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ASK THE EXPERTS

Ask the Experts: Pentimenti



Detail, "Bathsheba" 1637 by Artemisia Gentileschi, with visible pentimenti from revisions in architecture

Ask the Experts: "At a museum, I saw a painting that had ghost images from stuff underneath that had been painted over. Does this mean the artist re-used the canvas? Or did somebody else paint over it later?"

A: It could be either, although the more likely reason is that the artist made revisions that have shown through the top layers of paint. These ghost images of over-painting, changes and revisions are called "pentimenti" ("Pentimento" is singular.)

Sometimes, pentimenti simply manifest as a slight textural relief which can only be seen if light skims across the paint surface. Other times, color and distinct imagery are easy to spot. Even when heavily obscured by layers of paint, passages that have been painted over tend to become visible over time. This is something artists should consider before recycling a painted canvas, especially in oils, which can become less opaque as they reach antique age.

Any time a compositional element is painted over, there is a chance it could show through, but there are ways to make revisions less visible.

Pentimenti will be harder to spot and less likely to distract from the finished image if they are located in the margins or background. Artists concerned about ghost images disrupting a picture may want to avoid adding focal elements and faces on top of textured or heavily patterned passages. It's also sometimes possible to incorporate the earlier work into the next layer, especially if the colors and values are similar. If the next layer involves patterns, a subtle revision might be very hard to spot.

If it is necessary to make a significant change to a painting, wait until the passage to be painted out is dry. Dry paint will be less prone to induce sinking or other defects in the next layer. If the passage to be covered is thick or in high relief, it can be sanded to remove excess material and flatten out the surface. Unless sanded down to the primer, there is still a possibility the original passage will produce a pentimento, but removing the bulk of the paint will likely make it more subtle. A small number of synthetic-organic colors may have the capability of migrating through layers, however, so sanding might not completely prevent previous work from showing through.

When sanding a painting, always take precautions to prevent exposure to dust. Avoid sanding paint that contains toxic pigments. Support the back of the canvas with a rigid board while sanding to prevent indenting or stretching the picture.

Especially for oil painters who work in a layered approach, pentimenti are unavoidable. It's much easier to make invisible changes in acrylics, though evidence of revisions can still appear. Many artists accept this as part of the craft, and appreciate that the finished work also carries a record of the full process.

Pentimenti are not necessarily regarded as bad. In fact, they can be desirable to collectors, especially if they provide some interesting insight into the artist's process. Scholars have discovered major compositional revisions in famous works, where whole figures or architectural elements have been painted out. If your work endures into antique age, who knows what insight these small imperfections may provide!