

TATE



The Secrets of
Augustus
John's
*Woman
Smiling*

Tate conservation
research to coincide
with the *Gwen John
and Augustus John*
exhibition at Tate
Britain, 29 September
2004 – 9 January 2005

Augustus John
Woman Smiling 1908-9
Oil on canvas. Tate
© Tate, London 2004

Introduction

Woman Smiling captivated the critics when it was first exhibited in London in 1909. Augustus John (1878-1961) submitted it to the International Society's *Exhibition of Fair Women* at the New Gallery - in haste it would appear because the paint was not yet dry, and the painting not finished. But Roger Fry thought it was 'the most formidable picture in the exhibition'. (*Burlington Magazine* 1909)

The 'woman smiling' was Dorelia McNeill, who had lived with Augustus and his wife Ida in a *ménage à trois*. After Ida died in childbirth in 1907 Dorelia became mother to all their children, and lived with Augustus until his death in 1961.

Find out more about Augustus John at www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/john

The artist's preparation and painting technique

Woman Smiling began as a series of drawings. Augustus sketched Dorelia in charcoal and wash on fairly large sheets of paper. He chose one of these poses and, painting freehand, worked up the drawing in oil paint, enlarging it so it filled the canvas. The brush strokes were loose and sketchy, mimicking the freedom in the drawing.

He continued painting, working up the folds and form of the bodice and skirt, as well as her foot, arms and an approximation of the hands. He left a space for the face, waiting to paint this from life later.

This pose is not the one we see today. It is hidden beneath the current image. Conservators discovered this earlier pose through examination of the painting in different lighting conditions.

Views

There are six different ways you can look at *Woman Smiling*: the preparatory sketch, the finished painting, and x-radiograph, 'raking light' shone from the left, 'raking light' shone from the top, and the back of the painting's frame. Over the following pages you can see each of these views and read explanations of what they show.

