

ASHMOLEAN  
MUSEUM  
OXFORD

# Strategic Framework: Public value

# Ashmolean Museum Conservation galleries



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# Ashmolean Museum

A University Museum

Over 900,000 visitors a year

1 major temporary exhibition space  
(ticketed)

67 permanent public galleries

2 permanent galleries devoted to the  
subject of Conservation and heritage  
science

## Something curious

Conservators, scientists and curators work together to understand and investigate objects in their care. Sometimes an object isn't what it first appears and may be a fake or forgery. Corrosion patterns and composition are difficult to fake when looked at under a microscope or under analysis and often there are stylistic reasons to doubt that an object is genuine.

### Real or fake using thermoluminescence

Powder drilled from an ancient piece of pottery will glow when it is heated. The glow is known as thermoluminescence (TL). It is from energy trapped in crystals of the



# Restoring the Past

- 6500 year history of repair and restoration
- The early days of conservation profession and development of scientific discipline
- Introducing different cultural approaches



ASHMOLEAN



# Conserving the Past

- Lower ground floor 'thematic' gallery
- Adjacent to the learning studio
- Interactives for different learning styles



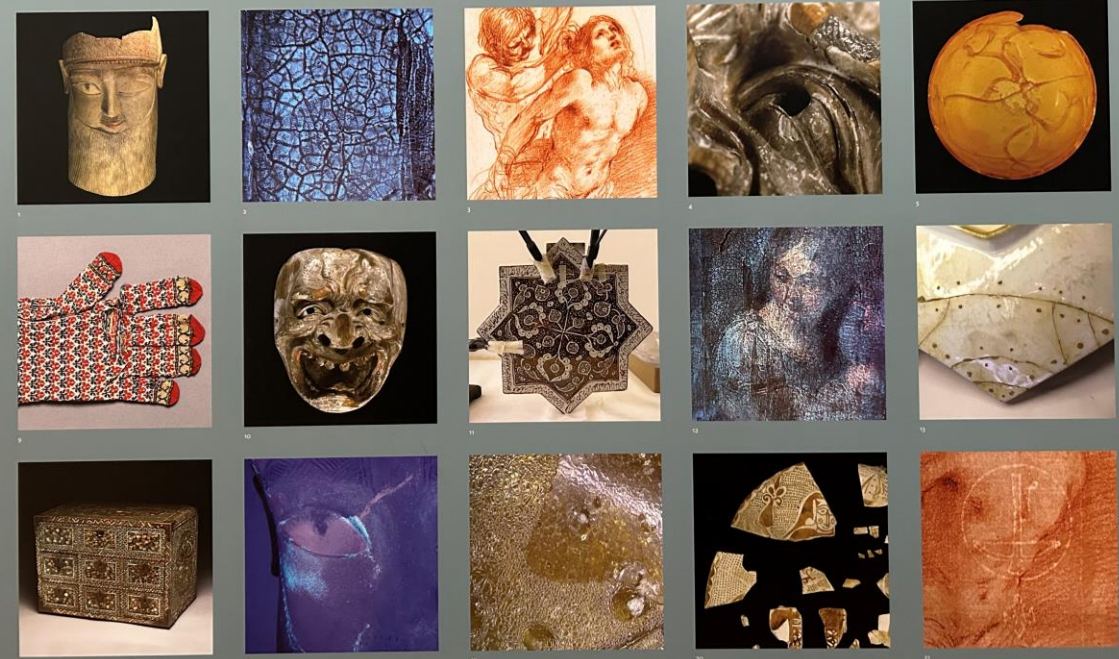
# Introducing conservation

- Investigation and discovery . From observation to analysis with case studies
- Uncovering past histories – stories to be told
- Work of the conservator – the value of preservation
- Questioning choices in conservation – what would you do?
- Conservation decisions in context.



## A POINT OF VIEW

These images show objects in the Ashmolean as they would be seen by a visitor and by a conservator. Can you tell which belong together?





- Fakes and forgeries - the most popular display in the gallery



- Changing display for current projects

# Public interest

'I did not know of the many methods used and how useful they are. We should try to conserve more.' (Female, Over 64, UK visitor)

'I enjoyed finding out how the technologies can reveal the story behind the objects.' (Male, 16-25, International visitor)

'I enjoyed questions of ethics and debates over adding to objects.' (Male, 26-35, International visitor)

'Learning about behind the scenes. It makes you think. Fantastic! (Female, 16-25, UK visitor)

Danai Koutromanou gallery survey evaluation as part of PhD thesis University of York 2012

## INVESTIGATION: AN EARLY ITALIAN PAINTING

### Report:

In 2008 the National Gallery examined this triptych.

