

## **Expanding Perspectives: Throwing Light on the Dark Side of Paintings**

People often consider paintings to be 2-dimensional objects – thin layers of paint laid on a planar surface – that do little more than hang nicely on walls. But, as ideas about what a painting can be are expanding, that assumption has been eroding. While paintings conservators and others who handle paintings have long known otherwise, some contemporary artists have also been making viewers aware of this fact.

This idea is rooted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the development of scientific methods of analysis and the will to better manage the care of museum collections first took hold. It caused all aspects of paintings to come under scrutiny. Since then, the body of information on artists' materials and techniques has grown immensely and now not only regularly supplements exhibitions, but also inspires publications, symposia, as well as stand-alone presentations dedicated to aspects of this topic.

Take the Indianapolis Museum of Art's *On The Flip Slide: Secrets of the Backs of Paintings* (9 October 2015 – 30 October 2016), which forms one outstanding example of a stand-alone presentation. By floating a selection of historical paintings in freestanding display cases, the works could be viewed from all sides. The significance of their respective features was then conveyed through explanatory texts, related objects and images, and videos that highlighted the results of art historical, technical and scientific investigations.<sup>1</sup>

The press release for *Recto/Verso: Behind the Italian Monochrome* at Tornabuoni Art London<sup>2</sup> makes it clear that a variety of issues can come into play when considering the backs of paintings. Focusing on the work of Lucio Fontana and other Milanese avant-garde painters of 1950s and 1960s, the exhibition revealed the backs of only 4 of the more than 20 paintings on display. The reason: the versos hold information that confirms the authorship of these artists' works. This is something, which the owners and the people managing the artists' estates keep secret, and why photography in the gallery was strictly forbidden.

The artist's interest in the backs of paintings, though, has a much longer history. Examples range from Rembrandt's *Artist in his Studio* (1628), Cornelis Gijsbrechts' *The Reverse of a Framed Painting* (1670) and E. Hiernault's *Still Life of the Back of a Painting with a Hebrew Bookplate* (1766), to Roy Lichtenstein's *Stretcher Frame* series (1968). What has changed in recent years is the artists' approach. Consider Anne Koskinen's work *Sculptures* (1998), which depicts a group of canvases leaning against a wall. All elements – canvas, stretcher and stretcher keys – are made of birch wood, a single material. This example is symptomatic. Contemporary artists frequently employ alternate media to depict paintings.

I became aware of this development in Dublin in 2008 when I encountered Ben Geoghegan's colour photograph *Hugh Lane Collection Verso* (2008) at Dublin

City Gallery, and Gerard Byrne's solo exhibition at Green on Red Gallery the following year. In this show Byrne, who taught at Copenhagen's Royal Art Academy, included several remarkable B&W images of the backs of paintings in the National Gallery of Denmark's collection. In addition to the wealth of information offered about the paintings' history, materials and technology, his photographs raised important questions. "What is the work of art?" posed one critic upon seeing Byrne's work. "Does it become an artifact rather than art after the passage of time and significant physical intervention?"<sup>3</sup>

*Invertito* (2012), Paco Cao's provocative installation at MART in Rovereto, Italy, generated similar musings. The salon-like hanging juxtaposed 14 of the museum's historical paintings with 1:1 scale photographic reproductions of the same pictures. The paintings, though, were kept in their storage frames and mounted back to front, thus leaving viewers with the task of comparing the photographic stand-ins with the backs of the respective paintings. This condensed, non-chronological and highly unconventional survey undoubtedly opened people's eyes about paintings in museum collections. Most reside in storage facilities and are only known through photographs.

Antti Oikarinen, whose particular brand of realism recalls the generic appearance of Koskinen's work, takes another path. He uses medium-density fibreboard (MDF), and then paints his sculptures to more closely resemble the things represented. Personal experience with his smallish Sculpture (2011), confirms how easily one unfamiliar with his work can be fooled. Seeing the backs of his two 'canvases' on a table while assisting with the installation of an exhibition, I instinctively wanted to turn them over to see what had been painted on the other side. The experience drove home the fact that such automatic reflexes can inadvertently subject art objects to potential damage, if handled inappropriately.

Then we have Vik Muniz, who takes realism to a completely different level. He and his team of experts craft incredibly accurate full-size copies of the backs of some of the world's most famous paintings. During the summer of 2016 the entire set was exhibited at the Mauritshuis in The Hague. Not only was Vik Muniz: Verso the museum's first venture in showing contemporary art, but the exhibition also included five new Versos, all of which are based on works from the Mauritshuis collection.

For me, stepping into the presentation was exhilarating. The space resembled a gallery in the throes of installation and the works, like any paintings waiting to be mounted, rested on padded blocks set along the room's walls. But seeing such seemingly authentic details such as labels, inscriptions and inventory numbers, as well as evidence of previous restoration and conservation measures really made an impact. They identified the works as masterpieces and served an educational function. Then later, seeing and hearing Muniz – courtesy of an online video interview<sup>4</sup> – enthusiastically speak about what the project entailed, of searching for a tree with the wood density and grain suitable for the Mona Lisa and of finding a weaver with a 19<sup>th</sup> century loom that could replicate the

herringbone patterned canvas used in Rembrandt's The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp, only enhanced the initial experience.

Emilie Gordenker, Director of the Mauritshuis and the exhibition's curator, has confirmed<sup>5</sup> how the museum fully supported this endeavor and

collaborated with the artist, in part by helping to solve the technical challenges encountered. She also noted that the museum was much more concerned about the presentation's informal nature than Muniz, especially with regard to people touching the works, but overall there were few problems. It was Muniz who wanted the exhibition to surprise people, to have them believe they had found their way into a prohibited space. For this reason interpretive material was made as invisible as possible. Gordonker added that many visitors truly favored the presentation, but more so after hearing Muniz talk about the project as part of the Multimedia tour. Addressing what goes on in the museum – everything from conservation to art handling – formed another important facet of the exhibition. This, too, was well received.

John Gayer (MAC 1992) specialised in paintings conservation in the Master of Art Conservation program at Queen's University in Canada. He has worked in North America and Europe, and over the past 3 years has participated in several conservation and collections relocation projects in and around Helsinki.

<sup>1</sup> For additional info, primarily in the form of images and videos, see:

<http://www.imamuseum.org/exhibition/flip-side-secrets-backs-paintings>

<sup>2</sup> Press Release 13 April 2017 - Recto/Verso: Behind the Italian Monochrome, Tornabuoni Art London, 20 April – 17 June, 2017

[http://81.29.208.70/fmi/xml/cnt/RECTO.VERSO%20Press%20Release\\_EDITED.pdf?-db=webuk&-lay=mostre&-recid=18&-field=pdf\\_comunicato\\_stampa\\_eng\(1\)](http://81.29.208.70/fmi/xml/cnt/RECTO.VERSO%20Press%20Release_EDITED.pdf?-db=webuk&-lay=mostre&-recid=18&-field=pdf_comunicato_stampa_eng(1)) or

<https://www.galleriesnow.net/shows/recto-verso-behind-the-italian-monochrome/>

<sup>3</sup> Andrea Kirsch, 10 December 2009, <https://www.theartblog.org/2009/12/more-art-basel-miami-beach-pulse-and-design-miami/>

<sup>4</sup> Patricia Alves & Ivone Lopes, Interview with Vik Muniz, Verso, The Mauritius, The Hague Online, Published 8 June 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rp-86-hmWvo>

<sup>5</sup> Personal communication, 19 January 2017.