


## Revealing a new identity? Conservation and investigation of a painting by Jan Baptist Weenix



Credit: © English Heritage Trust, Kenwood House.

Radosław Chocha and Alice Tate-Harte  describe the complex cleaning and restoration of a painting by Jan Baptist Weenix from Kenwood House, English Heritage. The treatment coincided with new art-historical research conducted by [Anke A. Van Wagenberg-Ter Hoeven](#) who describes how she identified the sitters in the painting as the artist's family.

### INTRODUCTION

The painting *Family in a Mediterranean Seaport* by Jan Baptist Weenix hangs in Kenwood House as part of the Iveagh Bequest (figures 1 and 2). You could be forgiven for not being familiar with the artist, as the first catalogue raisonné has only just been published (Van Wagenberg-Ter Hoeven 2018). He was a very successful and wealthy

painter in his day. The son of an architect, Weenix was born in 1621 in Amsterdam. He was apprenticed to a bookseller and was always using scrap paper to make drawings from life (Houbraken 1718-1721). He studied under several painters: Jan Christiaensz Micker and Abraham Bloemaert in Utrecht, and Claes Moeyaert in Amsterdam. He married Josijntje De Hondecoeter and had a son, Jan, who was born in 1641. When his son was 14 months old, Weenix travelled to Rome to study Italian painting, much to his wife's dismay. Weenix implored his wife to join him with their young son, but she refused to leave home. He joined the *Schildersbent* who were a society of Dutch and Flemish painters working in Rome.<sup>1</sup> While there, his speech impediment earned him the nickname *Ratel* (Rattle). He found success in Rome painting landscapes, portraits and history paintings for Cardinal Pamphili (who became Pope Innocent X). He returned to the Netherlands four years later, settling in Utrecht and introducing the concept of the harbour scene to Dutch art. He trained his son and his nephew who became successful still life painters.<sup>2</sup> With the income from his painting, Weenix rented a large country house outside Utrecht, but a change of fortune saw his health decline, dying in poverty in 1659 when he was only 38.



Credit: © English Heritage Trust, Kenwood House.

**Figure 1:** *Family in a Mediterranean Seaport*, Jan Baptist Weenix, before conservation.





Credit: © English Heritage Trust, Kenwood House.

**Figure 2:** *Family in a Mediterranean Seaport*, Jan Baptist Weenix, after conservation.

## IDENTITY OF THE SITTERS

The Kenwood House painting portrays a successful merchant, his wife and three children who stand in front of a bustling Mediterranean seaport. It was probably painted when Weenix lived in Utrecht (1653–4). In 1714 the Duke of Portland purchased the painting under the title *A Sea Port, Architecture, a Caravan and Weenix's Family*. The Duchess of Marlborough subsequently purchased it for Blenheim Palace. By the nineteenth century the family's identity had lost its association with the painting and it came to be known as a *Spanish Seaport*. The identity of the sitters as Weenix and his family was rejected in the twentieth century because it was thought that he had only two children. However, new archival research by Dr Anke Van Wagenberg-Ter Hoeven demonstrates that Weenix had three children: Jan, a girl (name unknown) and a younger boy called Gillis. Van Wagenberg-Ter Hoeven has determined that the child on the right of the painting, who appears to be a girl, is likely to be a boy (figure 3). Infant boys wore similar dresses and the stick that the child carries to tame the excitable spaniel was an attribute more commonly associated with boys, although the feather in the cap still appears feminine. Another cabinet painting *Merry Company* by Weenix depicts a boy lifting his skirt to urinate, leaving the gender indisputable (figure 4).<sup>3</sup>

The man's likeness can be compared to another portrait of Weenix who was drawn in red chalk by Jacob Houbraken (figures 5 and 6).<sup>4</sup> Weenix's flat nose and dimpled chin resemble the man depicted in the painting, although his hair is curlier and shorter in the drawing. Whilst there is sometimes a loss of fidelity from painting to drawing, we might assume this is a fairly close likeness given the contemporary source of the painting.

