



Pierre-Auguste Renoir
(1841-1919)

The Couple
(Les fiancés)

c. 1868

signed bottom left: "Renoir."

undated

Oil on canvas

h 105.4 cm x b 75.2 cm

WRM 1199





Brief Report

For the painting *The Couple*, formerly known as *Mr and Mrs Sisley* or *The Betrothed*, Renoir used a pre-primed canvas that had already been painted on all over. The first clues to this can be seen under raking light, where the brush-strokes clearly deviate from the visible painting, as well as in a conspicuous network of early shrinkage cracks and cracks due to aging, which already provide a view of the differently coloured underlying paint-layers (fig. 11). That the rejected painting did not survive long before being painted over with the portraits of Alfred Sisley and Lise Tréhot, Renoir's favourite model, is demonstrated first of all by the broad cracks caused by early shrinkage. But there is also partial wrinkling, predominantly in the green background, which has technical causes and points to inadequate drying of the underlying paint-layers (fig. 8). The X-ray photograph reveals two women sitting facing each other, taking up most of the picture, the size of which remains unchanged (fig. 4). The person on the left, with her hair up and wearing a dress, clearly a woman, is turning away from the beholder, the line of her back clearly visible in Sisley's sleeve under raking light (fig. 8). A chair with a round back can also be discerned. In the region of her hands the heavy absorption of X-rays by the overpainting prevents us from seeing whether she is reading or occupied with sewing or the like. Under X-rays, the second figure seems to have been less completely executed, the head and narrow-shouldered upper body being shown frontally. All in all, the painting had evidently proceeded to a considerable degree before the depiction of the two women was abandoned for reasons unknown. Two dividing layers, reddish-brown and green, were applied over the whole surface one on top of the other in order to cover the original painting and to provide a neutral ground for the subsequent depiction of the couple (fig. 10).

There are no signs of any mechanical reduction of the first picture, such as was Monet's practice, for example, when revising his pictures [Kendall 2004, p. 120] or such as can be demonstrated in Mary Cassatt's portrait of little Sara in the collection of the Wallraf-Richartz Museum (WRM Dep. FC 697), which she also intended to revise. In Renoir's oeuvre no picture has to date been identified with the one revealed here by the X-ray picture. Bazille's 1870 painting of the Studio in the rue Condamine, in the possession of the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, shows, when X-rayed, a covered-over depiction of Diana with bow and arrow, a motif also painted by Renoir in his 1867 painting *Diana the Huntress*, 1867, now in the collection of the National Gallery of Art in Washington (figs. 14, 15). Distel does not exclude the possibility that it was a study by Renoir that Bazille over-painted with his depiction of the studio [Distel 1985, p. 180]. As Bazille, Renoir and Monet shared studio premises from time to time between 1866 and 1870 [Néret 2001, p. 431], there were grounds for investigating whether perhaps it was not Bazille or Monet who might have been responsible for the underlying painting. However, to date there is no evidence from the oeuvre of either artist to support such a suggestion. The visible painting was executed wet-in-wet throughout, and signed bottom left by Renoir while the paint was still wet. An early framing of this painting, whose provenance in the first 30 years of its existence is however unclear, is apparent from pressure marks on the paint layer all round the edge.



Picture support canvas

Standard format	not a standard size
Weave	tabby weave
Canvas characteristics	22 threads per cm vertical and horizontal; very fine weave with occasional knots and irregularities; thread thickness 0.2-0.5 mm, Z-twist (fig. 4)
Stretching	not authentic; original fastening had nails at very wide intervals of 6.5-8.0 cm; current stretching with a very regular and close nail intervals of 2.0-3.0 cm goes back to a lining measure
Stretcher/strainer	stretcher with cross-bar, not authentic, as the stretcher is app. 1 cm larger on all sides than the painted canvas
Stretcher/strainer depth	2.0 cm
Traces left by manufacture/processing	the joints of the cross-bar with the sides take the form not, as is more frequent, of a mortise-and-tenon, but of a slightly dovetailed and bevelled cross-lap; the intersection of the cross bars is nailed
Manufacturer's/dealer's marks	not determined, lining means that canvas verso cannot be seen (fig. 2)



Ground

Sizing	not determined
Colour	off-white, microscopic inspection reveals individual fine black and red particles
Application	ground applied before stretching and cutting-to-size; one to two coats; traces at the edges prove that ground was applied with a brush (fig. 6)
Binding medium	presumably oil or semi-oil
Texture	even, opaque layer filling all pores

