

Introduction

Ruth just graduated from the NYU Conservation Program. She is interning in Painting Conservation at the National Gallery of Art until August and will begin a Painting Conservation fellowship at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in September. This poster is adapted from her 2023 ANAGPIC talk, focusing on the technical analyses that were incorporated in her Art History Master’s thesis.

The attribution of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation’s sixteenth-century Italian altarpiece *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saint James Major and Saint Jerome* at the High Museum in Atlanta to either Alessandro Bonvicino (circa 1498-1554), known as il Moretto, or Girolamo Romanino (1484/7-1560), called Romanino, was disputed among art historians of the twentieth century and remains so today. The painting is recognized as an important work of early Cinquecento Brescian art, and the two potential authors are among the most influential artists of that school. While various art historians have offered attributions, there has thus far been no systematic investigation of this painting.

Methods: Cross-section microscopy; Scanning electron microscopy with energy dispersive X-ray spectroscopy; X-Radiography; Infrared Reflectography

The Virgin’s Many Faces

IRR revealed several iterations of the Virgin’s head at different angles, finished to different degrees. The penultimate version was painted to completion and looks straight out at the viewer—one eye is visible in the cleaned painting. The final tilted head fits with Romanino’s early works. However, the amount of lead white used in the Virgin and Child’s faces, particularly compared to James and Jerome, confirmed with X-ray, is far closer to Moretto’s technique. It therefore appears that the design of the Madonna comes from Romanino, but the execution is by Moretto. The number of attempts made to perfect the face suggests this work is early in their oeuvres.



IRR – 1250-1510nm.
Molly Hughes-Hallett



IRR – with edges of
face iterations



Cleaned State –
Extra eye showing
Molly Hughes-Hallett

St Jerome’s Pose

Saint Jerome’s bent pose is found in various forms in the oeuvres of both Romanino and Moretto, such as the Romanino’s circa 1524 *Nativity* in the National Gallery in London and Moretto’s 1530-35 *Nativity with Shepherds, Saint Jerome and a Donor* at the Pinacoteca Tosio Martinengo. The pose is a key element cited by attributions of experts who attribute the painting to each artist. The infrared reflectogram of the Kress painting reveals that the saint was initially drawn almost upright and that a change to the bent position was made once the painting process had begun. This change is strong evidence that the painting predates the two artists’ other depictions of Jerome in such a pose.



