Two painters, two centuries, one mural: Technical research on the layered crucifixion mural in the Utrecht burial chapel of Guy of Avesnes

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Published in:
Painting Techniques

Citation for published version (APA):
5th International Symposium

Painting Techniques

History, Materials and Studio Practice

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam
18-19-20 December 2013

Edited by Prof. Dr. A. Wallert

RIJKS MUSEUM
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TWO PAINTERS, TWO CENTURIES, ONE MURAL: TECHNICAL RESEARCH ON THE LAYERED CRUCIFIXION MURAL IN THE UTRECHT BURIAL CHAPEL OF GUY OF AVENES

Anne-Maria van Egmond

Introduction
In the Cathedral of Utrecht, a well-preserved mural still decorates the burial chapel of Guy of Avesnes, Bishop of Utrecht between 1301 and 1317. It was discovered in 1919, when a brick wall was removed from what turned out to be a painted niche. The mural, which depicts a Calvary, covers the rear wall of this niche, which is located in the chapel’s eastside wall. Its figures are of an outstanding quality; other murals like this have not survived in the Northern Netherlands. What is even more exceptional is the fact that on the back wall of the niche not one but two paintings can be found, the one currently visible covering an older mural. This older mural was probably placed there as part of the furnishings when the chapel became a burial chapel for the aforementioned bishop in around 1320. This mural was painted over in around 1410. The unique situation of a well-preserved fifteenth-century mural covering a fourteenth-century one calls for technical research that renders both murals visible and determines the working methods of the two painters who worked on the same wall almost a century apart.

Description of mural
The currently visible mural depicts the crucified Christ, with Mary and St John the Evangelist on his right and St Margaret of Antioch on his left, identifiable by the dragon from which she rises (fig. 1, original and Photoshop reconstruction). St Margaret wears a dress in a pale shade of pink with a deep red cloak, which can be distinguished from the red background because of the green dragon’s wing that separates the two shades of red. Around her head and fair hair she has a fillet with a pearl in the middle and in her hands she holds a cross. Mary is clothed in a white veil, a pink robe and a blue and green cloak. She has her left hand around her right arm holding herself and is supported by a brown-haired St John, who is wearing a green robe and a pink cloak. His gaze is upon Christ. Christ, nailed to his cross only a few feet from the ground and naked apart from his loincloth, rests his chin on his chest and has his eyes closed. Above his head the INRI bumberole is fixed to the cross, which disappears into a somewhat translucent cloud. The cross stands on Golgotha against a red background, while earth-coloured mountains delimit the depth of the depicted space. The lower part of the painting, a red plain, is lined with first a thin band and then a broad black band and shows hardly any traces of original paint. This section may have contained inscriptions or coats of arms, connecting the painting to the chapel’s function as the burial place for Guy of Avesnes.

The painter of this mural has already been identified as an internationally oriented painter coming from Guelders or the Lower Rhine region who worked sufficiently long in the Southern Netherlands to absorb the main currents of refinement and elegance. Kees van der Ploeg made an elaborate stylistic comparison in which he built up this hypothesis, taking earlier comparative research by Albert Châtelet and Christian Klamt to a new level and dating the now visible mural to around 1410.

A second mural
Even with the naked eye, several clues can be detected pointing to the fact that the main mural was painted over an earlier scene. Black contoured circles indicate the presence of two other nimbuses between the nimbuses of Mary and St John and to the right of that of St Margaret. Between the red, pink, green and blue hues of the saints’ clothing, tiny specks of yellow emerge where the top layer of paint has flaked off. The yellow paint is visible on both the left and the right of the cross, suggesting underlying yellow garments. Next to the torso of Christ are the contour lines of another body. Not surprisingly, the subject of the underlying painting was presumed to be a more traditional Crucifixion with St John and Mary standing on either side of Christ.

Infrared reflectography (IRR) was used to render the underlying painting visible (fig. 2, original and Photoshop reconstruction). It allows a very detailed description of what is
Fig. 1. Anonymous, Crucifixion with Mary, St John and St Margaret of Antioch and six figures of bishop saints, female saints and angels, c. 1330 and 1410, tempera and oil on a sandstone wall, niche: 207 x 169 x 44 cm, Avesnes burial chapel, Cathedral of Utrecht, with Photoshop reconstruction eliminating irregularities (photograph: A.J. van Egmond).