Composition planning/Underpainting/Underdrawing

Medium/technique	the dense and multiple paint applications mean that neither stereo-microscopic inspection nor IR reflectography can provide any clues to a drawn or painted lay-in; this is true of both the visible picture and the one it covers
Extent/character	–
Pentimenti	–



Paint layer

Paint application/technique and artist's own revision

1. first painting (depiction of the two women, fig. 4): any conclusions are only possible by raking-light inspection, the interpretation of X-ray photographs, and stereo-microscopic investigation of the craquelure (no samples of the paint-layer were taken); brushwork still clearly visible in spite of subsequent paint layers; the depiction and its paint distribution are only discernible up to a point, for example it can be seen that the upper part of the left-hand woman is whitish-grey, that of the right-hand woman evidently orange-red (cf. mapping, fig. 13); no varnishing of this painting can be attested
2. dividing layers (figs. 10, 12): conclusions only possible as a result of stereo-microscopic inspection; the first painting was not completely dry; successively applied opaque reddish-brown and green separating layers over the whole surface, very even application, little pastosity, very even application; colours not monochrome, but not assignable to any objective depiction, not characterizable in any more detail
3. second use (depiction of The Couple, fig. 1): paint layers from the first use of the canvas were not completely dry when this picture was painted; all the paint applications of the picture which we now see are blended wet-in-wet, and we may presume that the painting was executed in a short time; the application and consistency of the paint varies from thin and creamy to viscous (in the yellow stripes of the skirt)

Painting tools

brushes in various widths, breadth of stroke up to 1.2 cm

Surface structure

in many places the brushwork of the visible painting can be traced (fig. 9), impasto areas are visible in those regions with a high proportion of white or yellow, e.g. in the skirt; the structure is dominated additionally by the following factors: partial wrinkling (fig. 8); aging cracks and a widespread network of early shrinkage cracks in the paint layers, spreading to various depths in the complex of paint and ground layers (fig. 11); brushwork of the covered first pictures (fig. 9)



Paint layer (continuation)

Palette

visual microscopic inspection of the visible painting reveals: white, pale yellow, bright yellow, ochre yellow, dark transparent red, pale orange-red, dark bluish-green, blue, dark brown, black, of the dividing layers: brown and green

VIS spectrometry: chrome(?) or cadmium yellow(?), iron-oxide yellow, carmine(?) or cochineal lake(?), vermillion, viridian, cobalt blue, iron-oxide red(?), dividing layers: iron-oxide red(?) and viridian, the colorants used for the first picture were not analysed

Binding mediums

presumably oil

Surface finish

Authenticity/Condition

varnished, not authentic, at the top edge there are remains of a tinted varnish

Signature/Mark

When?

signed bottom left, "Renoir.", wet-in-wet with a fine pointed brush and black paint in the grey paint-layer of the visible painting (fig. 5)

Autograph signature

signature is indisputably typical of Renoir's signature at this time

Serial

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Frame

Authenticity

not authentic, as can be seen from the traces of an earlier frame along the edges of the picture; it is however an early frame, as the painting was purchased by the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum in 1912 and the frame has not been changed since



State of preservation

Various degrees of wrinkling with layer-separation and lifting predominantly in the top third of the picture in the green background and flesh tones; the extent of the problem seems to depend on the composition of the underlying paint layer, as boundaries have formed in accordance with the shapes beneath; on the high points of the wrinkles a greater tendency to craquelure formation, here there are individual losses of varying extent, in some cases only visible through the microscope; discoloured, in some cases matt retouchings (e.g. next to the signature, Lise Tréhot's sleeves); small hole in the picture support and paint layer on the bottom edge of the picture on the left; individual abrasions in the sitter's skirt.

Additional remarks

The visible picture represents the second use of the canvas, see the comprehensive description in the summary. Further examples of this practice, due presumably to self-criticism coupled with economic necessity, can be found in the following paintings in the Cologne collection: Pissarro, *L'Hermitage near Pontoise*, 1867 (WRM 3119); Seurat, *Street Scene*, 1883 (WRM Dep. 822); Morisot, *Child among Hollyhocks*, 1881 (WRM Dep. FC 614); van Rysselberghe, *Cape Gris-Nez*, 1900 (WRM Dep. FC 714) and *Pines in Monaco*, 1917 (WRM Dep. FC 703), and other works.

