

A Technical Analysis of John Knox's *Regatta* c. 1825-30

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John Knox, *A Regatta on the Clyde at Glasgow Green, the Cathedral in the distance*, c. 1825-30, oil on canvas, 41 x 51 cm, private collection © The Hunterian

Introduction

A significant aspect of the work placement involved the technical imaging of *A Regatta on the Clyde at Glasgow Green, the Cathedral in the distance* (c. 1825-30) – an oil painting from a private collection and currently attributed to John Knox. In using non-invasive methods to examine the techniques and materials employed, the aim was to investigate the authenticity of this ambiguous painting. An inspection of the artwork's condition and meticulous detail was achieved using macro photography and ultraviolet light. Moreover, an analysis of the underdrawings was conducted using infrared reflectography – a valuable tool for detecting an artist's working procedure and answering questions of attribution.

Artist's Background

John Knox (1778-1845) was a Scottish landscape artist whose career as a painter and teacher of drawing was primarily spent in Glasgow. During 1829-32, Knox also lived in London and exhibited his works at The Royal Academy. Notably, Knox's panoramic paintings of tourist sites in Glasgow captured the city's increasing modernisation. In the case of *Regatta*, this scene of urban leisure reflects the ongoing development of Glasgow Green as planting schemes and the construction of civic monuments gradually transformed the landscape.

Macro Photography



A. Detail of the underdrawing



B. Detail of a figure's clothing



C. Detail of the background figures



D. Detail of the swimming dog

Regatta was initially examined in visible light and under magnification in order to closely observe the detailed brushwork and palette. Subsequently, areas of interest were photographed for further interpretation.

Results:

- In areas such as the riverbank, exposed underdrawings demonstrate that the artist planned the composition beforehand and intentionally left the working process visible.
- The fluid application of viscous oil paint is indicated in the right figure's clothing, which has also discoloured due to the varnish layer having yellowed overtime.
- Miniscule dashes of paint have been applied using a fine paintbrush to render the crowd of figures in the distant background.
- The wet-on-wet application of paint is evident in the dog's reflection as tones of brownish-orange, grey and white have been blended to enhance the impression of light scattered on the river's surface.

Ultraviolet Light



An ultraviolet photograph of *Regatta* showing the greenish-blue fluorescence of a natural resin varnish

Ultraviolet light revealed the presence of a natural resin varnish applied evenly over the paint surface. Upon first impression, the greenish-blue fluorescence (indicating an aged varnish) suggested that the surface coating could be original. Although, the fact that this painting has been relined implies that the varnish was likely applied after a past conservation treatment. A label on the reverse dated 'February 1983' may be an indicator of when this treatment took place.

A strip of darkened varnish, which extends around the edges of the painting, highlights that the artwork was previously cleaned whilst in its frame. In the reflected ultraviolet image, no evidence of retouching was detected. Moreover, areas of strong fluorescence show that the artist applied white pigment to highlight elements of the figures' clothing.

Conclusion

Overall, the results gained from the technical imaging of *Regatta* provide an improved understanding of the painting's condition and construction. However, further research is required to identify the specific materials employed and reach a conclusion regarding the artwork's attribution. In doing so, an in-depth examination of *Regatta* and comparative paintings by Knox will be conducted and presented in the form of a dissertation.

Infrared Reflectography



An infrared photograph of *Regatta* showing the artist's underdrawings and underpainting

An Apollo infrared camera system (0.9–1.7µm) was used to expose the artist's original underdrawings, which had initially been detected under magnification.

The infrared photograph shows that the architecture, trees and riverbank were all roughly sketched using a carbon-based material. Contrastingly, the clouds and figures were painted freehand – suggesting that they were possibly painted from life or derived from preparatory drawings. Another key result obtained through infrared reflectography is evidence of pentimenti. The presence of trees on the right, which do not appear in the final painting, demonstrate how the artist removed elements of the composition during the painting process. Similarly, an underpainting of a pontoon or bridge-like structure in the foreground was overpainted as it does not feature in the finished scene.

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Bibliography:

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