NEW LIGHT ON AN OLD SIGNATURE

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Infra-red photography has become well established as a useful resource in the examination of works of art. Because it records radiations of greater penetrative power than visible light, it helps to bridge the gap between normal vision and the completely "atonal" evidence of radiography. A rather striking demonstration of its value occurred recently at the Metropolitan Museum when we examined Carpaccio's Meditation on the Passion, before cleaning it.

The known history of the painting, as far as it bears on our present subject, can be summarized very briefly. In the seventeenth century it was in the collection of Roberto Canonici at Ferrara. In the same collection there was another painting, very similar in style and theme, a Burial of Christ, which is now, or was until recently, in the Kaiser Friedrich Museum. At that time both paintings were attributed to Mantegna—not unreasonably, since both were signed with his
Photographs, before cleaning, of the signature area of Carpaccio's Meditation on the Passion: above, by normal light, below, by filtered infra-red. About 2½ times actual size. The lower right corner has been cleaned experimentally down to the original paint.
Photographs after cleaning. The signature of Carpaccio shows faintly by normal light (above), very clearly on the infra-red film (below). The tail of the final “s” has been cleared of the covering paint to demonstrate the construction.
name. In 1911 Sir Claude Phillips, writing in the Burlington Magazine, presented an excellent argument on grounds of style for ignoring the Mantegna signatures and for attributing both paintings to Vittore Carpaccio. Although this attribution is now generally accepted, the logical search for direct physical confirmation seems never to have been made. The signatures have been allowed to remain, discredited and confounded by the labels on the frames.

The recent examination included the usual investigations by microscope, microchemistry, and technical photography and tests with solvents. They showed that the paint surface was covered by three layers of varnish. The upper two, known to have been applied in 1928 and 1940, were natural soft resin films of the dammar type, moderately discolored by normal deterioration. The third, next to the paint surface, was a very dark, semi-opaque, brownish film, having the characteristics of mixed resin and drying oil, presumably linseed oil. This film was irregular in thickness, and the irregularities were random in distribution, without relation to the colors or forms in the painting. Its disfiguring effect was great, almost completely neutralizing the cooler colors and generally distorting the tone relations of the painting as a whole. It was clearly not an original coating, since it carried over certain voids and scars in the paint film. The Mantinea signature, near the lower right corner of the painting, was related structurally to this layer.

As the first detail shows, the signature was located over a label, or cartellino, which was obviously a part of the original paint construction. This label seemed to have little excuse for existence, except as a support for some kind of inscription. If the signature was false, logic indicated a search for evidence of an earlier one. Nothing very promising could be seen through the discolored film material, even under high magnification. An infra-red exposure was then made. Beneath the now obviously false ANDREAS MANTINEA it showed with unexpected clarity not only traces of an earlier Mantegna signature (in the open space, lower center), but also another, completely different, inscription: vjctoris carpattij venettij opus.

This somewhat overwhelming windfall was at once gratifying and puzzling. It seemed safe to accept the newly revealed signature as authentic; certainly its existence was a more than adequate mandate to remove the false Mantegna signature, along with the disfiguring varnish films. Removal was accomplished by routine laboratory technique, without hazard to the underlying paint surface. But it was still not clear how the Carpaccio signature could record itself so vigorously on the infra-red film and remain otherwise so reticent.

Further microscopic exploration showed that the brush strokes of the signature were imbedded between two layers of the paint forming the label. There was no indication of stratification or of differences in paint structure, which would have been likely if the paint over the signature had been added later. Under these circumstances the discrepancy between normal and infra-red photographs is quite understandable. The signature would not be apparent in normal light, but would be reached by the greater penetration of infra-red waves.

The reason for such a retiring form of signature is still not explained, and speculation on that point is not in the province of these notes. However, Van Marle, in his discussion of the Berlin painting, mentions faint traces of what he believes may be a Carpaccio signature. He calls it “this half-concealed manner of signing.” This would also apply quite accurately to our signature, traces of which are now faintly discernible under good light and moderate magnification. Comparison with an infra-red photograph of the Berlin painting would be interesting, and perhaps at some future time may be possible.