Editorial

The Night Watch Uncovered

For almost one year, a team of nine conservators has been working on removing the varnish from Rembrandt's masterpiece, *The Night Watch* (1642). This intensive effort is part of Operation Night Watch. Initiated in 2019, it is the largest research and conservation project of the painting ever undertaken, aimed to optimally preserve *The Night Watch* for future generations. The removal of old layers of varnish is just one step in a conservation process that started with the structural treatment of the canvas support in 2022. Carried out with microscopic precision, the varnish removal takes place in the public eye, behind a glass wall in the Night Watch Gallery.

To remove the varnish layers applied during and since the last major treatment of *The Night Watch* in 1975-76, conservators briefly place absorbent microfibre tissues prepared with a minimal amount of solvent on the painted surface. Most of the varnish dissolves and is absorbed into the tissue. Next, the remaining traces of varnish as well as the retouches applied during the 1975-76 treatment are carefully removed under a microscope. As it turns out, beneath these layers remnants of an even older varnish and retouches are frequently found, as well as other traces of earlier treatments. These too are carefully removed under a microscope. All in all, this entails a time-consuming process, whereby the material condition of the painting determines the pace of the treatment.

In preparation for the current treatment phase, conservators, curators and natural scientists studied *The Night Watch* for a period of five years using the latest, most advanced technologies. These ranged from digital imaging techniques to scientific and material-technical research, from computer science to artificial intelligence. This has led to a number of breakthroughs, providing greater insight into the painting's creation process and current condition.

One element of *The Night Watch* that always captures the interest of the public is the barking dog in the lower right corner. In this issue of the Bulletin, Rijksmuseum curator Anne Lenders argues that Rembrandt modelled his painted animal after a drawing by Adriaen van de Venne, disseminated as the printed title page of a book. Lenders shows how Rembrandt's initial, painted sketch of the dog, concealed beneath the top paint layers, supports this comparison as well. Rembrandt's underpainting was first rendered visible only a few years ago thanks to the research of conservators, curators and natural scientists. Such a discovery is another fine example showing how various disciplines within the Operation Night Watch team complement one another.

Even now, with the removal of the varnish in full swing, the entire team of Operation Night Watch remains involved in the project. They continue to analyse previously generated data and initiate further analysis in the event of new research questions brought about by the treatment. As varnish and retouches are removed and *The Night Watch* gradually divulges its scars – sustained over a lifespan of nearly 400 years – a transformation will occur right before the visitors' eyes. Considering that a major treatment like this typically occurs at most once in a generation, the 'uncovering' of *The Night Watch* poses a rare opportunity indeed. The Rijksmuseum, in its turn, has a chance to reveal more about the painting's history in light of new findings.