IRR – 1250-1510nm.
Molly Hughes-Hallett

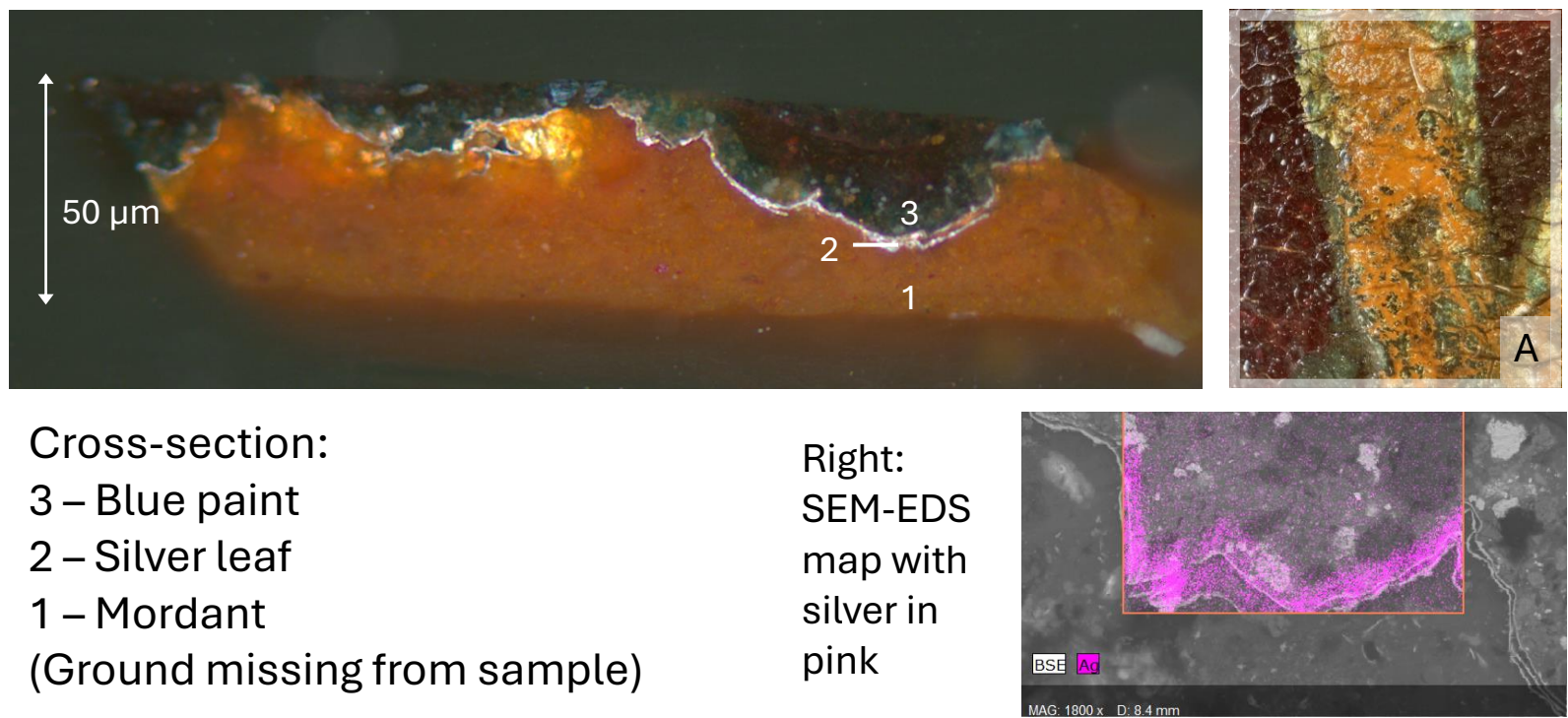


Romanino,
Nativity,
1524, NG
London



Moretto, *Nativity*,
1530-35,
Pinacoteca Tosio
Martinengo

Altered Appearances

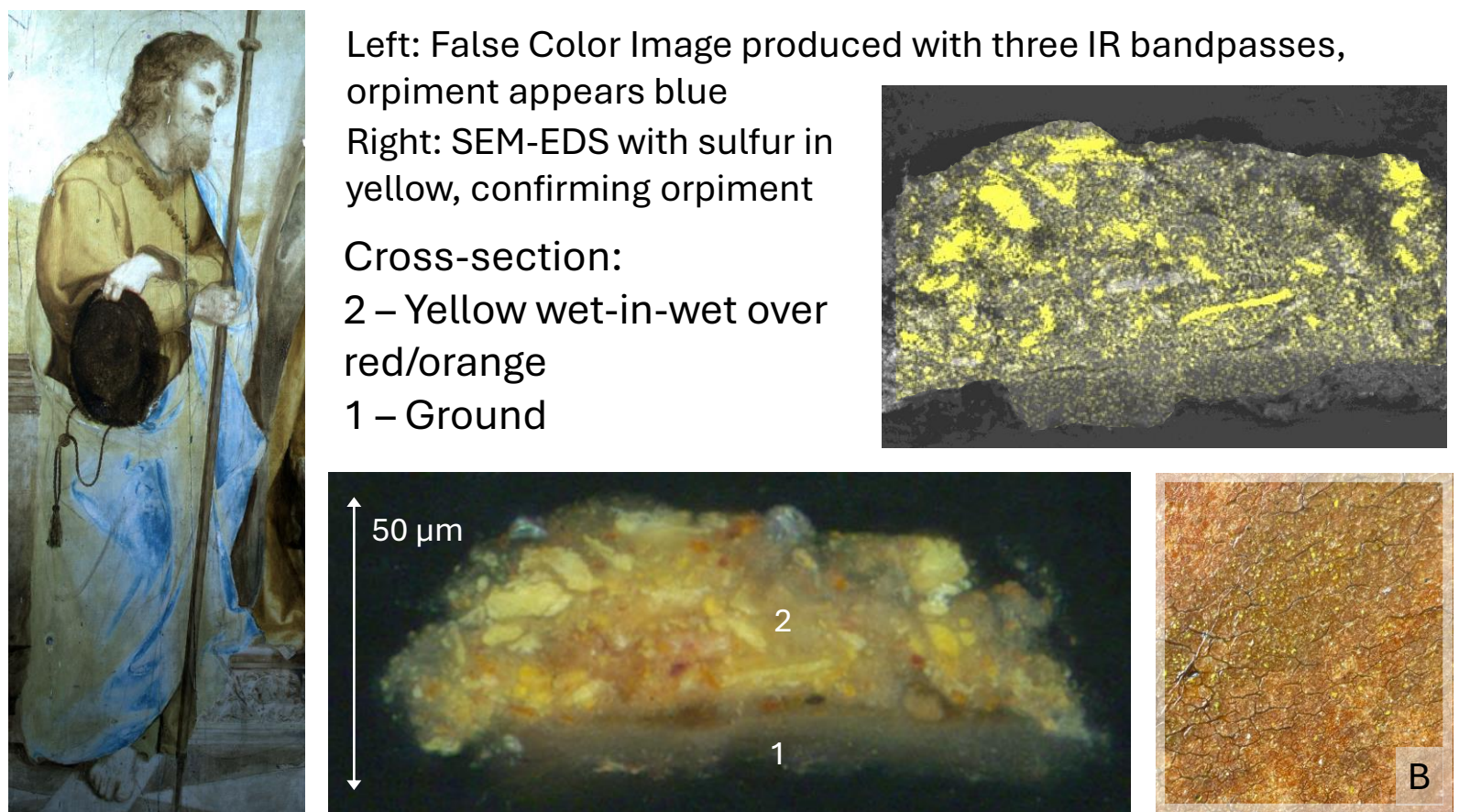


Cross-section:
3 – Blue paint
2 – Silver leaf
1 – Mordant
(Ground missing from sample)

Right: SEM-EDS
map with
silver in
pink

A cord tied around the Virgin’s waist and ending with a tassel on the step is silver-gilt. The silver is degraded and abraded such that the cord appears to be predominantly the color of the mordant, with some of the blue line details preserved on top of the silver. In the early sixteenth century, the use of metal leaf was falling out of fashion but was still incorporated in some of Romanino’s early altarpieces. There is also gold applied with mordant on the edge of the Virgin’s mantle and in the decoration of the steps in the Kress painting.

Orpiment was identified in Saint James Major’s robe. It has significantly deteriorated to form a brownish crust. In some areas, the crust was previously scraped away, leaving only a very minimal amount of paint through which the ground is visible. Orpiment was imported to Venice from Asia Minor for use by artists, who valued its almost gold-like luster and brightness.



Left: False Color Image produced with three IR bandpasses,
orpiment appears blue
Right: SEM-EDS with sulfur in
yellow, confirming orpiment