Literature

- Andree 1964: Rolf Andree, Katalog der Gemälde des 19. Jahrhunderts im Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne 1964, p. 103 with ill.
- Dauberville 2007: Guy-Patrice und Michel Dauberville, Renoir, Catalogue raisonné des tableaux, pastels, dessins et aquarelles, 1858-1881, cat.no. 256, p. 303, with ill.
- Daulte 1972: Francois Daulte, Auguste Renoir, Catalogue raisonné de l'œuvre peint, Figures 1860-1890, vol. 1, Lausanne 1971, with ill.
- Distel 1985: Anne Distel, "The 1860s", in: Renoir, exhib. cat. Hayward Gallery, London/Galleries nationales du Grand Palais, Paris/Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, New York 1985, pp. 179-195
- Kendall 2004: Richard Kendall, Monet by himself. Paintings, drawings, pastels, letters, London 2004, p. 120
- Néret 2001: Gilles Néret, Renoir, Painter of Happiness, Cologne 2001, p. 431

Source of illustrations

Fig. 13: archive of the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum & Fondation Corboud, fig. 14: Centre de Recherche et de Restauration des Musées de France, Paris

All further illustrations Wallraf-Richartz-Museum & Fondation Corboud



Examination methods used

- | | |
|--|--|
| ✓ Incident light | ✓ VIS spectrometry |
| ✓ Raking light | – Wood identification |
| – Reflected light | – FTIR (Fourier transform spectroscopy) |
| ✓ Transmitted light | – EDX (Energy Dispersive X-ray analysis) |
| ✓ Ultraviolet fluorescence | – Microchemical analysis |
| – Infrared reflectography | |
| – False-colour infrared reflectography | |
| ✓ X-ray | |
| ✓ Stereomicroscopy | |

Author of examination: Katja Lewerentz

Date: 02/2005

Author of brief report: Katja Lewerentz

Date: 05/2008



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Fig. 1
Recto



Fig. 2
Verso



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Fig. 3
UV fluorescence

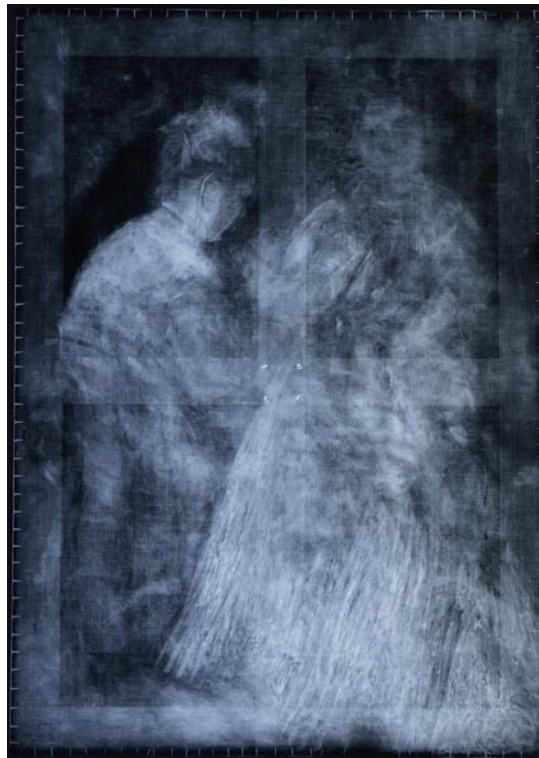


Fig. 4
X-ray



Fig. 5
Detail, signature,
wet-in-wet,
microscopic photograph
(M = 1 mm)

