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Historical recipes for preparatory layers for oil paintings in manuals, manuscripts and handbooks in North West Europe, 1550-1900: analysis and reconstructions

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Foreword

The subject of historical recipes for preparatory layers for oil paintings presented itself during my former employment as research associate with the HART Project, HART standing for Historically Accurate Reconstruction Techniques.¹ Having developed an interest in historical recipes during my Masters in Art History,² it was wonderful to work with Dr. Leslie Carlyle who headed this research project, work that I combined with a position as a paintings conservator.

The main activity of the HART Project, to prepare ‘historically accurate’ reconstructions of historical recipes of paint layers and materials, in order to develop our knowledge of historical paint techniques and help us understand degradation processes, was applied to several topics, one of which was the preparatory layers employed by Vincent van Gogh.³ In order to be able to execute such reconstructions, the HART project team performed extensive recipe research. The basis for the recipe collection that forms the main dataset for this dissertation was thus established during my time with the HART Project.⁴

Preparatory layers formed one of the several focal points of the HART Project, and it was this area in particular that captured my imagination. I wished for a chance to dedicate more comprehensive and in-depth research to recipes for preparatory layers. When the opportunity presented itself to register as a PhD candidate with the University of Amsterdam through the enthusiasm of Prof. dr. Frans Grijzenhout, I was thrilled with the opportunity to be able to focus on this topic.

As many paintings conservators and other researchers interested in the technology of paintings before me, I have wondered why certain materials and techniques were chosen for the preparation of supports for painting. I wished for more insight into the function and significance of each of the layers that are part of the preparatory system. Studying the ground recipes gathered for the present research project, I found texts that provided answers to many of such questions. Reconstructions of the recipes that I found in historical sources added a new angle; they allowed me to experience the steps taken by an artist or colourman, albeit from the viewpoint of a twenty-first century researcher. By imitating historical support preparation methods, I learned more about the meaning of

¹ The HART Project was one of the projects inside the De Mayerne Programme, a national multi-disciplinary research programme sponsored by NWO (Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research), which ran from 2001 to 2005. A summary of the results of the HART Project can be found in: Boon, Ferreira (eds.) 2006. Carlyle’s unpublished report provides detailed descriptions of all the research and reconstructions executed by the HART team. Carlyle, unpublished, 2005.

² My Master thesis focused on historical recipes for final varnish layers in Dutch recipes dating between 1600 and 1900 (Stols-Witlox 1995). While studying at the Limburg Conservation Institute (SRAL) in Maastricht to become a paintings conservator, it was developed into an article (Witlox 2001).

³ Carlyle 2006.

⁴ Carlyle generously shared recipes from eighteenth and nineteenth century British manuals, gathered for her PhD (Carlyle 1991) and subsequent publication on nineteenth century British manuals on oil painting (Carlyle 2001). These recipes were entered into the HART Project research database that formed one of my primary tasks within the HART Project. The dataset was subsequently extended during my PhD research to include earlier sources, recipes from North West European countries and selected recipe sources originating in South Europe and the United States. An overview of the contents and scope of the recipe database is presented in 3.1.1.2. See also Witlox and Carlyle 2005 on the contents of the database.

specific details in the recipe instructions and this led to a deeper understanding of the role of individual materials and layers in preparing a support for painting.

One may ask why, while I am writing from a background as a paintings conservator, this research focuses mainly on the creation process of paintings, not on their conservation. I feel that research such as has been executed here, although not involving direct conservation and restoration, lies at the basis of conservation decisions. My enthusiasm and dedication to this research therefore is a direct result of my involvement in paintings conservation. Thorough knowledge of the materials and techniques employed by artists is needed for the interpretation and understanding of the state of preservation of paintings. Furthermore, knowledge of materials employed in a painting is of vital importance for its full chemical characterization. Without a complete chemical characterization we will never be able to fully grasp the influence of the conservation treatments that we employ.

This research would not have developed in the manner it did, without the help and advice of many colleagues. Most important in this respect are my dissertation supervisors, Dr. Leslie Carlyle and Prof.dr. Frans Grijzenhout, who both generously supported me with advice and devoted their time to reading and commenting on the texts that I produced. Working with Leslie for the HART Project started my fascination for this type of research, Frans's suggestion to develop my research as a PhD dissertation, acted as a catalyst. Leslie and Frans, I am extremely grateful for all your help and support. It has been of vital importance and I immensely enjoyed our meetings and discussions on the contents of my dissertation.

I was able to assemble my recipe collection, thanks to the help of many librarians in Dutch universities, museum and city libraries, who showed me the way through their systems. The recipe collection of the RCE (Dutch Cultural Heritage Agency) was one of the first resources that was available for research, and I would like to thank Ad Stijnman and Hayo the Boer (then both RCE, Amsterdam) for their help. Dr. Leslie Carlyle generously shared recipes from her database of nineteenth century British manuals on oil painting techniques, which meant a very important boost for the recipe collection.

Access to the Winsor & Newton archive was granted by Winsor & Newton and ColArt, for which I am very grateful. In particular, I would in particular like to thank Paul Robinson (ColArt). I would also like to thank all others who allowed access to or helped me locate historical recipe books: Cecil Krarup Andersen, Troels Filtenborg and Anne Haack Christensen (Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen), Ann Massing (Hamilton Kerr Institute, Cambridge UK), Pamela Smith (Columbia University) and Tonny Beentjes (UvA), Melissa Katz, Marianne Ott (Hochschule für Bilden Kunste Bern), Margriet van Eikema Hommes (Delft Technical University) and Arie Wallert, who also provided information about paintings (Rijksmuseum Amsterdam).

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