

Uncovering an oily mystery

May 27 2014, by Anne Craig



Ian Longo displays the camera used to look under the oil of Paul Kane's paintings.

Queen's researchers are making new discoveries about Paul Kane's paintings, an important collection of art for understanding 19th century Canada.

George Bevan (Classics) is using infrared light technology to peer underneath the oil of Kane's [paintings](#) and see the original pencil drawings. Kane's pencil drawings sketched in the field are the earliest

depiction of [19th century](#) Canadian and Aboriginal life. The artist took these sketches back to his Toronto studio in the 1850s and used oil paints to finish the artworks.

Working with Ian Longo, Dr. Bevan examined 130 paintings in the collection. Their work forms the basis of a new exhibition at the Royal Ontario Museum entitled *The First Brush: Paul Kane and Infrared Reflectography*.

"Paul Kane recorded a critical time in Canadian history. We wanted to learn how and if the paintings were adapted for the Western tastes of the time," says Dr. Bevan.

Mr. Longo photographed the paintings with a consumer grade camera. The infrared light technology revealed pencil, charcoal and painted sketches beneath the final oil painted surface – details that could not be detected by the naked eye.

"At times it was shocking to see the difference in Kane's initial sketch work on the canvas and his final product," says Mr. Longo. "One of my favourites is a piece entitled "Return of a war party" in which the river in the scene has what appears to the viewer as only two large war canoes on it. In our photograph, though, we discovered a third large canoe that Kane later decided to eliminate from the scene and painted a large rock over top instead."

Based on the success of this project, Dr. Bevan hopes to put more collections of paintings under the lens for closer examination.

"The more we learn about paintings and painters like this, the more it helps us learn about history. We were lucky to be involved in this project."

Provided by Queen's University

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