

## Stephen Gritt and Thomas Markevicius on the Petrobelli Altarpiece

*Conservator- Stephen Gritt*

Hello, my name's Stephen Gritt, and this is Thomas Markevicius. We're conservators at the National Gallery of Canada. And behind us, or in front of Thomas, and behind me, is a large fragment of a painting by the 16th century Venetian painter Paolo Veronese. It's a work that's been under restoration for almost two years, and we're in the final stages now. We're just wrapping up the treatment. This painting was bought by the Gallery in the 1920's. It was bought because of an unfortunate circumstance, which means that the painting came to us very inexpensively, perhaps for a tenth of the cost that it should have been. When the painting came from England, it was in a packing crate in a ship. The packing got wet, and the painting was severely damaged to the point where the owners were going to ship it back to England as an insurance write-off. So one of our colleagues, one of our ancestors, as it were, a restorer, along with the National Gallery director at that point, went to look at it and decided that the condition wasn't as bad as everybody else thought. They put in an offer, and they were successful and they did buy the painting. That restorer also got the job to restore painting back in the twenties and then the painting, with great fanfare, was hung on

the walls of the National Gallery of Canada at that point, which obviously wasn't in the present building where we are today. Within ten or fifteen years, however, the materials of that early restoration began to look a little discoloured and pretty much the painting has been off display most of the time in the intervening years. The present restoration is one of the most extensive treatments of the painting in the collection. It's going to enable us to get the painting up on the wall to become part of the permanent collection once more where it rightly should. It will join two other paintings by Veronese in the collection, one of which is on permanent display. As well as getting the painting ready for our permanent collection display, we're also getting the painting together for an exhibition. Some of you might be wondering about the odd shape of this painting; I mean it's a rather beautiful arch form, but, typically, paintings of this shape go down a little bit more. And in fact, this painting was once approximately twice as tall as it is today. In the 18th century, when the cathedral that it was painted for, was suppressed by the Vatican, the painting was divided into four pieces, perhaps more, but we now have four today. And it was sold off piecemeal by a Venetian paintings dealer. Most of the fragments seem to have

made their way to England and two of the fragments are now in Dulwich and in Edinburgh. One of the fragments may not have gone to England, may have stayed in Europe, and ended up in the United States. That was a recent discovery that was made during the scope of the project to reassess all the fragments with the ultimate aim of getting them all together. In about a week's time this painting that we are just finishing up will be put into a packing crate and will head across the Atlantic, where the fragments will be re-united for the first time in several hundred years in London. That's the first venue of an international touring exhibition. The second most important venue, of course, will be here at the National Gallery of Canada, where the object will on display with the other fragments in some sort of a reconstructed setting within the permanent collection as a special exhibition.

## The Restoration of Dead Christ Supported by Angels

One of the many benefits of this treatment as well as the fact that we can get the painting out on display for the first time, in a long time, it's given us the opportunity to really take a good look at the painting and to iron out a few misconceptions that scholars seem to have had about the painting. So, obviously, when we really get into a

treatment, we have the opportunity to perform a more or less full technical study. We did on this painting. We pulled a full X-ray, we did a lot of technical examinations using infrared sensitive cameras to which showed us aspects of the underdrawing which had never been seen before. We also took paint samples and analyzed samples in terms of what pigments were present and what medium Paolo Veronese used. One of the principal broad benefits really has been to allay any suspicion that this part of the altarpiece was painted by somebody other than Paolo Veronese. Early on, in the understanding of this painting, people didn't really know from which period of Paolo's career the painting was from. And later on in his career, the use of assistants, which is more or less, required if you're running a large workshop in the sixteenth century. The use of assistants certainly means that sometimes the quality of the paintings can be variable. Remarkably, he does, he's very good at quality control but certainly you can see differences. I think there was a suspicion because this object was not studied properly, it lived most of its life in storage, here in Canada behind glass, buried by dirt and varnish and a lot overpaint. But there was a suspicion that if any parts of the original enormous altarpiece were painted with use of the assistants, or mostly by the studio assistants, it would have been this piece because it would have

been high up. The top of the altarpiece would have been around six meters off the ground. It also contains no donor figures or it didn't contain the figures of the people who commissioned the altarpiece and aside from the figure of Christ, there are no major players. The rest of the figures are supporting casts as it were. So you might expect that Paolo would have painted the figure of Christ, and the quality in that figure was fairly apparent. But in the other figures, because of damage and overpaint, the quality was not apparent. So as I say, the principal benefit of the treatment in that respect has been that we've been able for the first time, with technical examination, but also simply with our eyes, to fully appreciate the quality of the object, which is consistent over the whole of the surface of the painting. Really effectively we can put our hands on our heart and say this is an autograph Paolo Veronese painting, although, obviously, he would have had help on something this size. But the quality is such that it really doesn't matter.

The treatment of this painting really is one of those classic comprehensive old master treatments of the kind that we rarely get the opportunity to do anymore. But it's exactly the kind of thing that you see in the movies and what people think of as a restoration. The painting was covered in varnish and dirt and overpaint and was fairly illegible.

