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The Met resurrects Italian Old Master's Entombment

Museum's restoration lifts "grey veil" from final commission by the Renaissance artist Moretto da Brescia

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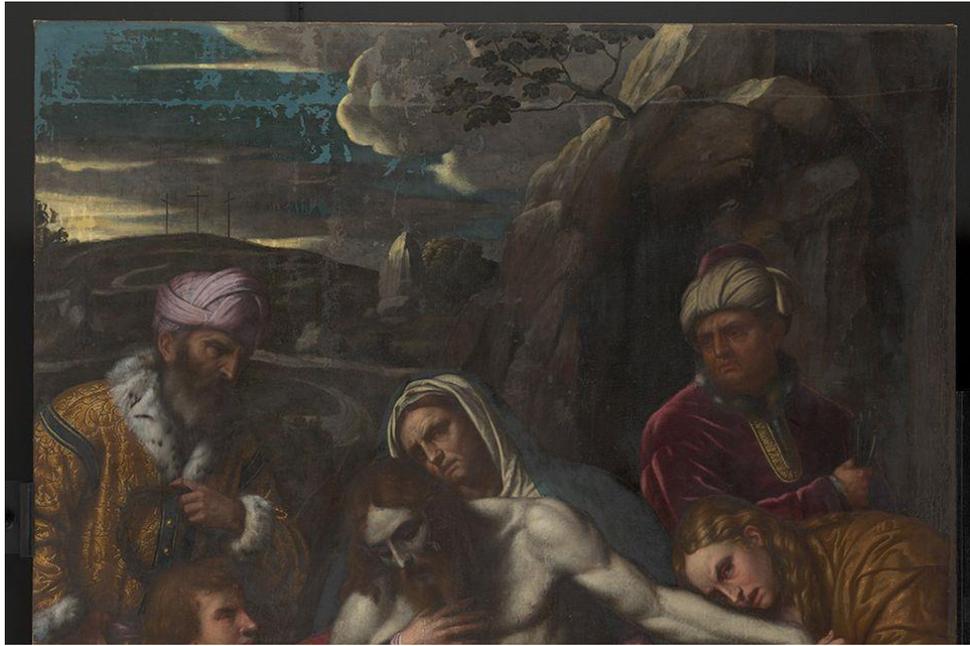


Moretto da Brescia 's Entombment before its recent restoration to remove streaks and later retouches COURTESY OF THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

Michael Gallagher has just been appointed the deputy director for conservation at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. But soon after he joined the New York institution 13 years ago, he says, a particular Italian Renaissance work caught his eye. He felt that *The Entombment* (1554) by Moretto da Brescia “was one of the saddest-looking pictures in the collection—in terms of its condition and appearance—yet I always felt it was just a truly great painting”. Only recently has he had the chance to work on it: after more than a year in the studio, the restored painting will be back on view later this month, as the collection undergoes a substantial rehang while the museum renovates its skylights.

Moretto was a leading artist in the northern Italian Brescia school, “the great precursors of Caravaggio, who grew up in that area”, says Andrea Bayer, a curator of European paintings at the Met. *The Entombment* was Moretto’s final major work, completed for a Brescian confraternity in the year he died. “It’s a painting of incredible, sombre power. When the museum bought it, the person who presented it to the trustees and then to the public said that to him it was like a late Beethoven sonata: sonorous, monumental, grand and very moving,” she says.

But much of that resonance had been lost until now. “What I found fascinating was that we have people on my department’s Visiting Committee, who love pictures like this, but on seeing it after cleaning asked, ‘is this a new acquisition or was it in store?’ And yet it has never been off view since 1912,” Gallagher says. “But its sad condition, appearance and presentation just made you subliminally think, ‘Just move on, this doesn’t merit your attention, there are better things here.’” Bayer says that “when you got your nose right up” to the 2.4m-high picture, “you saw these terrible streaks across the lower part of the canvas that were discoloured retouches. And because they were exactly on your eye level, they really disturbed your ability to look at it as a beautiful work of art.”