Cross-section:
2 – Yellow wet-in-wet over
red/orange
1 – Ground



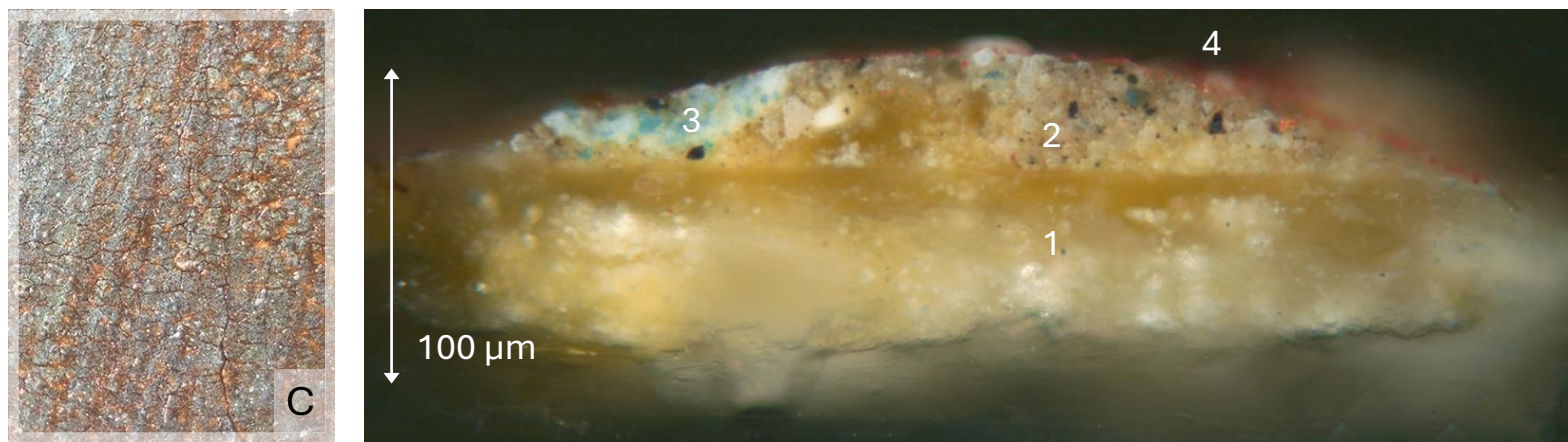
50 µm



Madonna and Child with Saint James Major and Saint Jerome
Italian, early 16th century
Oil on Panel, 148.9 x 138.4 cm
High Museum of Art, Kress Collection K1630

Before Treatment Photography
Molly Hughes-Hallett
Digitally brightened for legibility

