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Picture restorer Simon Gillespie gets to grips with a particularly difficult problem.

I can imagine the 17th century person who proudly hung this rather bloody, brightly coloured painting on the hunting lodge wall in the depths of the country. But even if he were endowed with the most prophetic vision, I doubt if he could have imagined the same bedraggled object that I pushed into the back of an equally neglected car some months ago.

Looking through my records it is noticeable that most of my work is spent undoing what some previous restorer has unwittingly attacked and bequeathed to the next generation. This was no exception.

The work was painted by Abraham Hondius who was born in Rotterdam 1625. He specialised in illustrating brutal fights between animals, and in this one he excels in the savage of a stag cornered by hounds. Painted with great confidence – although he does not search for minute details – the expressions and attitudes of the animals come out very strongly with broad brush strokes. This was, however, one of the tattiest pictures I had seen for a few years. It was covered with dust, accumulated grime, and a very discoloured yellow-brown copal varnish on top of a layer of repaint, which in turn covered the damaged original. The original itself was stained and patchy, being partly cleaned and in some parts over cleaned, revealing areas of raw canvas. All this was not helped by some clever ancient removal man who had added a number of large holes. There was therefore yet another ‘patch-up job’ to cover his efforts.

Once in a while I am presented with such extraordinary problems. In fact, one of the first paintings I was given was a stunning early 19th century English group portrait which had been beautifully cleaned and given a fresh varnish before being popped into its frame behind glass. But the glass had become firmly attached to the wet varnish and when the painting had been dropped, it resembled a flexible mosaic. After some thought and hardening of nerves, we used a combination of hot and warm solvents and ended up with an almost normal painting. Shortly after this success, a bleached landscape, which looked quite like a photographic negative, came in for treatment after a month’s spell on the Caribbean sea bed! Although not totally successful, we managed to retrieve some of the colour by washing out the salt deposits and restoring the paint to some of its former glory. In lighter moments, I have come across the work of prudish Victorians who have censored private parts with a leaf or convenient veil! In those cases we must literally undress the figure.

But back to the treatment of the disgusting Hondius. We began by removing all dust and grime so as to see something of the subject. Then

with swabsticks we tested for the removal of the varnish, and after trying some 40 different types of solvent we found the most suitable and started work. It was very time consuming, due to the unusual thickness of the varnish, but at this stage it was rewarding to see the marked difference between dirty and uncovered paint. Yet one more layer of overpaint covering a substantial amount of the original need still stronger solvent, but eventually even this old oil based paint came off. After this first onslaught the canvas needed its treatment, and we decided to 'reline' it, or back it, on to a new one.

This had to be achieved with great care so as not to disturb the paint surface. Successfully completed, all that remained to be done was to fill the holes and devote hours of patient work with a tiny, fine pointed brush made from Russian sable to retouching the damage so as to disguise the defects. These days the selection of 'fill-in' pigments and mediums is generally of a high standard so they don't discolour in time and are easily removable. Old-fashioned oil paint, which sadly some people still use, can cause permanent staining and discolouration.

After many days, the painting was completed, and my final varnish having settled down, we reached what occasionally is the most gratifying point; the return of the picture to the collector or gallery. The utter shock, delight and surprise on the client's faces is something well worth witnessing but the final stage of getting paid is often more difficult than the job itself. The last thing, therefore, is to scurry back in time to plead with the bank for just a few more days' credit. Honestly, who would be a restorer? Or a deer come to that.