The markings on the sacks next to the signature (lower right-hand corner) may give another clue to the family's

identity (figure 7). The number '4' on the right-hand bale refers to Mercury, the patron of travellers and merchants. It is reasonable to assume that the associated letters may be a way of incorporating the sitter's identities, however the initials shown do not match with Weenix. They might simply be generic trademarks of Dutch merchants used to identify cargo, like those in harbour scenes by Stoop and Pynacker, or they may indicate a different identity for the sitters.

## ARCHITECTURE

The setting is not a real harbour, but the architectural details are taken from sketches of real buildings in Rome, which are bought together in a *capriccio*. The ruined columns to the left quote the Temple of Vespasian while those to the right suggest the Temple of Castor and Pollux, which stand in the Forum in Rome (Bryant 2003). The fortress behind the sculpture is reminiscent of Castle San Angelo in Rome. The sculpture of the lion attacking a horse is taken from a bronze by Giambologna, after an antique sculpture in the gardens of the Palazzo dei Conservatori on the Capitoline Hill (figure 8) (Bryant 2003). To the left of the family several workmen are busy weighing and recording boxes on a scale. This side of the painting is quite damaged, but the building is probably a weighing station based on an



Credit: © English Heritage Trust, Kenwood House.

**Figure 3:** Detail of *Family in a Mediterranean Seaport* after cleaning possibly showing Jan Weenix (left) and Gillis Weenix (right).





Credit: © Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

**Figure 4:** *A Merry Company* engraved by Nicolas Verkolije after a lost painting by Jan Baptist Weenix.

old customs post in Trastevere called the *Antiqua Pesa* (Van Wagenberg-Ter Hoeven 2018: 110). The idea of painting Dutch sitters in an Italian landscape was a concept that Weenix used for other commissions. Van Wagenberg-Ter Hoeven believes it possible that Weenix was imagining his family in Rome, perhaps painting his unfulfilled desire for them to join him.

## MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUE

When the painting was conserved by the English Heritage Collections Conservation Studio (2016-2017) some observations were made about the artist's technique and materials. He seems to have used a fairly conventional seventeenth-century Dutch technique, making sketches that inspired the seascape in the painting. A drawing in red chalk depicts a harbour scene with a male and female rider near an arch who are similar (although reversed) to the figure wearing armour and the woman on horseback in the Kenwood House painting (figures 9 and 10). The configuration of boats and masts are also closely related.

The fine weave, tabby canvas has been extended slightly at the bottom edge. A warm orange ground layer was applied to the canvas. This was followed by a grey underpaint applied with a brush, the marks of which can be seen in the Infrared image (figure 11). To create the sky Weenix applied this grey layer over the ground to create a bluish tone. Then he used a brighter blue paint using smalt, which is visible in cross-section (figure 12). This has degraded to a grey-blue. Weenix might have collaborated with Nicolaes Berchem, who possibly helped with the mid-ground landscape and little figures, as some details of the staffage appear similar to Berchem's own paintings and sketches.

The costumes and fabrics are wonderfully conveyed and would have been even brighter originally. The eldest boy (Jan?) has a rich red velvet coat in beautiful condition. The man's (Weenix?) garments are in excellent condition and use various combinations of earth pigments with



Credit: © English Heritage Trust, Kenwood House.

**Figure 5:** Detail of *Family in a Mediterranean Seaport* after cleaning most likely showing Jan Baptist Weenix.

black (identified with optical microscope). The woman's (Josijntje?) black silk dress is under painted in brown with a deep black glaze. Her green skirts appear to be painted with a copper green pigment (no technical analysis conducted). The yellow silk of the girl's coat was probably painted with a yellow lake pigment that has faded. A deeper copper green (that has turned brown) was likely used to paint her skirt, to offset the bright, mixed green on the left-hand side. The blue skirt of the other boy (Gillis?) was probably painted with smalt or indigo and has also discoloured to brown.

