‘PIGMENTS REVEALED’

Engaging visitors with colour materiality

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The material composition of art and archaeology collections has been meticulously investigated for over a century. Scientific laboratories are nowadays established departments in most museums and have been growing in size and number in the last 30 years.

At the same time, the technologies applied to museum collections are evolving continuously, allowing scientists to obtain an increasing amount of chemical information without sampling or even touching the objects.

Although material studies on heritage collections have been multiplying, their outcomes have mostly been retained within academia, typically presented during dedicated conferences or in specialised scientific journals.

The forthcoming display, ‘Pigments Revealed: Ruskin’s Quest for Durable Colour’, opening in December 2023 in the Conservation Gallery, seeks to disseminate the outcomes of such studies to a broader public. It focuses on the results of the ongoing research project ‘Ruskin’s Painting Materials’, funded by the Leverhulme Trust.

This research centres on John Ruskin’s teaching collection preserved at the Ashmolean, which includes watercolours he used as lecture materials when he became a professor of art at Oxford in 1871. Material studies on the composition of colours used by Ruskin are combined with archival research into his written works to enhance our understanding and appreciation of his activity as a water-

John Ruskin (1819–1900), *Study of a Kingfisher, with dominant Reference to Colour*, 1871, watercolour and bodycolour over graphite on wove paper, 25.8 x 21.8 cm. Ashmolean Museum (WA.RS.RUD.201).

colourist and art teacher as well as of the historical and cultural environment around the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century.

'Pigments Revealed' will centre around the *Study of a Kingfisher*, one of Ruskin's most emblematic watercolours, and accompany visitors on a short journey to understand how cutting-edge non-invasive technology is used to identify and characterise coloured pigments and how scientific information can be used as a springboard to acquire an enhanced perspective on history. 'Pigments Revealed' ultimately uses science and technology to humanise museum narratives. It seeks to engage the public with the mind behind the artworks by revealing Ruskin's personal choices in painting his watercolours during a transitional historical moment that saw crucial developments in the manufacture of colours.

Furthermore, in the spirit of continuous learning that thrives across the University of Oxford, we plan to use this display as a pilot study to measure levels of visitor engagement and learning. We know from previous research and initiatives across the University and beyond that the public is interested in learning about 'behind-the-scenes work' and has an appetite for art materials and techniques. However, we want to explore how visitors' engagement changes when elements of science, conservation and materiality are introduced alongside traditional curatorial

John Ruskin (1819–1900), *Study of Dawn: purple clouds*, 1868, watercolour and bodycolour over faint graphite lines on blue-grey paper, 15.3 x 22.3 cm. Ashmolean Museum (WA.RS.ED.005).

narratives. Ultimately, we aim to establish how these interdisciplinary narratives can be leveraged to prompt a more profound social-emotional response in visitors.

In order to gather evidence to explore this research question, we will use an audience survey and ask visitors to rate a series of statements according to their levels of engagement. The same survey will be accessed in two locations in relation to Ruskin's Kingfisher via QR codes. The first QR code will appear next to the original Kingfisher watercolour displayed in the forthcoming 'Colour Revolution' exhibition (21 September 2023–18 February 2024), which will run in parallel with the 'Pigments Revealed' display for a short time. In the exhibition, the *Kingfisher* watercolour will be interpreted without reference to scientific and conservation narratives. The second QR code will appear next to the 'Pigments Revealed' display in the Conservation Gallery, where visitors will encounter a reproduction of the Kingfisher with an interpretation that additionally references the material studies research. Comparing the results of the two surveys will enable us to assess the impact of the scientific and conservation narratives and interpret any changes to visitor response.

This project has provided a unique opportunity to gather colleagues from across the Ashmolean and Gardens, Libraries and Museums (GLAM) Assessment and Evaluation Unit to explore interesting questions about how our visitors learn and engage with the collections. It testifies to the Museum's and University's commitment to continue promoting its collections and strive to increase social appreciation of our heritage. The outcome of this research will, in turn, inform the ways in which we tell stories and share knowledge in the future.

Performing Macro- X-ray flourescence on *Engraving of a Relief of the Chariot of Ramesses II from the Depiction of the Battle of Qadesh in the Great Hall of the Temple at Abu Simbel*, 1829–32, watercolour and bodycolour over engraving on wove paper, 66.1 x 51.4 cm. Ashmolean Museum (WA.RS.REF.177).

Heritage Scientist Tea Ghigo observing *Engraving of a Painting of Ramesses III adoring Isis and Ptah-Sokar, from Ramesses' Tomb at Biban el-Moluk,* 1829–32, 44.3 x 66.3 cm. Ashmolean Museum (WA.RS.REF.180), prior to material analyses.