Distinctive Textiles



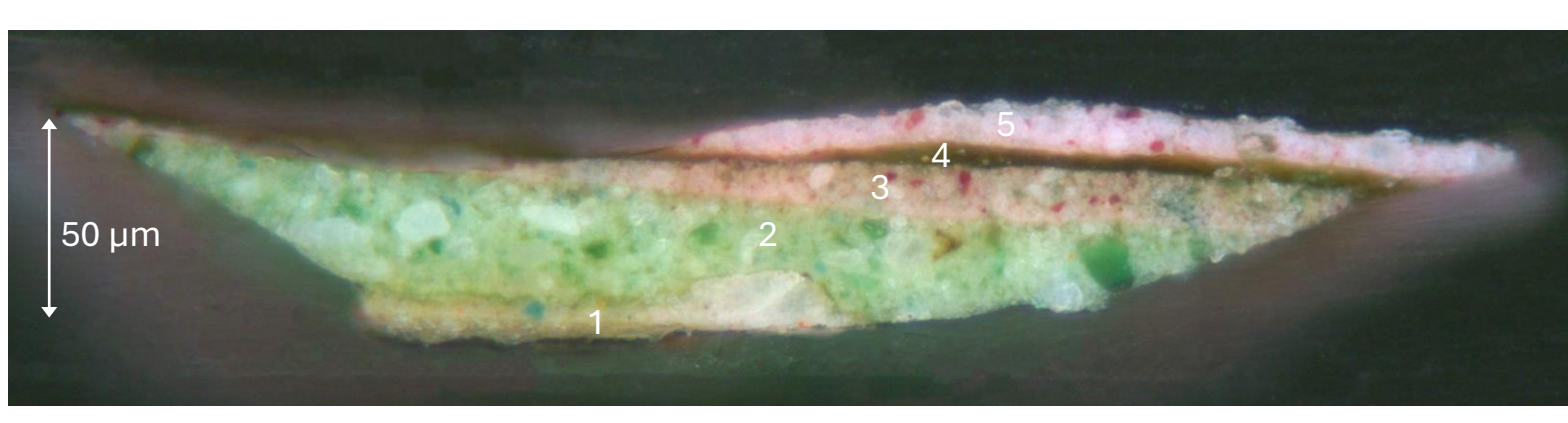
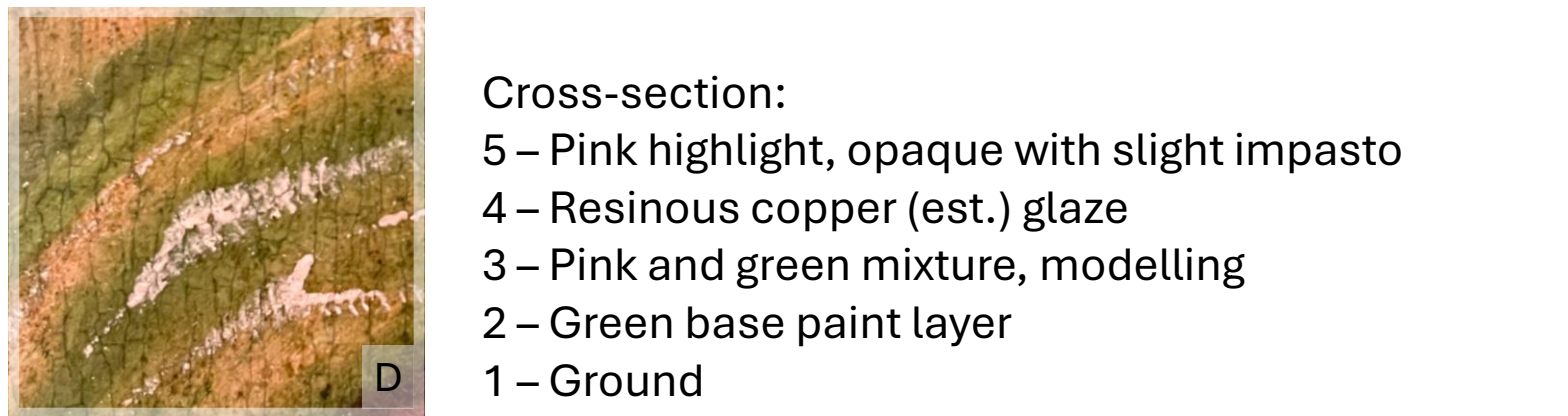
Cross-section:
4 – Resinous copper (est.) glaze
3 – Pink and green mixture, modelling
2 – Green base paint layer
1 – Ground

Left: X-radiograph of canopy

Moretto gave great attention to textiles in his paintings. He challenged himself to execute dimensional but translucent fabrics against skies and applied his skill in balancing colors to renderings of shot silk.

The unusual canopy is reminiscent of Romanino’s experiments with composition. The X-ray shows it is planned rather than a compositional change. However, the moderate success of the fabric’s translucency, albeit marred by abrasion, suggests early Moretto.