Weenix made several changes to the position of the figures during the painting process; dark shapes showing where the figures were originally placed are visible with the naked eye, for example, around the feet of the man and wife and



Credit: © Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

**Figure 6:** *Portretten van Simon Peter Tilemann en Jan Baptiste Weenix* drawn by Jacob Houbraken.





Credit: © English Heritage Trust, Kenwood House.

**Figure 7:** Detail of *Family in a Mediterranean Seaport* after cleaning with signature in faint white paint and trademark inscriptions.



Credit: © English Heritage Trust, Kenwood House.

**Figure 8:** Detail of *Family in a Mediterranean Seaport* after cleaning with sculpture of Lion fighting a Horse.

around the wife's head (figures 13a and 13b). These changes are not visible in X-ray or Infrared images. The little boy (Gillis?) on the right seems to have been unplanned and added after the landscape and other figures were finished (figure 14).

## CONDITION AND TREATMENT HISTORY

The tonal range, readability of form and compositional relationships within the painting, prior to its treatment at the English Heritage Conservation Studio, were significantly compromised due to the painting's condition. It was marred by layers of yellowed varnish and numerous areas of mismatched retouching. The flaking seemed to be an incipient and continuous problem and the various consolidation attempts had certainly contributed to the varnish becoming increasingly damaged.

The original canvas is of a fine tabby weave with some irregularities. The painting is currently extended on three sides by 1 - 2 cm with filling and retouching, except at the top edge. It had been glue-paste double lined (and had its original tacking margins removed) with the earlier lining most likely undertaken in the late-nineteenth century and lined onto a finer, tabby weave canvas. The present lining was carried out in 1951 by Buttery (who also cleaned the

painting) who used cotton duck and glue-paste (Bryant 2003: 99).<sup>5</sup> The lining was structurally sound with only minor tears at the corners. The planar alignment was satisfactory, however, the canvas had numerous large old tears and damages that were covered with unsympathetic filling and retouching. A yellow glue stain was applied to the tacking margins of the outer lining canvas, presumably to make the lining look older. A pair of early-eighteenth century oval red wax seals with a portrait bust, possibly of Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough, and mounted on fragments of a coarse canvas are present on the back of the stretcher (figure 15).



Credit: © Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum, Braunschweig.

**Figure 9:** *Harbour Scene with Riders* drawn in red chalk by Jan Baptist Weenix.



Credit: © English Heritage Trust, Kenwood House.

**Figure 10:** Detail of *Family in a Mediterranean Seaport* after cleaning with rider in armour and woman on horse on left hand side.

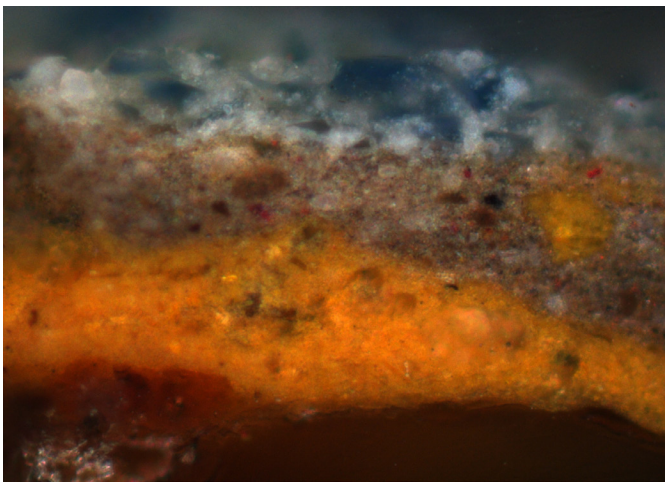
The original warm orange ground of moderate thickness was generally well adhered to the paint layers and the canvas support. A strip down the left side through the arch and the figures was particularly damaged. There were considerable abrasions over the surface, especially in the sky and probably from a previous cleaning treatment. The retouching in the sky had yellowed so significantly that it appeared to add a 'yellow haze'. Adjacent to some of the damages, the craquelure of the paint and ground was quite raised, for example, down the left edge of the building's arch and in areas of the sky, particularly the upper right quadrant. Generally,





Credit: © The Courtauld Institute of Art, London / English Heritage Trust.