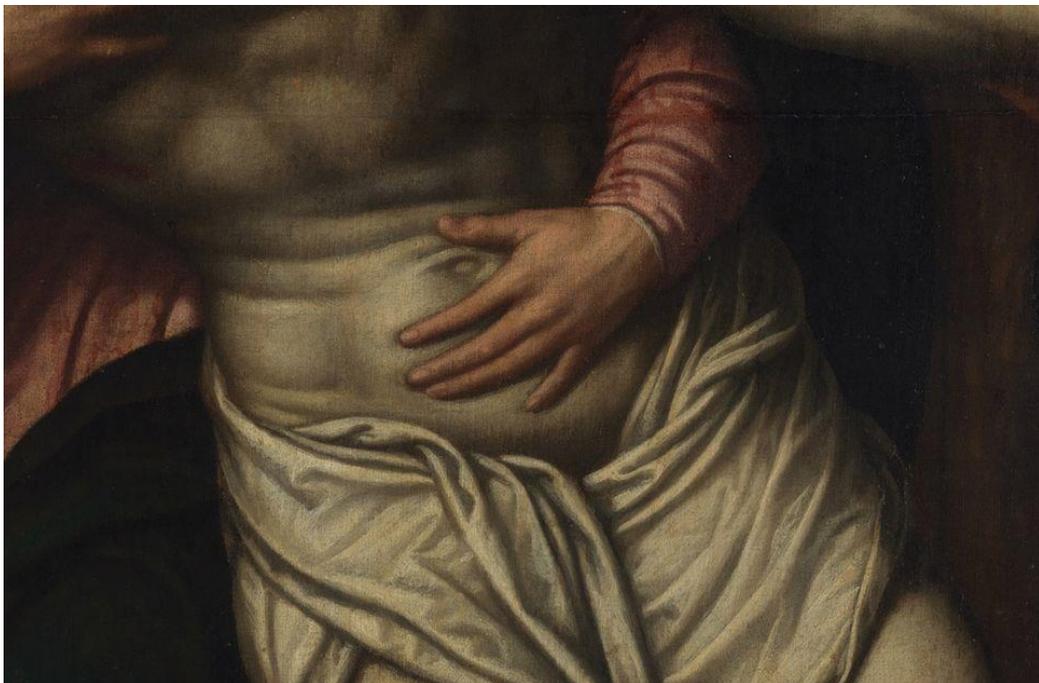
The painting during its treatment The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Gallagher has taken away those earlier retouches, removed and replaced the glue lining that no longer held down the seams of the different parts of the canvas, “so the picture almost looked bisected”, and retouched areas that had “quite a few losses”. He was in the final stages of retouching when he spoke to The Art Newspaper. “Of course, there is a lot more that I could do, but my aim is to do just enough to suppress damage,” he says. If a visitor were to take a magnifying glass to the picture, the retouches would be visible, he acknowledges. “But the point is that when you encounter that picture now, in the galleries, you’re much more likely to be moved.” Despite his interventions, “the grandeur of that painting, its monumentality, its extraordinary emotional impact is 100% Moretto”, he says.

Bayer describes the result as thrilling. “When Michael cleaned the painting and the actual colours became visible—because we had been seeing it beneath a grey veil for so many years—you realised that there was this lemon-coloured light streaming in from the left, touching the rocks, touching the trees, spreading across the upper part of the picture. And that the figures themselves, although at first glance so sombre, are dressed in these wonderful clothes: the purple turban of one of the figures, the Magdalen’s shining yellow and mustardy-colour satin. It’s a painting that combines the sombre

moments with these much higher tones of colour and light, and therefore life.”

The “revelation” of the light, as Bayer describes it, shows that, through conservation, the painting’s full meaning has been retrieved—it reflects much more clearly Moretto’s intimation of the coming Resurrection as well as Christ’s burial. She returns to the assessment of the painting’s power when it was first acquired. “Again, just like in a great piece of music, you have the high moments and the low moments, and it takes all of that coming together to make such a complex painting.”



A detail of the offending hand of the Virgin on Christ's stomach in the painting COURTESY OF THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

‘ Indecorous’: why Charles Eastlake failed to acquire the Moretto for London's National Gallery

Moretto's painting could have ended up in the collection of the National Gallery in London were it not for a typically 19th-century sense of propriety on the part of its director between 1855 and 1865, Charles Lock Eastlake. He went to look at the painting at least twice, according to the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s European paintings curator Andrea Bayer, and “realised it was the late masterpiece by the artist”. But there was a problem. "He was disturbed by the fact that the Virgin is holding up the dead Christ

and has her hand directly on his stomach and it is right in the middle of the picture. And he just found it indecorous," Bayer says.

So the work nearly went through a very different form of retouching to the one recently performed by the Met's deputy director for conservation, Michael Gallagher. "As he did with other works, Eastlake considered whether he could get one of the conservators active in Milan at the time to paint a little drapery, so that the Virgin wouldn't be touching the skin of Christ. In several other pictures in the National Gallery, he went through with that kind of idea, but here he rejected it and decided that it was not going to enter into the National Gallery collection."

And so the painting entered the Met decades later, with the Virgin's hand intact on Christ's belly. "I don't know if that was because we were dragging ourselves out of the Victorian era, or if it just didn't bother the people who looked at it," Bayer says.