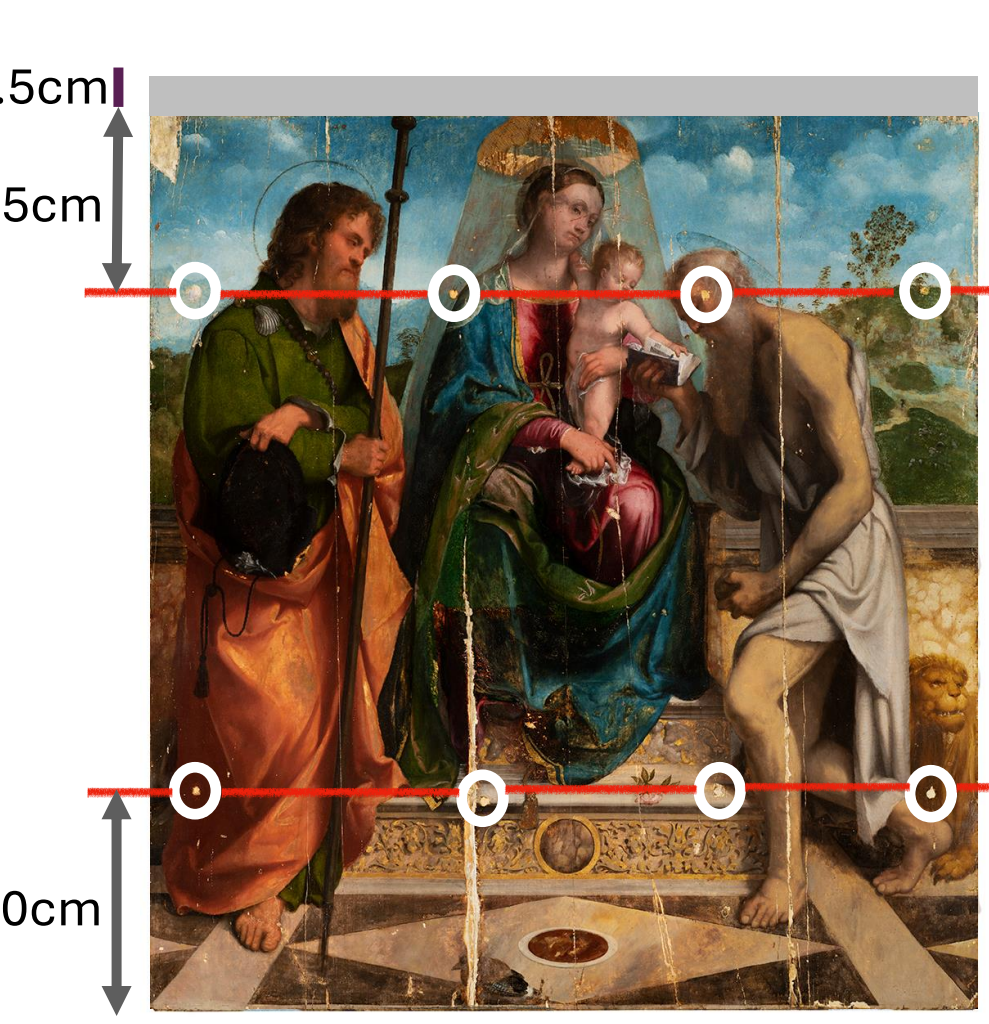
Equally, the type of shot silk in the lining of the Virgin’s mantle is seen in Moretto’s later works. The layering of green and pink paint skillfully renders the play of light on the fabric, blending the lower layers while opaque highlights are used to show the silk catching the light.



50 µm

Napoleonic Campaign

When the panel was cleaned, two sets of dowels were evident as distinctive losses, and their disparate distances from the top and bottom edges indicated that the panel was cut down about 6.5cm on the top. The bottom edge shows the original, unpainted preparation and has not been cut down. The top of the panel was probably cut down before the painting entered Lechi’s collection (the painting’s first known provenance), as the measurements listed in his 1824 catalog match those of the painting today. It is possible that the Kress painting was removed from its church as part of the Napoleonic campaign, so the damage



could have been wrought as part of this process; Gietz found evidence that paintings were cut down to fit into frames or crates. Although this loss is only approximately six centimeters, the missing piece alters the effectiveness of the composition.

Conclusion: A Case for Collaboration

These findings, combined with additional art historical analysis of the work, provide significant evidence for both Romanino’s and Moretto’s involvement. The key factor revealed by technical analysis is the extent of revisions made during the painting process, indicating an artist early in their career and, I suggest, a discussion between collaborators. Romanino and Moretto worked together on an extensive project in 1521, but no other collaborations have yet been proposed. There were multiple opportunities for the young Moretto to have collaborated with the more established Romanino before 1521, and this Kress painting marks an early moment in their shared artistic development. Additionally, as is often the case, conservation science here

enables us to understand the changes the painting has experienced, and therefore more accurately appreciate it as a subject for art historical research.



Moretto & Romanino

Left: Moretto from Carlo Ridolfi’s 1684 *Le maraviglie dell’arte, ouero, Le vite de gli illustri pittori veneti*
Right: Romanino by Lattanzio Gambara, c.1550-60, Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, Both: Wikimedia Commons

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