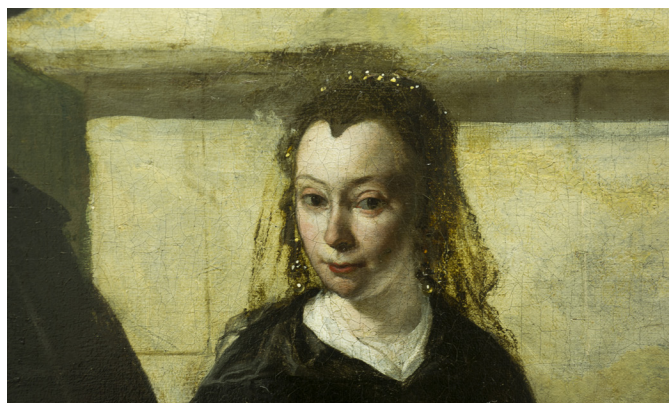
**Figure 11:** *Family in a Mediterranean Seaport*, infrared reflectograph showing brushy priming.



Credit: © English Heritage Trust, Kenwood House.

**Figure 12:** Paint sample of the sky shown in cross-section of *Family in a Mediterranean Seaport* (x 200).

the painting had a rough surface appearance with brittle-edged craquelure throughout. On thorough examination, the ground and paint layers appeared to be stable and did not require further consolidation prior to commencing the cleaning. The incipient flaking had been a concern over the last decades and at least four campaigns of consolidation have been recorded in the conservation records at English Heritage. In 1980 consolidation by impregnating with



Credit: © English Heritage Trust, Kenwood House.

**Figure 13a:** Detail of *Family in a Mediterranean Seaport* with dark *pentimento* around wife's hair.

wax-resin adhesive was undertaken to reduce flaking and this was followed four years later by retouching of the old paint flakes with pigment bound in Ketone N. In 1991 the flaking paint in the lower left corner was laid with wax-resin adhesive and a heated spatula with the excess cleared with Stoddard solvent. The latest consolidation of the ground and paint layers was carried out in 2011 using Lascaux® 4176 Medium for Consolidation, with the aid of a heated spatula (English Heritage Conservation Studio 2011).<sup>6</sup>

The varnish was relatively discoloured and there was localised blanching in certain retouched areas, particularly down the left side through the arches of the building and over the foreground figures. The varnish was becoming increasingly disturbed by the emergency conservation treatments, showing crinkled matt areas as well as thinning along the ridges of paint which had been heat treated. The latter appeared as light areas and there was a slight greyish cast to the varnish. This was a layer of Ketone N with the addition of cosmolloid wax applied in 1980 (English Heritage Conservation Studio 1980) that fluoresced blue under ultraviolet (UV) light and was added on top of the natural resin varnish.

The painting was displayed in a c.1670 Dutch oil-gilded frame with carved decoration deriving from a Louis XIV pattern. The front of the frame has alternated strapwork with palmette and rusticated palmette on the hazzled background (Bryant 2003: 99). The back of the frame has most likely been trimmed and the frame was in good condition overall.

## CURRENT TREATMENT

### Cleaning

A considerable amount of greyish surface dirt was removed from the painting using saliva and cleared with de-ionised water. The discoloured thick varnish was removed from the surface with a mixture of ethanol and 2,2,4-trimethylpentane (TMP) in a ratio of 1:2 and 1:1 respectively and with the aid of raking light. The varnish residues were evened up with the application of pure acetone. Previous heavy retouching



Credit: © English Heritage Trust, Kenwood House.

**Figure 13b:** Detail of *Family in a Mediterranean Seaport* with *pentimenti* around feet of both figures.





Credit: © The Courtauld Institute of Art, London/English Heritage Trust

**Figure 14:** Detail of infrared reflectograph showing the little boy (Gillis?) added after completion of landscape and other figures.



