

At the Portrait Gallery – Hidden portrait of Mary Queen of Scots discovered

At the Scottish National Portrait Gallery you will from this weekend be able to see the results of a research project conducted by National Galleries of Scotland and the Courtauld Institute of Art. A portrait of a woman believed to be Mary Queen of Scots has been discovered underneath another 16th century portrait.

The ghostly image of a woman which looks very similar to other portraits of Mary was found with X-ray photography when researchers were examining a portrait of Sir John Maitland, 1st Lord Maitland of Thirlestane, which is attributed to Adrian Vanson (died c.1604-1610).



Conservator Dr Caroline Rae was examining a number of works by Vanson and Adam de Colone two Netherlands artists who worked here in Scotland during the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Dr Rae is the Courtauld Institute of Art's Caroline Villers Research Fellow and the institute collaborated with NGS on this project.

Vanson's portrait of Sir John Maitland (1589), the Lord Chancellor of Scotland, is part of the National Trust collection and usually hangs at the Trust's 17th century historic property Ham House, near London. The results of this collaborative research project, which set out to explore the respective artistic techniques of Vanson and de Colone, will be revealed in a new display which opens at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery tomorrow.

Dr Rae discovered the concealed portrait while conducting a

technical examination using X-radiography (X-ray), a technique that can penetrate through paint layers but which is stopped by pigments containing heavy metals such as lead white (a white pigment that was commonly used throughout Europe at the time). The X-radiograph revealed the presence of lead white depicting a woman's face and the outline of her dress and hat beneath the upper layers of paint.

Dr Rae was able to trace the outline of a woman, whose appearance indicates she is likely to be Mary, Queen of Scots, based on distinct similarities to other depictions of the controversial queen made during her lifetime, and in particular during her later years. The face of the sitter for instance shows a strong resemblance to two miniatures by the famous English miniaturist Nicholas Hilliard (1547-1619), kept in the Royal Collection and the V&A Museum collection. Other clues, like the sitter's pose with her head tilted to the side and her hand at her waist with her fingers positioned as if holding something, the wired cap and square-necked gown, also accord with other portraits of Mary, including a work hanging at Blair Castle, Perthshire.

Mary Stuart, often called Mary, Queen of Scots was a controversial figure in history. Forced to abdicate the throne in 1567 due to the suggestion she was implicated in her husband's murder, then imprisoned by Elizabeth I from 1568, Mary was executed in England in 1587 – two years before the inscribed date on the overlying portrait of Sir John Maitland. Mary's recent execution may be a reason why her portrait was covered over or abandoned by the artist.

Despite the fascination with which Mary, Queen of Scots was regarded both during her own lifetime and since, there are relatively few authentic portraits of her, and in particular few images from her life in Scotland.

Dr Caroline Rae said: "Technical examination of works of art, in conjunction with art historical and documentary research,

forms the pillars of technical art history. Using technical art history, it is possible to illuminate artists' materials and techniques for the first time in centuries, to discern copies and forgeries and to explore questions of authorship and workshop practice. The discovery of this hidden portrait of Mary, Queen of Scots is an exciting revelation, not only as it adds to our knowledge of 16th century Marian portraiture and patterns of commission at the time, but as it aids in illuminating our understanding of Adrian Vanson, a Netherlandish émigré artist who came to Jacobean Scotland to seek a new life and quickly ascended to the status of Crown painter."

David Taylor, Curator of Pictures and Sculpture at the National Trust, commented: "Vanson's portrait of Sir John Maitland is an important picture in the National Trust collection, and the remarkable discovery of the unfinished portrait of Mary, Queen of Scots adds an exciting hidden dimension to it. It shows that portraits of the queen were being copied and presumably displayed in Scotland around the time of her execution, a highly contentious and potentially dangerous thing to be seen doing."

Christopher Baker, Director of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, added: "This fascinating discovery has been made thanks to an innovative collaboration undertaken by the National Galleries of Scotland, the Courtauld Institute of Art and the National Trust. The shadowy presence of the Queen beneath a painting of Scotland's Lord Chancellor could not have been detected without Dr Rae's technical expertise. The analysis of this intriguing picture forms a key part of a broader project, which we hope will raise awareness of such important research for many visitors to the Scottish National Portrait Gallery."

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