The original canvas had been stuck onto a further canvas which presented the painting in a rectangular format because the original curved edges of the arch had at some point been trimmed off. We don't know the reason for that but they've been trimmed to make a nice image of a rather disturbing arch and someone had solved the problem by turning it into a rectangle. So, our treatment really was to undo all of that structural work which misrepresented the painting and to undo all the material, and to remove all the material on the surface, dirt and overpaint to really get back to what remained of Paolo pretty much. Then you start re-assessing the work from thereon up. The first stage was obviously the cleaning, which is done very carefully. The initial sections were all done under a microscope. You can see here in the studio we have very good light. Our facilities are really very good and every care was taken. In fact, the cleaning process was one of the lengthiest sections of the treatment and took almost a year to complete with more than one person working on the cleaning. The next stage was the structural treatment which is us assessing the canvas, the original support and the lining canvas, which was stuck on in the 1920s and deciding whether to remove it, what to do with it, what condition this entire structure as a laminate was in, and what we should be doing with it. What we decided to do was not to remove the lining,

because it wasn't causing any problems, and actually the removal would have been stressful, but we've given it a further lining and, in doing so, we've returned the painting to its original arched top format, which obviously has great benefits in terms of the overall composition of the painting because it relocates Christ's head to the centre of the arch, rather than the central mass of his body being in the centre of the painting. It re-establishes a dynamic sweep that will become all the more apparent when the painting is back with the other paintings, the other fragments that once comprised the original altarpiece.

## Ethics in Restoration

Any restoration, particularly one that has to do with rather significant damage to a painting, brings with it certain ethical concerns; and that was definitely the case with this object behind me. It's made particularly more interesting by the fact that the object is a fragment of a once larger painting that now has its own independent life. Both Thomas and I are from very different backgrounds in terms of experience and professional education, and we tend to have slightly different viewpoints. We think that was all to the good because during the whole process of the restoration there was a lot of discussion about the right way to approach all of the problems. And what the

end result is that the painting certainly benefits from that discussion, as well as the fact that it's far more interesting for us. To go through the stages of the treatment, well, the first stage was the cleaning. And in terms of ethical issues connected with the cleaning, we didn't have a great deal of choice because a lot of the material on the surface of the painting was so discoloured and degraded that we would be not doing the painting any service to leave that in place. The painting was effectively entirely removed of all of the material that was put on it in the 1920s, and we left a few fragments from earlier restorations just because they were particularly stubborn and difficult to remove. And of course, one of the primordial ethical issues is that no original material gets damaged during any stage of the treatment. Another difficult issue approaching this painting was the fact that this fragment was even more fragmented by cutting off its edges and which was altered into this odd shape which originally was supposed to be an arch shaped composition. After long discussions we decided to add strips on both edges completing its arched shape, which gave us opportunity to complete the composition.

Dealing with smaller scale losses such as abrasions and small scale lacuna, conservation practice usually doesn't raise questions. However, once dealing with large

scale losses, it's it always raises controversy and requires non-standard decisions. Just because of the size of the additions, I we felt a bit uneasy how to approach this matter. It wasn't so much of a technical issue, because the additions which we've been planning to attach they had to represent architectural details which were already present in the painting, and we knew how they should have, they could have looked or something similar. However, we also wanted to complete the composition and to benefit its esthetic possibilities and its esthetic appreciation. We were aiming at two contradictory goals that were going one against the other. Eventually, after long discussions we decided that our additions should be clearly identifiable to everyone who would see the painting.

## The Restoration of "Head of Saint Michael"

One of the many exciting aspects of working on this project has been the re-discovery of the missing fourth fragment which is absolutely key to understanding the altarpiece. This is a fragment that probably stayed in Europe and eventually ended up at the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, Texas. The painting came here for treatment because it, too, had not been worked on comprehensively since the 19th century. We were the obvious people to work on it

because we were working on the much bigger fragment.

Each of the remaining fragments of the altarpiece present their own fairly distinctive ethical issues. In the case of the St. Michael fragment from the Blanton Art Museum in Texas, the original surface of the painting only goes up to this mark here. When I say the original surface of the painting, I mean the original section of the painting that was once St. Michael. There's an addition strip here which was once, originally, much wider. The painting, when it was cut from the main altarpiece and then sold in the early 19th century, was perhaps around this wide and the restorers who reformatted the painting used another section of the overall altarpiece that they would have otherwise thrown away, to extend the painting. The canvas beneath the paint here is from another area of the altarpiece that would have had blue sky on it but had not this tone at all. So, originally, this fragment would have been slightly larger; we think it was cut down sometime in the 19th century, and originally the restorers reformatting the image would have included a wing on this side. We think that's probably because why St. Michael's wing, on this side, was still part of the original painting. When we got the painting for restoration, it was of course in this size. We haven't done anything to it but in the cleaning process, in removing the

varnish and overpaint, we would have removed overpaint that would have shown that this section of the painting was clearly different. And we would have created a rather firm line up against the side of St. Michael's face. In addition, the forms of the folds here, which are part of the 19th century restoration, we would have obliterated those and revealed fragmentary blue sky and a tiny fragment of a column. What we decided, therefore, was to more or less completely remove all the original restoration material up to this line and then work with what remained to honour the history of the fragment as an independent painting and to give it a little bit of space on this side of St. Michael's face, so that you can appreciate just how beautiful he is, without being bothered by this odd feature. The resolution in the restoration or retouching is such that as you walk across the room to the painting, this addition strip is not obvious and will not bother you, but if you spend a few minutes looking at the painting, you'll see that there's a slight difference in the treatment of the surface and that essentially the forms on this side of the line are slightly blander, slightly greyer, slightly less intensely coloured than on that side of the line. Certain strokes in the paint do not cross the line. These are all visual cues that this section of the painting is not painted by Paolo Veronese and is probably the work of a restorer.