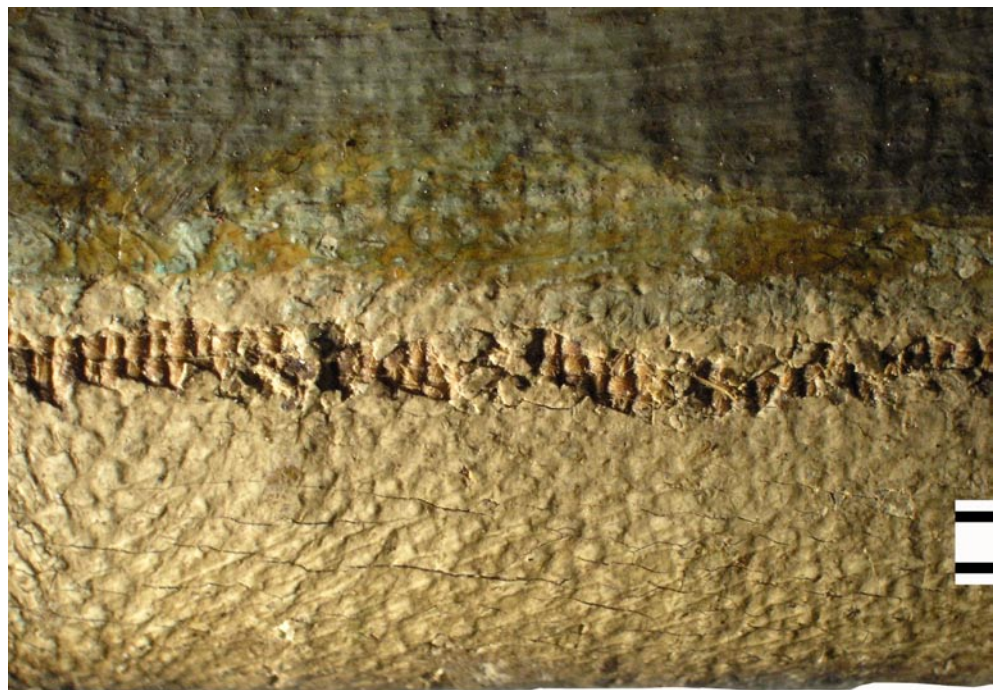


Fig. 6
Priming, at the edges
with visible brushwork,
microscopic photograph
in raking light (M = 1 mm)



Fig. 7
Wet-in-wet paint
applications in the
visible picture (Lise
Tréhot's eye),
microscopic photograph
(M = 1 mm)



Fig. 8
Detail in raking light,
brushwork of the hidden
painting and boundary
between the network of
early shrinkage cracks
and the wrinkling
becomes visible (right
sleeve of Sisley's coat)



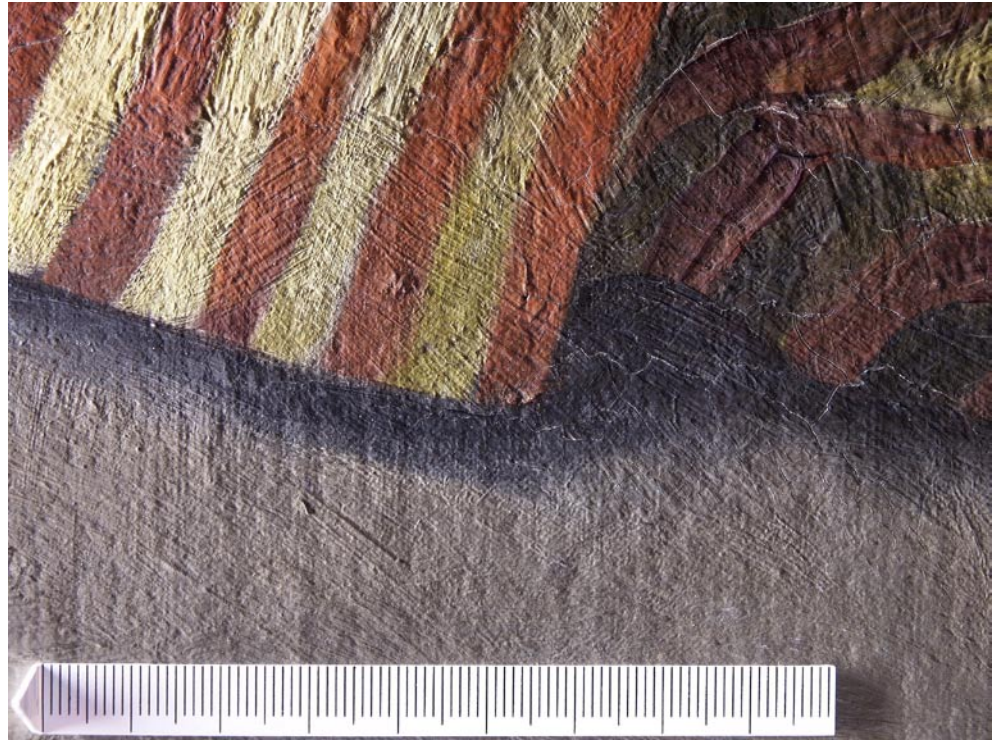


Fig. 9
Detail of hem of skirt in raking light, brushwork of visible and hidden pictures is apparent



Fig. 10
Overpainted green dividing layer is only partially covered along the foldover edge, microscopic photograph (M = 1 mm)



Fig. 11

Detail, early shrinkage cracks in the green dividing layer on the right next to Lise Tréhot allows us to see an underlying red paint-layer which belongs to the dress of the covered right-hand figure, microscopic photograph (M = 1 mm)