Credit: © English Heritage Trust, Kenwood House

**Figure 15:** Detail of wax seals on stretcher.

and overpaint were not addressed at this stage of cleaning (figures 16a and 16b).



Credit: © English Heritage Trust, Kenwood House

**Figure 16a:** Detail of *Family in a Mediterranean Seaport* during varnish removal.

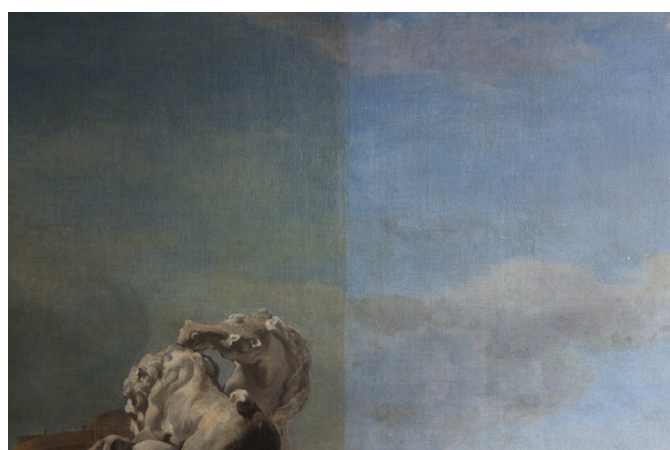
Removal of the varnish revealed a discoloured patchy layer, most likely oil-based and covering the entire surface.<sup>7</sup> This layer could have been added during the 1951 restoration and was visually disturbing, especially in the sky. It was removed with 3% tri-sodium citrate with added ammonia to increase the pH and applied warm, alternated with the ethanol and 2,2,4-TMP cleaning solution. This supposed oiling out layer was only removed from the sky as its removal from the background could have caused some risk to the vulnerable, abraded earth pigments used, but without significant change to the overall tonal range.

The old and extensive retouching in the sky was softened with 1:1 industrial denatured alcohol (IDA): acetone in the first instance and removed mechanically under magnification with a scalpel, together with the fills beneath. The latter were of an unsympathetic texture and level and were covering original paint. Damages in the paint layers forming horizontal lines suggest the painting had been rolled and slightly compressed in the past.

### Cleaning the sky

Closer examination of the sky under magnification implied that it had been totally overpainted, mostly in the nineteenth century, with an oil medium. A dense blue of synthetic appearance throughout and especially in a grey cloud in the top right corner of very different and loose brush handling, did not stylistically correspond to other works by Weenix or the similar Dutch paintings of the same genre and period. Moreover, in its current state with heavily overpainted clouds around the sculpture, it was difficult to establish the atmospheric condition and the position of light. To remove the overpaint from the sky, the following materials were tested:

1. Benzyl alcohol gel with acetone in two stages.<sup>8</sup>
2. Resin soaps (deoxycholic acid, water and triethanolamine (TEA) at pH 9 and deoxycholic acid, water and ammonia).
3. 1:10 ammonium hydroxide: IDA.
4. 1:6 N-methyl-2-pyrrolidone: IDA.
5. 1:9 N-methyl-2-pyrrolidone: acetone.



Credit: © English Heritage Trust, Kenwood House

**Figure 16b:** Detail of sky during varnish removal.





Credit: © English Heritage Trust, Kenwood House.



Credit: © English Heritage Trust, Kenwood House.

**Figure 17a:** Detail of *Family in a Mediterranean Seaport* during overpaint removal.

**Figure 17b:** Detail of sky during overpaint removal.

6. 2% EDTA with a few drops of ammonium hydroxide. As these did not work satisfactorily, '3A' mixtures (acetone: water: ammonium hydroxide) among other tests, were tried in various proportions of 8:8:1, 4:4:1 and 2:2:1. It was noticed that a stronger '3A' mixture could be satisfactorily applied for the overpaint removal without detriment to the original paint underneath, providing it was applied by rolling and softening the overpaint with a small cotton wool swab after wetting the area with Shellsol® D40.