Fig. 2. An infrared image (IRR) of the Avesnes mural painting Crucifixion with Mary, St John and St Margaret of Antioch and six figures of bishop saints, female saints and angels, taken with an Osiris digital still infrared camera model A1 in April 2012, owned by the Art, Books and Collections Foundation, ABC Foundation © 2013. IRR assemblies and reconstruction were made using Adobe Photoshop CS6.
indeed a depiction of a traditional Crucifixion. Christ, put to the cross with large nails, hangs on the right side of the cross. Nothing can be said of Christ’s original facial expression because the IRR reflects off the gold leaves of the nimbus, rendering undetectable what is underneath. Close to his head is the INRI sign on the intersection of the wooden beams. On top of the cross nests a bird that can be identified as the symbolic pelican feeding its young; on either side of its nest are depictions of the sun and moon. Mary stands to Christ’s right side, chaste with her veiled head bowed. St John is on Christ’s left side, identifiable by the book in his left hand, looking and gesturing towards the crucified Christ. His right leg is pointing outwards, causing his robe to fold. A pin on his chest holds his garment together; the fabric is clasped under his armpit. His blond hair is slightly curled. Both Mary and St John are clad in yellow; fragments of this colour are visible where the aforementioned top layer of paint has come off. The little creature in front of St John’s right foot is very peculiar: a tiny dragon, which shares the foreground with the skulls and bones of Golgotha.

In the reveals of the niche, six figures can be seen that are half the size of those on the rear wall: from top to bottom they appear to be bishop saints, virgin saints and angels, all carrying attributes, but these objects are not sufficiently specific to identify the figures holding them (fig. 3). The plants at their feet are similar to the ones in the fourteenth-century painting on the back wall. The palette used for these figures and those on the background, with white and yellow tones, also seems to be the same. It can therefore be assumed that the six figures were part of the initial painting that covered both the back wall and the reveals of the chapel niche.

Method of overpainting
Before the painting techniques of each of the Avesnes mural painters can be outlined, it is important to clearly separate the two overlapping paintings, determining which elements belong to which painting and what the main differences are between the two. Both are Calvary scenes. The oldest one shows Christ with Mary and St John, while in the second one St Margaret has been added and the symbolic bird covered by a cloud. The currently visible torso of Christ is painted more to the left than the overpainted one. However, the placement of his shoulders, head and arms has stayed the same. This shifting of Christ’s body may have been necessary to create sufficient space to insert St Margaret and her enormous dragon: in Christ’s original pose, St Margaret’s cross would have touched his side at points. By changing Christ’s position, the cross could stay in the same place and the mural’s symmetry remain intact.

Because Christ was painted in two different places, it is possible to study the contour lines of the underlying torso:
they have a ‘sketchy’ look about them when compared to the contour lines of the other figures. The lines might be part of a charcoal preparation drawing that has been partly wiped out, the carbon black residue forming several smaller lines, or part of the paint used to define or outline the contours at a later stage. Because of the ‘sketchy’ look of the lines, the question arises whether the Christ figure is actually a completed figure in the underlying painting or a sketch that belongs to the preparation of the fifteenth-century painting. A cross section taken from the area to the right of the fifteenth-century Christ’s armpit (fig. 4) clarifies the issue: it shows a skin-coloured layer of paint between two red ones, indicating that the torso was painted in with flesh tones. It can be assumed that a painter does not completely finish one element of his composition before adding others to only then find out his scheme does not work out as planned. This means that it is very likely the torso of Christ does indeed belong to the oldest mural. Another, clearly visible, characteristic of this fourteenth-century Christ are his hands and fingers, splayed and attached to the cross with very large nails, whereas Christ’s hands in the later position claw around more modest nails (fig. 5).

The second painter, working in the early fifteenth century, used a layer of red paint to cover part of the torso and other areas he no longer used in his representation of the Crucifixion. He made two remarkable choices concerning this red layer. First, he did not use it to cover up his predecessor’s pelican, but instead used a semi-transparent cloud, leaving viewers to guess what is underneath. For instance, a figure of God the Father had been suggested. It is unclear what the merit was of this cloud. Furthermore, the painter did not use a red layer, or for that matter any layer of paint, to cover the sides of the niche where, by the time he finished painting, six old-fashioned figures remained. Their faces, which do not have clear traits, indicate that they were initially left unfinished. It is as if the first painter only applied a first layer of colour fields without filling in the details in an additional layer. The IRR image does not clarify this. It is not clear whether it already looked like this when the second painter started his work, but if it did, it is all the more strange that this painter did not apply a fresh layer of paint.