Fig. 12

Early shrinkage crack; investigation of the stratigraphy reveals, from top to bottom: visible black paint-layer (Sisley's coat, second use of canvas), green and reddish-brown dividing layers, grey paint-layer (dress of left-hand woman, first use of canvas), microscopic photograph (M = 1 mm)





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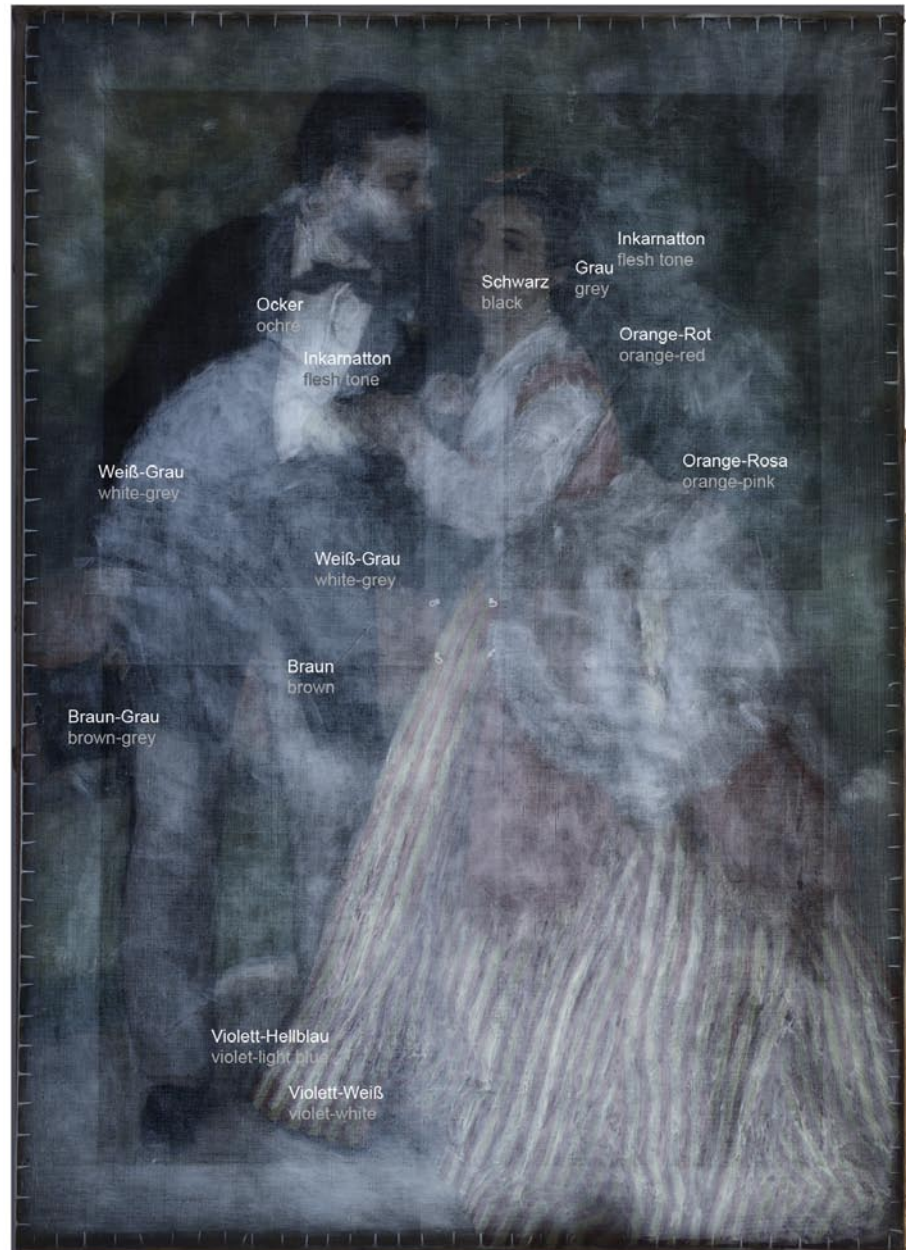


Fig. 13
Photo-collage of visible painting and X-ray, with mapping of the painted-over picture of the two women



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Fig. 14
Frédéric Bazille,
*Atelier dans la rue
Condamine*, 1870,
h 98.0 x b 128.0 cm,
Musée d'Orsay, Paris



Fig. 15
X-ray picture of fig. 14
(rotated through 90°),
rejected Diana motif is
visible

