

The Consolidation of Pigments in the Morgan Library & Museum's Winchester Bible Leaf

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Introduction

The Winchester Bible Leaf at the Morgan Library & Museum, MS M. 619, is a double sided single leaf dated between 1160 and 1180. It is a very large sheet of parchment, measuring 57.8 x 38.8 cm. It was requested for loan by the Metropolitan Museum of Art for their exhibition on the Winchester Bible in late 2014-early 2015. Standard loan practice for all medieval manuscripts at the ML&M requires a complete check of pigment stability. During this process, it was discovered that the pigments were in an unstable state in many areas of both the recto, at left, and the verso, at right. The leaf is one of the most important and beautiful medieval objects in the collection of the ML&M, so it was imperative for both the loan and the long term care of the leaf that the pigments were consolidated and made stable.



History

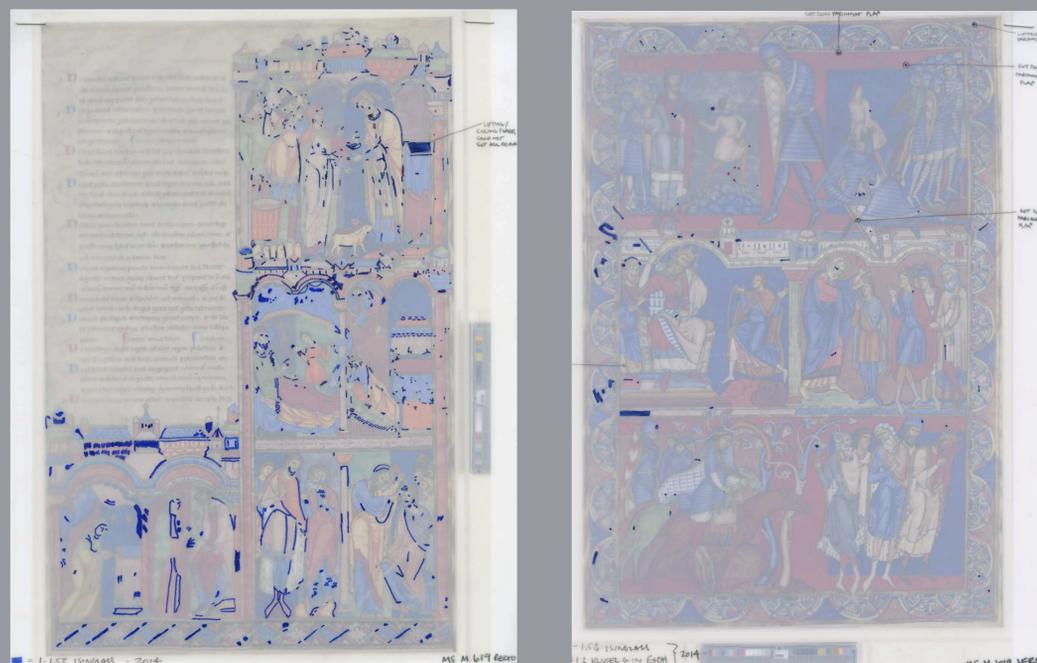
The leaf was acquired by J. Pierpont Morgan in 1912. It had been removed from the large multi-volume Winchester Bible in 1820 during the re-binding of the bible. The artist, the Master of the Morgan Leaf, was one of six who worked on the illumination of the Winchester Bible. The leaf marks the shift from the Romanesque to the Gothic. The recto is the beginning of 1 Samuel. The imagery ends with Samuel's anointing of Saul as Israel's first king. The verso dramatically depicts the life of Saul's successor, King David, from his slaying of the Goliath through the moving scene of David mourning the death of his rebellious son Absalom. Drawings for four full-page illuminations were executed, but the Morgan Leaf is the only completed full page leaf in the entirety of the Winchester Bible.



Images 1-8 from left to right. Images correspond with numbered areas on recto and verso above. 1-6 are located on the recto. 7 and 8 are on the verso.

Consolidation

The double sided leaf is stored in a frame at all times. The loan request provided an opportunity to examine the state of the pigments. Lindsey Tyne, Assistant Paper Conservator, began the examination and the consolidation of minor areas on the verso. The images at right are of overlays used to indicate the areas of consolidation. As can be seen, the need for consolidation was extensive. When she began examination of the recto she discovered that the pigments were not flaking, but rather seemed completely unstable from their binder base through the pigment. The scope of the work, on deadline, required additional help, which I provided. The behavior of the pigments during brush consolidation with 1-1.5% isinglass in EtOH and water was unlike anything I had experienced. The binder acted as if it was a pile of sand that began to crumble when tested for stability with a thin brush. The binder appeared to be in multiple layers, each reacting slightly differently to the application of consolidant. Multiple applications of the consolidant was required for almost every area in need of stabilization. Despite the amount of consolidant required, the pigments retained their original aesthetics. Fortunately, the consolidation did stabilize the pigments, but the complexity of the structure of the binder and pigment, especially in the depiction of faces, was without precedent in my decade of consolidation practice at the ML&M.



English Medieval Wall Painting

The puzzling behavior of the pigments in the Winchester Bible Leaf was at the forefront of my mind when I began reading Helen Howard's *Pigments of English Medieval Wall Painting*. The images above are taken from her book and are from Winchester Cathedral, the ancestral home of the Winchester Bible. The wall paintings at Winchester are composed of the same pigments as the Winchester Leaf: ultramarine, vermilion, red lead, malachite, lead white and iron oxides. A crucial difference is the presence of vivianite in the wall paintings. The style, motifs and composition of the wall painting images closely reflect the images on the recto of the Winchester Leaf. Howard describes the large amount of calcium carbonate used as a base for the pigments on the wall paintings. The Winchester Cathedral artists have been directly linked to wall paintings at the Romanesque Chapter House at Sigena, Spain and to the Winchester Bible. The working methods of the wall painters vis a vis the composition of the recto of the Morgan's leaf poses an intriguing area of study to further understand the care and treatment of the Winchester Bible Leaf.

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