The cleaning, although painstaking (at least three swabs in one small area were required) worked in a controllable manner, gradually reducing the thick layer of overpaint. In order to achieve an even surface free of blanching, the residues of overpaint had to be cleared immediately under magnification using a solvent mixture of ethanol and 2,2,4-TMP. Additionally, pure IDA was locally used to address the further overpaint and to clean the dark areas around the loss on the left-hand side.

During the overpaint removal, a temporary brush coat of MS2A® varnish was applied revealing a much cooler and greyer sky with the warm reddish orange ground showing through with the soft light transitions around the clouds. The original paint was found to be in relatively good condition with only local abrasions in places and on the clouds. A possible reason for overpainting the entire sky could have been stylistic, providing a warmer, bluer sky more in keeping with the fashion at the time (figure 17a and 17b).

### Further overpaint removal

After discussion with Rachel Turnbull, an English Heritage senior conservator,

and Dr Jerzy Kierkuć-Bieliński, a curator of the Iveagh Bequest at Kenwood House, the decision was made to clean further and remove more of the local overpaint and over fills throughout the painting, especially from the architecture and the figures on the left-hand side, to reveal the good quality original paint as much as possible.

The overpaint was quite thick and clearly covering old cracks. It was well matched in some areas but discoloured and mismatched in others. The overpaint was removed with a gel of N-methyl-2-pyrrolidone and IDA in a mixture of 1:5, thickened with Carbopol® 478 and Ethomeen® C12. This was left on the surface of the fill for five minutes to soften the overpaint and then rolled over with IDA to remove it. Further overpaint was removed from the original paint around the losses with the same method, but the gel was left for less time, combining mechanical action from a scalpel where required. This disturbed the oily layer that is



Credit: © English Heritage Trust, Kenwood House.

**Figure 18:** *Family in a Mediterranean Seaport* after filling.





Credit: © English Heritage Trust, Kenwood House.

**Figure 19a:** Detail of *Family in a Mediterranean Seaport* after filling.

thought to have been applied as part of the 1951 restoration, but it was safe to use over the original paint and was only confined to the areas of old retouching. Retouching and fills on the vertical edges were removed with an ethanol and 2,2,4-TMP mixture and a scalpel.

During removal of the local overpaint and retouching three campaigns of filling were exposed: old, very granular and oily fills; a bluish-grey waxy material, and a more recent white putty presumably consisting of chalk, glue and oil. The former was removed as the texture was not refined and sympathetic to the original and it was soluble in an IDA gel with the aid of mechanical action. The waxy fills that covered small losses and the original paint were also removed using a xylene gel. The white putty, soluble in a weak ammonium hydroxide solution, was retained where it did not cover the original paint, and where the texture was appropriate and cleaning had not affected it.

The overpaint removal revealed the extent of the large loss on the left where overpaint had extended unnecessarily onto the original and intact paint. There were several gains, pictorially, following overpaint removal in the sketchily painted figure group on the far left. The flag on the mast



Credit: © English Heritage Trust, Kenwood House.

**Figure 19b:** Detail of *Family in a Mediterranean Seaport* after retouching.

of the ship closest to the arch currently reads as blue, white and red. Under close examination it appears the blue is later strengthening which covers a red flag. However, it was felt more research was required before removing this detail.

The temporary varnish was removed with IDA and Shellsol® A100 in the proportion 1:5 as the MS2A was no longer soluble in a pure white spirit. The painting was given a brush coat of 15% Paraloid B72 in Shellsol A100. This resulted in an even layer where the oily layer had been removed in the sky, but it sunk in areas around the losses where the 1:5 N-methyl-2-pyrrolidone and IDA mixture had been used to remove the retouching.