Preparatory sketch



Finished painting

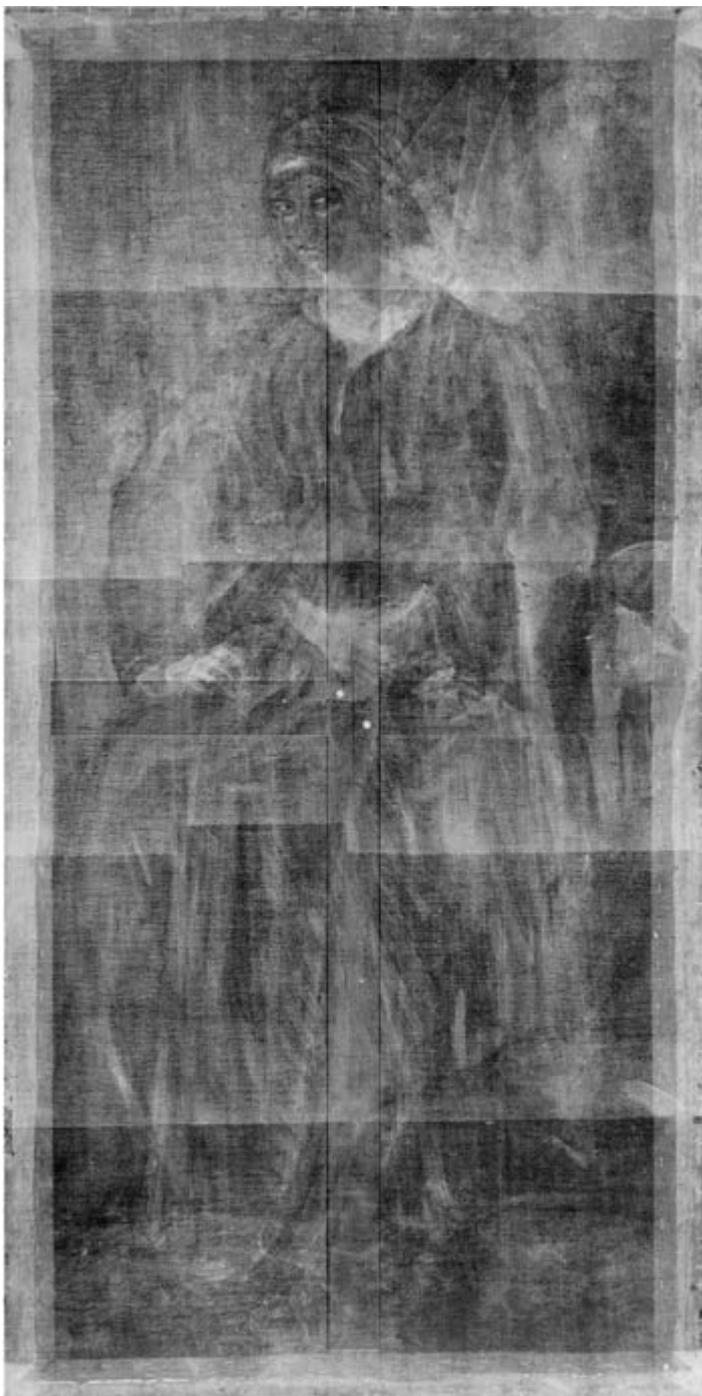


X-radiograph

A painting can be x-rayed to discover what lies under the surface.

An x-radiograph is made by beaming x-rays through a painting onto x-ray sensitive film. An image forms because each element in the paint blocks the x-rays by differing amounts. For example, lead will block x-rays therefore paint containing lead white appears light on the film. Cadmium, as in cadmium red, will block some x-rays but not all, so the red painted areas appear grey. The thicker the paint, the more x-rays will be absorbed.

The x-radiograph shows all the layers at once. Both the top layers, (the image we see on the surface) and the earlier pose (in which Dorelia is standing) are visible.



'Raking light'

The first inkling of another pose (painted underneath the one you see when you look at the painting with the naked eye) came when the painting was viewed in 'raking light'. Conservators light a painting in a variety of ways to tease out more information from the texture. One method is to shine a light across the painting parallel to the surface. The cast shadows enhance the brushstrokes.

Patricia Favero, Kress Intern in the Painting Conservation Section, discovered this early pose when she examined *Woman Smiling* in the conservation studio at Tate Britain.

Unlike Gwen John, Augustus did not scrape off an earlier image before re-painting. These earlier strokes create ridges which are still visible in the overlying paint. It is just possible to decipher hands at the centre, the bodice modestly fastened at the top, the raised hem of the skirt and Augustus's bold hatching.

'Raking light' from left



'Raking light' from top



The back of the painting's frame

Augustus painted on commercially-primed linen canvas. This is stretched over a wooden artist's stretcher that can be expanded slightly to increase the tension in the fabric. Ideally the canvas will become stiff, drum-like and flat. If the tension is uneven, ripples will form at the edges.

In the summer of 1908, Augustus, Dorelia and the children holidayed in France. This may explain his use of French painting materials: the commercially-primed canvas is tacked to a French stretcher - size 120 Marine - made by Bourgeois, a colourman based in Paris.



Woman Smiling in more detail

Why is the painting cracked?

Looking closely at the painting also shows how Augustus changed his mind. Changes provoke drying cracks. Everywhere that Augustus changed his mind and altered the colour or the tone or the composition, there are soft-edged cracks.

This is because he applied fast-drying paint over slow-drying paint. Top layers dry first in contact with the air. They stiffen and shrink slightly as the solvent evaporates. As they tighten up over the wetter lower layers, they split or crack. Colours underneath may be visible in the fissures.

Glimpses of colour in the cracks around Dorelia's face reveal that her head-scarf was initially blue and draped down to her right shoulder.

