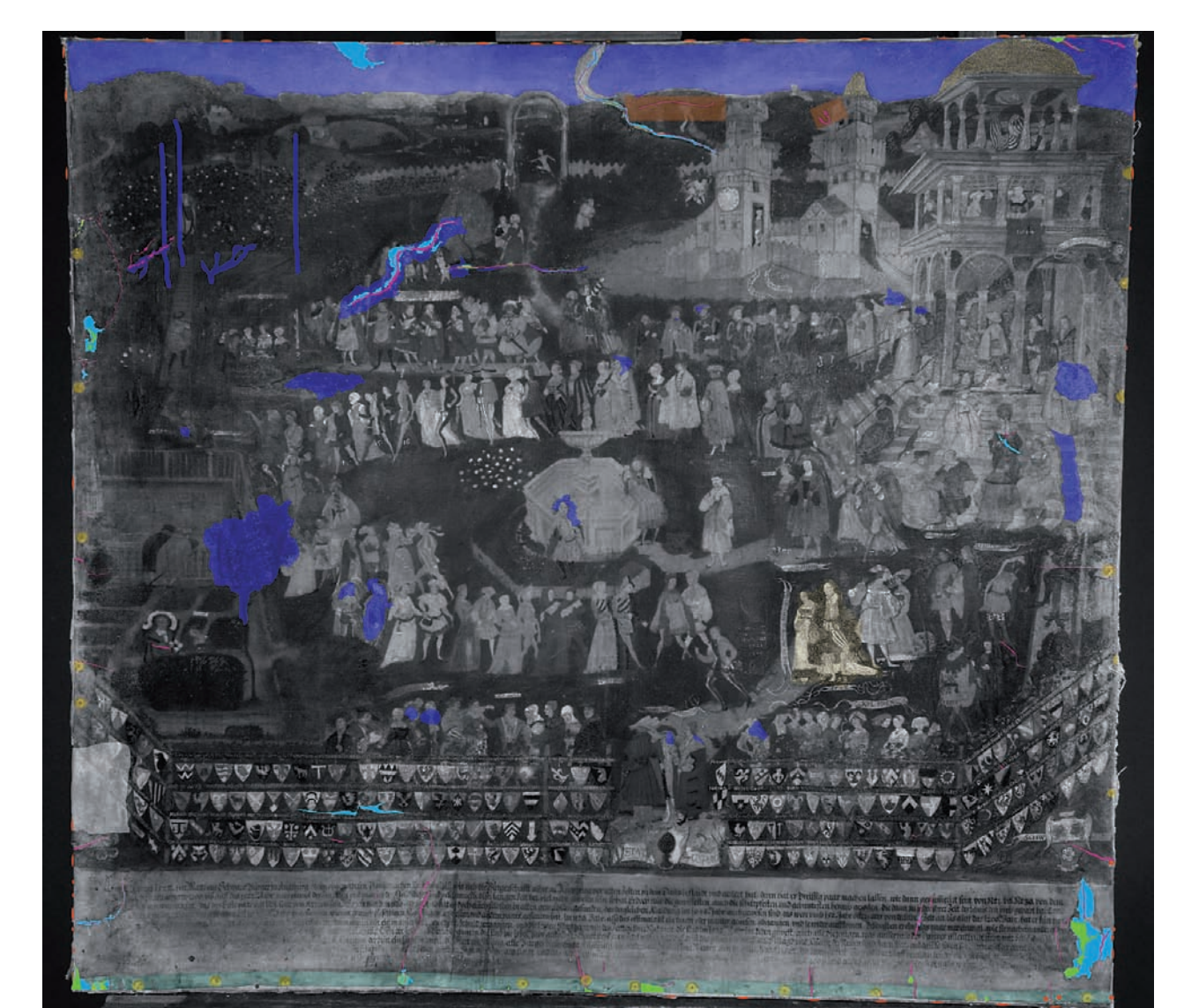


Fig. 8: Artwork (recto), normal illumination, with polarizing filter

Annotations:

light blue = fills; green = losses; purple = tears; orange = nails; dark blue = overpainting on the coating; yellow = overpainting under the coating; brown = repairs to the back.



Fig. 9: Detail, lower right, normal illumination, polarizing filter. The benefactor figures (Matthäus Schwarz, with striped leggings, and his sister Martha to his left) are better preserved than the surrounding figures, but show a most likely very old overpainting. The light green paint can also be attributed to it.



Fig. 10: As Fig. 9, near-infrared spectroscopy (NIRS). The benefactor and the figure to his right show a different colorant applied during a later overpainting. The black lines could consist of carbon ink (arrow).

1 The full format of the artwork is 850 mm high by 930 mm wide.

2 Samples taken with a scalpel from the corium (dermis) of all three parchment sections and analyzed with MALDI-TOF (D. Kirby/Milton, MA, USA) confirmed the initial assessment.

3 Reflectance transformation imaging (RTI) involves multiple images taken of the same location from many different illumination angles that are then digitally aggregated to show surface structure and surface reflection.

Acknowledgements

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