### Analysis: paint sample

A paint sample from the Virgin's robe reveals original paint, dirt and later repainting:

- 1 Partly recrystallised calcium sulphate shows it was once very damp.
- 2 Dark grey undermodelling (lead white and charcoal black).
- 3, 4 Discoloured Azurite mineral pigment with a degraded Ultramarine glaze.
- 5 Discoloured varnish and dirt.
- 6, 7 Later repainting using black pigment followed by Prussian blue (not invented until circa 1710).

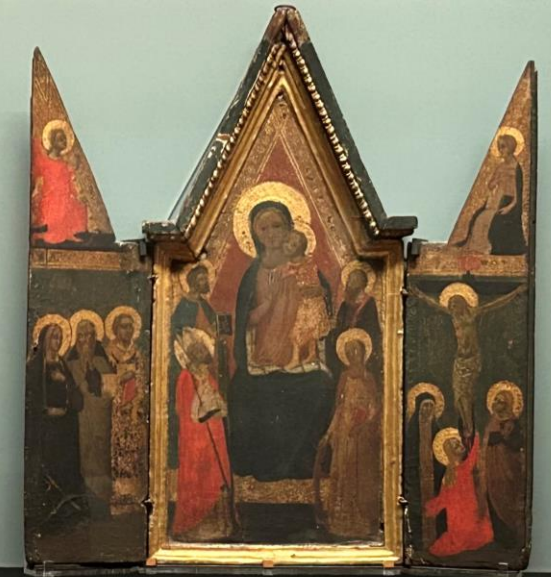
### Action:

The apparent extent and nature of the restoration suggest removal would reveal little original painting. However future techniques and opinion may change this approach.



Paint sample from the Virgin's robe. A few other samples show the base of the panel has been underpainted and repainted a new skin.

Triptych, Andrea del Verrocchio, Florence and dating to about c. 1480, uncut oil



Danaï's bronze arm, circa 300 BC. At least 1000 years old. Photographed by the National Gallery, 2012. © 2012, National Gallery



## INVESTIGATION: A BRONZE ARM

### Report:

This arm comes from a larger sculpture. The style could be Greek, Roman or even from the 1500s. Can a technical study help us decide?

### Analysis: X-ray

- 1 Dark areas here indicate thicker or denser metal.
- 2 Crack in the casting.
- 3 Join or repair between hand and arm, cast separately.

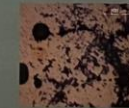
Analysis: wavelength dispersive X-ray spectrometry  
A tiny sample was removed and analysed. The levels of lead are typical for ancient casting of large sculpture, and impurities suggest it could be Hellenistic (323–31 BC) or Roman but not from the 1500s.

### Analysis: metallographic survey

Only metal buried for many centuries shows this structure and depth of corrosion.

### Analysis: observation

The ridges show where wax sheets were once joined before molten metal was poured into the mould to make the arm.