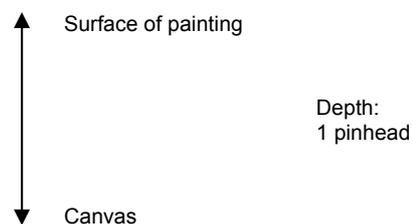
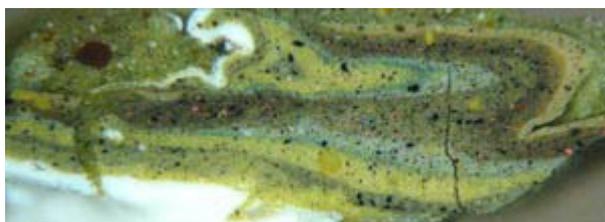
Woman Smiling made a full page spread in the Burlington Magazine a month after it was first exhibited. The critic CJ Holmes remarked that the 'very haste which has contributed so much to the spirit of the piece has brought with it an undeniable loss of that shapely and pleasant handling of material'. The painting was in fact not finished.

After the exhibition, Augustus refined it. He changed the blue headscarf to green, tucking it up neatly behind her head. He filled the bodice to Rubenesque proportions, squared the body in space by deepening the shadow on the furthest sleeve, and firming the left knee so now Dorelia (almost) sits. Cracks exist in all these areas.

The background

Augustus fretted over the background. It started out yellow. Then he scumbled blue on top to make a green, then yellow again then blue; then he threw in a shadow. He swirled up the paint as he worked since he didn't wait for the under layers to dry before adding more wet paint on top.

Cross-section of the painting



This change of mind is apparent in a cross-section of the painting. A small sample of paint, no bigger than a pinhead, was taken from the edge of an existing hole in the paint layer, mounted in resin and sliced through. Through the microscope, this whole shifting colour scheme is unveiled as a sequence of layers.

Face



Although the x-radiograph shows two pairs of hands, there is only one face. Augustus did not include Dorelia's face in the earlier painting; he left a bare oval, so that he could paint her portrait from life (this is also why the face looks so dark on the x-radiograph).



We suspect that when Dorelia came to pose for the face, she sat down with a big smile on her face and Augustus was so excited with her new pose that he changed the composition, rapidly repainting the whole figure: hands on hips, a monumental lap and undone bodice.

Bodice

From the x-ray and 'raked light' views, we can also see that the bodice was originally modestly fastened at the top, like on the preparatory sketch.

Preparatory sketch



Finished painting



'Raked light' from the left shows the line of the bodice, painted underneath the final version, similar to the preparatory sketch.



Hands

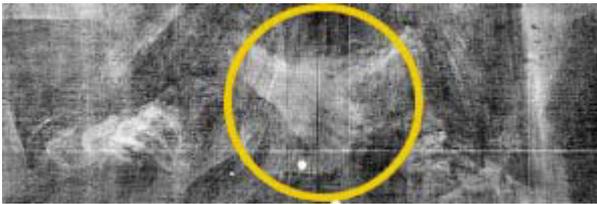
The position of the hands in the preparatory sketch is quite different from that in the final painting.



Looking at the painting with light shone from the top, it is just possible to decipher hands in the centre.



The x-ray shows this more clearly. Two pairs of hands are visible: hands clasped at the centre, and hands on hips.



Skirt and ankle

Augustus started to paint the bottom of the skirt and the ankle as they were in the preparatory sketch, but he also changed these.

Preparatory sketch



Finished painting



Looking with 'raked light' shone from the top, you can just make out lines which follow the raised skirt like in the preparatory sketch.



Ripples at the top of the canvas

The tension in the canvas is uneven. There are ripples at the top and the lower edges. It is possible that Augustus may have taken the canvas off the stretcher – perhaps to bring it home to England after his holiday in France – and then re-stretched it again for the exhibition.

'Raking light' from the left





Credits

This is based on research by Mary Bustin, Tate Paintings Conservator and Patricia Favero, Kress Intern in Tate Painting Conservation.

You can see the interactive version of The Secrets of Augustus John's *Woman Smiling* at www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/john/womansmiling.shtm

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