

Art history specialists: 'Lady in a Fur Wrap' artist identified

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"Lady in a Fur Wrap," circa 1580-1588. Credit: CGS CIC Glasgow Museums

Collection

Leading international specialists in the field of art history have released the initial findings of a four-year collaborative research project centering around one of Glasgow's most famous paintings, the "Lady in a Fur Wrap."

For over 100 years, scholars have been debating who painted the beautiful portrait "Lady in a Fur Wrap," traditionally thought to be by El Greco (1541–1614).

New research and closer analysis of the masterpiece has allowed experts to understand more about El Greco's style and that of other artists painting at this time. Technical examination, carried out by the Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid and later by the University of Glasgow in partnership with Glasgow Museums, has led professionals to reattribute the Lady, renowned as one of the finest 16th century portraits in Europe, to Alonso Sánchez Coello (c.1531-1588).

"Lady in a Fur Wrap" was purchased by Sir William Stirling Maxwell in 1853. It is one of an important collection of Spanish works, which together with Pollok House, was donated to the City of Glasgow in 1967 by Sir William's granddaughter Dame Anne Maxwell Macdonald. It is planned the painting will return to Pollok House, run by the National Trust for Scotland, in summer 2020 with a fresh interpretation.

Duncan Dornan, Head of Glasgow Museums, said: "Through our partnership with leading experts in the field of Spanish art we have gained a much fuller understanding and appreciation of this important painting. After detailed analysis and examination, we are closer to understanding who painted one of Glasgow Museums' most popular and

internationally recognized artworks."

"Lady in a Fur Wrap" is a fascinating portrait. This technical study has also, excitingly, revealed unexpected elements such as traces of underdrawing hidden behind the surface. These suggest a different style of dress for the Lady, before the eye-catching fur cape was introduced. These are all elements that continue to attract debate and although we now understand who painted the work the identity of the mysterious lady is still unanswered. It is certain the "Lady in a Fur Wrap" will continue to intrigue and inspire for generations to come."

"Lady in a Fur Wrap" has fascinated viewers ever since it was exhibited in the Louvre, Paris, in 1838. Since the beginning of the 20th century, however, it has presented a conundrum. Increasingly, scholars in the field of Spanish Art thought the Lady looked different from other paintings known to be by El Greco. This led them to propose a number of new possibilities regarding who painted it, when and who is featured in the painting.

Using the opportunity of the "Lady in a Fur Wrap" being on loan to the Prado in Madrid for the 2014 celebrations for the 4th centenary of El Greco's death, technical examination of the painting was carried out at the museum that year.

A broad spectrum of scientific examination techniques (imaging and analytical) were employed to ensure a very in-depth understanding of the material-technical aspects of this painting: different photographic techniques including raking light and UV fluorescence photography, X-radiography, infrared reflectography (IRR), stereomicroscopy, X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy (XRF), optical microscopy and scanning electron microscopy coupled with energy-dispersive X-ray microanalysis (SEM-EDX). Further analysis with fluorescent staining and FTIR APA Imaging on paint cross sections prepared by the Prado was carried out in

2018 by the University of Glasgow and Bern University of Applied Sciences.

A comprehensive research project was set up in Glasgow to unpack the complex history and significance of this unique painting. It explored questions of artistic technique, and used scientific analysis and further research methods involving the history of dress, society and collecting. The project compared the results with equivalent scientific investigation and additional research on five other major 16th-century Spanish portraits in the Stirling Maxwell collection in Glasgow. Further, it drew on the results of similar research on paintings held by international institutions such as the Prado Museum.

Through this collaborative and comparative approach the partners' understanding of the context of portraiture and artistic practice in this period in Spain was greatly enhanced.

Dr. Mark Richter, University of Glasgow, who coordinated the scientific investigation in Glasgow, explained: "Through technical analysis of the painting's surface, as well as analysis of microscopic paint samples, we now know much more about how this most enigmatic portrait was painted and the relationship of its materials and methods of creation to those of other important pictures in this and other collections.

"All the evidence indicates that the materials and techniques used in the creation of the painting are consistent with 16th century practice in Spain. However, the composition of the layers in the "Lady in a Fur Wrap" is different from paintings we know to be by El Greco. Most paintings are built up using multiple layers. In the 16th century, when this painting was made, these layers normally included a ground layer, a priming layer, multiple paint layers and finally varnish. Technical examination carried out by the Museo del Prado and the University of Glasgow has allowed us to examine these layers in detail. The

composition of the layers in the Lady are considerably different from the layers seen in autograph works by El Greco.

"One of the main differences is that El Greco typically primed his gessoed canvases with a layer of brownish-red. This distinctive layer tended to include precious pigments of many different colors, suggesting he used scrapings from his paint palette for this initial layer. The priming layer in the Lady does not correspond with this, instead it features a light grey layer. Another distinguishing trait is the painterly quality of his underdrawing, which is radically different from the drawn lines clearly visible in the infrared reflectography of this painting. Details like this, important for understanding an artist's individual technique, help explain why the "Lady in a Fur Wrap" is no longer considered to be painted by El Greco."