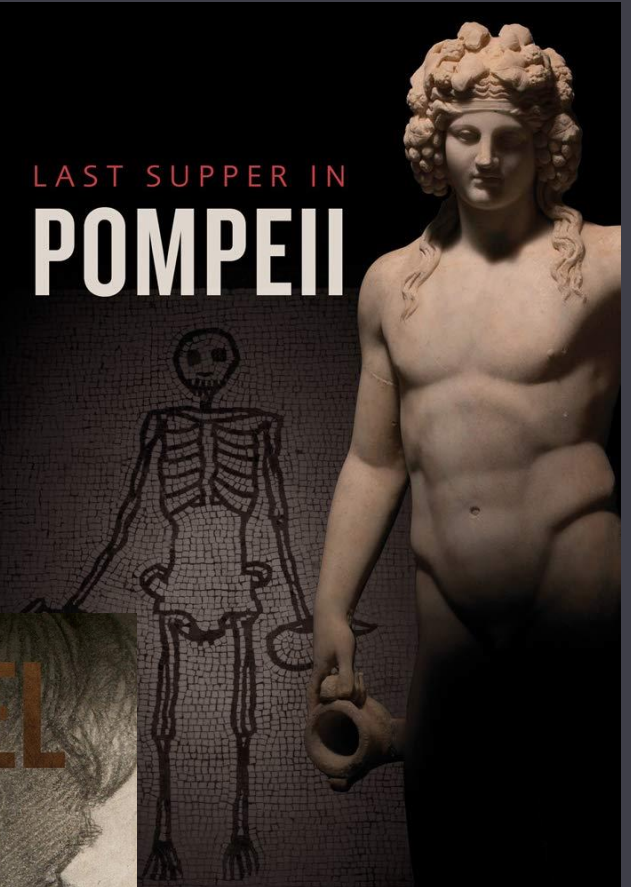
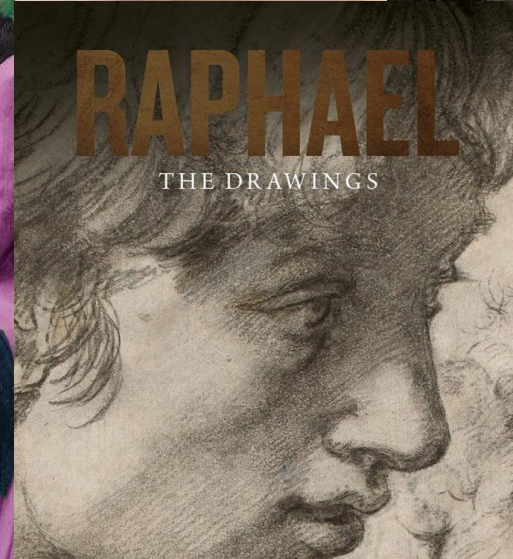
Surface of the bronze arm, high magnification.



Wax sheets in the arm.

# A place in major temporary exhibitions

- Raphael: The Drawings (Jun – Sept 2017) research
- Last Supper in Pompeii (July 2019 – Jan 2020) video and research
- Colour Revolution (Sept 2023 – Feb 2024) video and research





# MEET ME AT THE ASHMOLEAN

HELP US CONNECT OLDER  
PEOPLE TO OUR COLLECTIONS



Creative and cultural participation has been identified as the single biggest contributor to wellbeing in later life. As part of the Ashmolean's mission to offer visitors of any age an opportunity to connect to and celebrate heritage, we are launching **Meet Me at the Ashmolean** – an ambitious new project that will support invigorating, inspiring programmes to help fight loneliness and make the Museum more accessible and inclusive for those living with dementia.

Please donate today and help ensure that we are able to welcome the widest possible audience to the Museum.

For more information, please pick up a leaflet, visit [www.ashmolean.org/meet-me-appeal](http://www.ashmolean.org/meet-me-appeal) or contact [developmentoffice@ashmus.ox.ac.uk](mailto:developmentoffice@ashmus.ox.ac.uk) T 01865 288186

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Meet Me at the Museum supports older people and those living with Dementia to be socially connected

# Ashmolean Conservation galleries – everyone is welcome

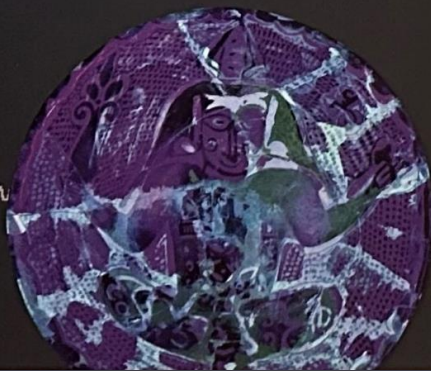
## CONSERVING THE PAST: FIGHTING TIME

LOOKING AFTER OLD AND FRAGILE OBJECTS IS A FIGHT AGAINST TIME AND DECAY

The specialists who look after museum collections are called 'conservators'. Their job is to preserve objects so visitors and scholars can enjoy and learn from them far into the future.

Conservators use the latest technology to find out why objects decay and the best ways to preserve, store, and display them. They investigate how objects were made and used and even whether they are fakes or forgeries.

Find out how conservators work to identify and minimise the causes of decay.



## OBJECTS ARE FRAGILE

How does touching affect materials?

Natural oils on your fingers are absorbed by paper and wood and attract dirt. Acidic oils can also cause metals to corrode. Constant touching eventually wears away fragile surfaces.

Often, the safest place for museum objects is in a storeroom. Museums have to find the right balance between displaying objects and keeping them safe for future generations.

Please touch!



## Touch this object

Each touch causes tiny amounts of damage. Over time this leads to wear and tear. How many touches will these materials survive?

Materials:

Gesso gilt frame  
Silk  
Limestone  
Silver