**Fig. 5.** Detail of fourteenth-century and fifteenth-century hands and nails (photograph: A.J. van Egmond).

**Painting in fourteenth-century Utrecht**

The figures on the sides of the niche and, more importantly, the ones in the IRR photograph can be compared to other fourteenth-century figures in Utrecht paintings in order to gain some insight on the origins of the fourteenth-century painter. Another fourteenth-century wall painting can be found in the direct vicinity of Utrecht Cathedral: one of the houses surrounding the Dom square, the Rode Poort, contains a private chapel with a mural dating from the first quarter of the fourteenth century. It shows the cleansing of a priest’s hands and thereby confirms the assumption that this house belonged to an important cleric. The priest can be compared to the fourteenth-century St John from the Avesnes mural. Their cloaks show a marked difference between the picture-neseness of the priest and the linearity of the saint: the folds of the priest’s fabrics exist because of different shades of blue juxtaposed next to each other, while those in St John’s cloak only exist because of curving contour lines (fig. 6). Marieke van Vlierden, comparing the mural in the house chapel with early Cologne panel and wall painting, suspects that the painter of this house chapel mural is from Cologne and visited Utrecht following the cathedral’s building master John of Cologne, who worked there between 1295 and 1320.

The more linear style characterising the oldest Avesnes chapel mural appears to be a feature of fourteenth-century wall painting in the Southern Netherlands. Comparable linearity can be found in Flanders, Brabant, Artois and the Meuse area until the 1380s. Applying the same logic as Van Vlierden, the painter of the Avesnes mural could have come from the area of Hainaut, just like the bishop it was painted for and the limestone used for his Tournai tomb, which is also in the Utrecht chapel. This tomb was polychrome, as has recently been detected with the aid of X-ray fluorescence (XRF) executed on invisible fragments in the cracks of the dark limestone. This polychrome must have been applied in situ to prevent damage in transport. It could even be possible that the same painter who accompanied and polychromed the tomb was responsible for the painting on the wall opposite it.

The date and location of this fourteenth-century mural lead to comparison with other Utrecht paintings, albeit on a differ-

**Fig. 6.** Detail from mural The cleansing of a priest’s hands in the Rode Poort, early fourteenth century, Utrecht, Gemeente-lijke Fotodienst Utrecht (photograph: Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands), compared with detail of figure of St John from fourteenth-century Avesnes mural (photograph: A.J. van Egmond).
ent scale because they have been painted in a different medium. These are the miniatures in the *Rime Bible of Jacob van Maerlant* (fig. 6) painted by Michiel van der Borch. Several figures are painted with some of the same traits as the Avesnes St John figure. For instance, the miniature of the *Annunciation* (fol. 118v) shows Mary and Gabriel opposite one another and their robes have curled folds similar to St John’s cloak in the mural. St John’s stance can be recognised in Joshua’s (fol. 38r) and Nebuchadnezzar’s (fol. 85v), the right leg pointing outwards and guiding the fabric over it with a double fold in front of the lap. Apart from their stereotypical Jewish hats, they are dressed like the *Rime Bible* figure of God, who in the miniature with Moses *receiving the law* (fol. 29v), has a similar brooch on his chest to the one St John is wearing (also to be seen in fol. 1v and fol. 4v). Even though the illuminator Michiel’s signature in the miniature of *The destruction of Jerusalem* and the presence of his name in the local archives strongly suggest a Northern Netherlands origin, namely Utrecht, it has been generally agreed that Michiel van der Borch must at least have had training in Southern Flanders or Northern France. The possibility that a Utrecht painter who received his education abroad was responsible for the fourteenth-century Avesnes mural, rather than a painter with actual origins in the Southern Netherlands, cannot therefore be discounted. Technical research might give some more indications of this fourteenth-century painter’s whereabouts.

**Painting technique of the fourteenth-century painter**

Using different techniques, the materials the fourteenth-century painter used can be identified from the samples that were taken from the mural. The pallet is characterised by hues of yellow and brown.

**Painting technique of the fifteenth-century painter**

The same techniques have been proved successful in identifying the fifteenth-century materials. Remarkably, the red paint of the background contains vermilion, which is known to be a very expensive pigment. Fragments of carapace can also be found in St Margaret’s red clothing, which indicates the use of red lake, an even more valuable material. The fifteenth-century painter could have utilised red ochre, a cheaper variant of yellow and brown.

**Acknowledgements**

Art, Books and Collections Foundation and C.A. Chavannes-Mazel.

**Biography**

Anne-Maria van Egmond studied History of Medieval Art at the University of Amsterdam. She obtained her MA with distinction at the same university after internships at Museum Catharijneconvent, DOG Rijksmuseum and Stichting Kerkelijk Kunstenbezit Nederland. She is now writing her dissertation on the material culture of the The Hague court between about 1350 and 1430, focusing on means of communication through art objects and luxuries and on the economic networks of nobles, artisans and merchants. Her main interests are medieval art in the Northern Netherlands, different approaches to art historical research and the history of art history in the Netherlands.

**Notes**