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## The restoration game: painting revealed as genuine Titian

English Heritage conservator uncovers artist's signature on painting known as Titian's Mistress in Duke of Wellington's collection at Apsley House



The English Heritage conservator Alice Tate-Harte working on the painting known as Titian's Mistress. Photograph: Lucy Millson-Watkins/English Heritage

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It was a heart-stopping moment when the conservator Alice Tate-Harte gently cleaned off centuries of thick black paint and grime and uncovered square Roman letters spelling out the name TITIANUS. The reputation of the bare-breasted young woman in the painting was instantly transformed: she has turned out to be a genuine work by one of the most revered masters of European painting, not a much later imitation of his style.

“It was a once-in-a-career moment, and there was nobody else in the conservation studio to share it – I had to ring my husband to have somebody to tell,” she recalled.

The painting of a woman half-wearing a sumptuous gold braid-trimmed silk and fur robe was known as Titian’s Mistress but was believed to have been painted long after his death in 1576. It has been hiding in public view for centuries. Now cleaned of layers of overpainting covering up historic damage, including the time when it was slung into a chest of booty looted from the Spanish royal collection, it will go on display this summer for the first time as a genuine Titian at [Apsley House](#), the palatial London home of the Duke of Wellington, now in the care of English Heritage.



Detail of signature discovered on the painting known as Titian’s Mistress.  
Photograph: Lucy Millson-Watkins/English Heritage

The Duke of Wellington himself wasn’t aware of what a treasure he owned. The painting came to [London](#) in 1813 in a staggering art collection the Iron Duke acquired after victory in Spain in the Napoleonic wars. He added an enormous gallery to his home, to house his annual banquets on the

anniversary of Waterloo, and display the paintings including works by Goya, Corregio, and four by the Spanish master Diego Velázquez.

Wellington had three Titians, but didn't know it: all were believed to be copies or by later followers. Simultaneous conservation work by the [Hamilton Kerr Institute](#) in Cambridge on another painting from the collection, the Young Woman Holding Rose Garlands, now in the family collection of the present duke, and by the [Prado](#) some years ago on a painting of Danaë, has confirmed that all three are either originals or made under Titian's close supervision in his studio.

The three paintings will be displayed together this summer with the x-rays that helped nail the new attributions: one revealed a completely different unfinished work under Titian's Mistress, so English Heritage may actually have acquired two new Titians.



X-Ray of Titian's Mistress. Photograph: English Heritage/Hamilton Kerr Institute

The work at Cambridge also uncovered a signature on the Rose canvas, very similar to the one Tate-Harte found but this time reading *Titianus Fecit* (Titian made it).

Wellington got the paintings when he comprehensively defeated the army of Napoleon's brother Joseph at Vitoria in 1813. His troops captured Napoleon's baggage train, including a massive leather trunk crammed with paintings looted from the Spanish royal collection. Wellington sent the trunk back to London, but it was only as his brother unpacked the canvases, cut from their original frames and stretchers, that their astonishing quality was realised. Wellington offered to restore them to the King of Spain, but was told to keep "this very small offering" in gratitude for the end of French rule in Spain.

In such company the lovely young woman would have seemed among the very minor works. Paintings claimed as Titian's *Mistress* were common. "The name was very often given by dealers to works in Titian's style to bump up their selling appeal," Tate-Harte said. The original surface had been overpainted to cover up extensive damage, including in the 18th century when the rectangular canvas was folded and packed into an oval frame, made worse when it was later reversed. The subject had even acquired a row of sausage curls on her forehead, when the damaged border of her chic little feathered hat was misinterpreted as her hair.

The painting was sent from Apsley House to the English Heritage conservation studio several years ago, but went to the back of the queue as a relatively unimportant picture. It was only when work began in time for this year's redisplay of the house in time for its bicentenary that the painting's true significance emerged.

The young woman's eyes now sparkle and her pearls gleam. However, much of the damage is irreversible: cleaned, she now appears to be wearing a very dirty smock, which is actually the grey underpainting showing through.

"I've done as much for her as I can," Tate-Harte said. "Enough, I hope, so that people can now see her real quality. And after some debate we're calling her *Titian's Mistress* again – we have no idea whether she actually was his mistress, but that's how Wellington would have known the picture so it seems fitting."

- The three paintings will go on display in an exhibition about the discovery at Apsley House from July 2015

