

Children's Art Day: The National Gallery

At the UK's premier art gallery, restoration experts are busy bring old paintings back to life for a new generation of visitors.

Ever wondered how thousands of years-old paintings stay in pristine condition? We went in search of Martin Wyld, the man with the answers at the National Gallery in London...

You would think that the work of the head restorer at one of the world's most important art galleries would be technical and advanced, but Martin Wyld's only tools were a barbecue skewer, cotton wool and a form of alcohol. If Martin made a mistake, he could end up smudging a very valuable work of art!

The process was really simple, too. The first step was to use some good spit! Martin spat onto cotton wool and rubbed at an area to work off the surface dirt. 'Spit seems to work quite well,' he told us. 'And it can't hurt the picture!'

He followed up with more cotton wool, stuck onto a skewer and soaked in alcohol. This was wiped over the surface of the painting. It looked really easy - we had a go ourselves and, in fact, it was!

But the skill came in the delicacy of the work. Martin explained he had to work slowly and carefully; sometimes it even takes years to finish just one. And if he made a mistake, he could end up smudging a very old and very valuable work of art!

He showed us some of his mistakes - smudges on quite important Italian paintings, a set of seven, all quite big that fitted together. But luckily he has a colleague who touches up mistakes afterwards.

We'd say the other most difficult part of Martin's job is the responsibility he has. He works with paintings worth millions of pounds.

Many paintings were of the Virgin Mary and Child and to us, they looked fine. But Martin told us that their black robes should actually be sky-blue! Age and dirt had changed the colours, and the oily wax that had been put on them to protect them had worsened their condition as it had picked up extra dirt.

Martin also explained that some paintings he was working on had been restored years ago by people who had made a complete mess of them. It was easier to restore a picture that had never been touched since the day it was painted, he said. But before anyone touches a painting nowadays, the restorer has a set of x-rays taken of the painting.

These x-rays show the painting's stages of development, layer by layer. It helps the restorer to know what he's looking for under the dirt. It also tells him how much he has to take off to be able to see the painting as it should have been. If he goes too far, he would be rubbing off the original paint... not restoring, but destroying.

About the team

This story was produced by Lucas Davison, Olli Musselwhite and Holly Gillway, 14. It was published in Starworks, the annual [Artworks](#) magazine.

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