As a result of the Prado's technical analysis on the Lady, they went on to examine in more detail artistic practice by portrait painters at the court of Philip II of Spain. One of these artists is Sofonisba Anguissola, the subject of a new exhibition at the museum in Madrid.

Head of Spanish Renaissance Painting, Museo Nacional del Prado, Dr. Leticia Ruiz Gómez, said; "A conclusion has been reached that the "Lady in a Fur Wrap" is neither the work of El Greco, nor by Sofonisba Anguissola, but by Alonso Sánchez Coello. I think this is a splendid Sánchez Coello."

Dr. Hilary Macartney, who led the research at the University of Glasgow, added: "Alonso Sánchez Coello was the principal portraitist at Philip II's court and much favored by the King. In his time Sánchez Coello was better known and more admired than El Greco. The misattribution of the Lady was instrumental in establishing El Greco's reputation outside Spain in the 19th century. More recently the portrait's popular association with Sofonisba Anguissola helped revive interest in

her work. Now, at last, it will re-establish the international reputation that Alonso Sánchez Coello deserves.

"Other aspects in addition to the paint analysis have been crucial in concluding our findings. The case for attributing *The Lady in the Fur Wrap* to Sánchez Coello takes into account a range of factors, including stylistic characteristics. Sánchez Coello is most closely associated with conventional, formal royal portraits, however we now believe that he was also responsible for portraits of a different and more informal character, such as the Prado's *Unknown Young Woman*, as well as *The Lady in the Fur Wrap*, which combined intimacy and current ideals of female beauty.

"Together with leading scholars of Spanish art, dress and related historical fields we deliberated over features including dress and jewelery and the status of people represented in portraiture in this period. It is only in considering all these aspects that we have been able to attribute this outstanding portrait to Alonso Sánchez Coello."

"Lady in a Fur Wrap"

- Provenance and Reception of the "Lady in a Fur Wrap"
Displayed in King Louis-Philippe's "Spanish Gallery" at the Louvre in 1838–48, the "Lady in a Fur Wrap" beguiled French Romantics and British visitors alike and was considered the 'gem' of this important collection.
- Attributed to El Greco (1541–1614) and regarded as an early masterpiece painted soon after he settled in Spain in the 1570s, its fame became linked to the rapid rise in the painter's international reputation from the mid-1800s. Stirling Maxwell praised the portrait in his seminal study *Annals of the Artists of Spain* (1848), the first scholarly history of Spanish art in English and the first photographically illustrated book on art. It provided

the fullest information on El Greco in English up to that date, as well as the first photographic illustration of the Lady. He subsequently purchased the portrait at the sale of the French king's collection in London in 1853. Its frequent loan to major exhibitions also contributed to its fame. Since 1967, when Pollok House and most of its collections were given to the City of Glasgow by Stirling Maxwell's granddaughter, the "Lady in a Fur Wrap" has been on public display within the House and remains the most famous work in the Stirling Maxwell collection.

- Analysis undertaken; Following on from the Prado's examination of the Lady in 2014, experts from Glasgow Museums, Glasgow University, Historic Environment Scotland and the Doerner Institut, Munich, carried out further advanced analytical techniques in 2018, including Gas Chromatography Mass Spectrometry, a procedure which is ideal for providing detailed chemical information on the organic materials found in paint samples, especially binding media. It is particularly valuable for the identification of natural products such as oils and resins, where specific molecular indicators can distinguish between different species and can also be used to distinguish the different drying oils in paint samples, such as linseed and walnut oil. Other techniques, such as infrared reflectography, increased understanding of preliminary sketches or underdrawings by the artists, which are often hidden by opaque overlying paint layers. X-radiography on some of these works was carried out at the University of Glasgow's School of Veterinary Medicine. Stereomicroscopic surface examination and investigations with infrared reflectography (IRR) and X-ray fluorescence (XRF) were undertaken at Glasgow Museums Resource Centre.
- Other works studied as part of "Lady in a Fur Wrap" project; Five other important paintings in the Stirling Maxwell collection, by El Greco and other contemporary artists working during this "Golden Age" of Spanish painting, were selected for study

together with the "Lady in a Fur Wrap." Compared with the remarkable informality of the "Lady in a Fur Wrap," the magnificent portrait of Philip II of Spain by Alonso Sánchez Coello is one of the finest examples of an image of political power by the king's favourite portrait painter. The portrait of Philip's fourth Queen Anne of Austria is more typical of representations of women in this period in its formality and the rich, high-necked dress. Our research has confirmed the identity of the sitter in the portrait of Don John of Austria, the king's half-brother, and its [attribution](#) to the Flemish-born Jorge de la Rúa (Jooris van der Straeten), rather than to Alonso Sánchez Coello as traditionally thought. Our findings on the Portrait of a Gentleman by El Greco confirm it to be an excellent example of his later style, a view shared by our Prado colleagues. Datable to c. 1600, it is likely to represent a prominent member of Toledo society. The playing card-sized Portrait of a Knight in Armour fits stylistically between the circles of Sánchez Coello and El Greco.

Provided by University of Glasgow

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