### Filling, retouching and varnishing

A temporary varnish of 20% Regalrez® in white spirit was applied by brush to the entire surface before filling the larger losses with a wax-resin and chalk filler imprinted with a silicone mould, chosen to attempt to replicate the texture of the original paint layers as closely as possible.<sup>9</sup> After retouching over the wax fills (recreation of the ground colour) with 15% Paraloid B72 and dry pigments, the Regalrez varnish was removed with white spirit (without



disturbing the Paraloid B72 layers). Further filling was carried out with a chalk and gelatine putty. Retouching was undertaken with Gamblin® Conservation Colours followed by glazes of MS2A and dry pigments (figures 18, 19a and 19b). The painting was spray varnished with 18% Laropal® A81 in 1:5 propan-2-ol/white spirit several times with intervals in between spraying to increase the gloss. A final semi-matt spray of Laropal A81, with a small amount of microcrystalline wax, was applied to achieve an even saturation and desirable level of gloss.

### Frame conservation

The frame was lightly cleaned using a soft brush, and dirt from the corners and along the lower member was reduced with cotton swabs moistened with water. The frame's rebate was lined with gummed brown paper tape and felt. A new inner slip was made, gilded and toned to cover the exposed lining around the edges of the painting. A build-up and backing board of Fome-Cor® was also made for the frame.

### CONCLUSION

The conservation of the painting was doubly beneficial, not only was the true quality of the painting revealed along with its original cool-toned sky that had been covered for over 100 years, but the identity of the sitters was understood. The technical investigation was limited but it established some information on Weenix's studio practice. Further comparative data on the artist's technique and materials would help our understanding of the way he worked. Readers can see the painting hanging in the dining room at Kenwood House alongside other Dutch Masters.

Radosław Chocha, Alice Tate-Harte  Anke A. Van Wagenberg-Ter Hoeven

### ENDNOTES

1. A band of painters also known as the Bentvueghels (flock of birds).
2. Jan Weenix and Melchior de Hondcoeter.
3. The painting survives as an engraving.
4. *Portrait of Simon Peter Tilemann and Jan Baptiste Weenix*, drawn by Jacob Houbraken. The drawing belongs to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.
5. Buttery's label with a handwritten inscription 'HAB B.208' is on the reverse of the stretcher.
6. Prior to a touring exhibition.
7. This layer was not analysed, however, it is plausible that a combination of mastic and copal varnishes were applied.
8. During the first application, the gel was left for approximately 20 - 30 seconds on a small area before being cleared with slightly dampened cotton wool swabs. This was then alternated with a mixture of IDA and white spirit in a ratio of 1: 4. During the second application less gel was applied and for a shorter duration time of 10 - 20 seconds and the clearing followed.
9. For detailed information on the materials, preparation and application of the silicone mould, and wax-resin and chalk filler refer to

the paper by Folks, S. and Reddington, S. 2010.


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### MATERIALS

- Fome-Cor® Board, extruded polystyrene with paper facers, 3A Composites, USA, Inc.
- Gamblin® Conservation Colors, dry pigments, pre-ground in a urea-aldehyde resin, Gamblin Artists Colors, Portland, Oregon, USA.
- Laropal® A81, urea-aldehyde resin, BASF.
- Lascaux® Medium for Consolidation (4176) aqueous acrylic copolymer dispersion, Lascaux Colours & Restauro.
- MS2A®, reduced ketone resin, Linden Chemicals, no longer available.
- Regalrez™, hydrogenated hydrocarbon resin, Eastman Chemical Company/ Kremer Pigmente.
- Silicone mould, Bentley Advanced Materials, UK.
- Solvents and materials for gels / mixtures:
- 2,2,4-trimethylpentane (TMP), acetone, ethanol, propan-2-ol, industrially denatured alcohol (IDA), ammonia, benzyl alcohol, n-methyl-2-pyrrolidone, Shellsol™ A, Shellsol™ D40, white spirit, xylene; Carbopol® 478, poly(acrylic acid); Ethomeen® C12, ethoxylated aliphatic amine surfactant; deoxycholic acid, EDTA, triethanolamine, (TEA), tri-sodium citrate, VWR International Ltd.

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