



IN SEARCH OF OLD MASTER TECHNIQUES: AMBROSE MCEVOY'S COPY OF TITIAN'S *NOLI ME TANGERE*

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ABSTRACT This article considers *Noli me Tangere* by the early 20th-century British artist Arthur Ambrose McEvoy (1877–1927), a copy after a work by Titian. The two artists' respective working practices are compared to evaluate the extent to which McEvoy was successful in emulating Titian's technique, and to draw out broader comparisons between the two artists. This object-based technical study is set in the context of McEvoy's interest in 'Old Masters', as he termed them. Identifying this interest as unusual for a British artist at the time, it reveals both McEvoy's successes in emulating Titian's technique and his errors, particularly regarding the layering of final glazes. The study also uses McEvoy's interest in Titian to test the prevailing view that McEvoy's career can be divided into two distinct periods: a promising early career contrasted with his later practice as a successful society portraitist, with a 'turning point' in c.1915. In particular, the paper identifies continuities between McEvoy's exploration of Titian's technique and the oil painting method he developed in his portrait practice. The research builds on a general revival of interest in McEvoy in recent years and has benefited from access to McEvoy's papers and from invaluable assistance from McEvoy's family.

Introduction: Ambrose McEvoy's *Noli me Tangere*

The painting *Noli me Tangere* (started 1899, completed 1901) by Arthur Ambrose McEvoy (1877–1927) was brought from a private collection to the Courtauld Institute of Art for study and conservation in 2020 (Figure 1). This article addresses two questions. The first seeks to establish how McEvoy understood and sought to imitate Titian's technique; to explore McEvoy's interest in Titian and other Old Masters; and to ask whether his approach was shared by his British contemporaries. The second question concerns the specific techniques McEvoy continued to use in his later practice, his development of a 'method' of painting and the consideration of whether there was a stylistic link between his study of Old Masters and his later work. The methodological approach has been one of collaboration between art conservation and art history, combining technical examination, historical study and close visual analysis. Furthermore, although McEvoy has not been the subject of extensive

scholarship, the research has been assisted by access to his unpublished archive, now at the Tate.

By way of a preliminary point, this paper uses the expression 'Old Masters' to refer to eminent artists active in western Europe between c.1300 and 1800. This is a vague and outdated term often eschewed by art historians. However, we use it in the same way as McEvoy: for him and his contemporaries, the Old Masters represented a standard against which they could measure their own artistic achievements.

The original painting

Titian painted his *Noli me Tangere* in around 1514 as a young man in his early 20s. The painting captures the moment in the story of Christ's Resurrection when he is recognised by Mary Magdalen in the Garden of Gethsemane. The work's title, which is Christ's Command to Mary not to Touch Him, is taken from John 20:17. The work has

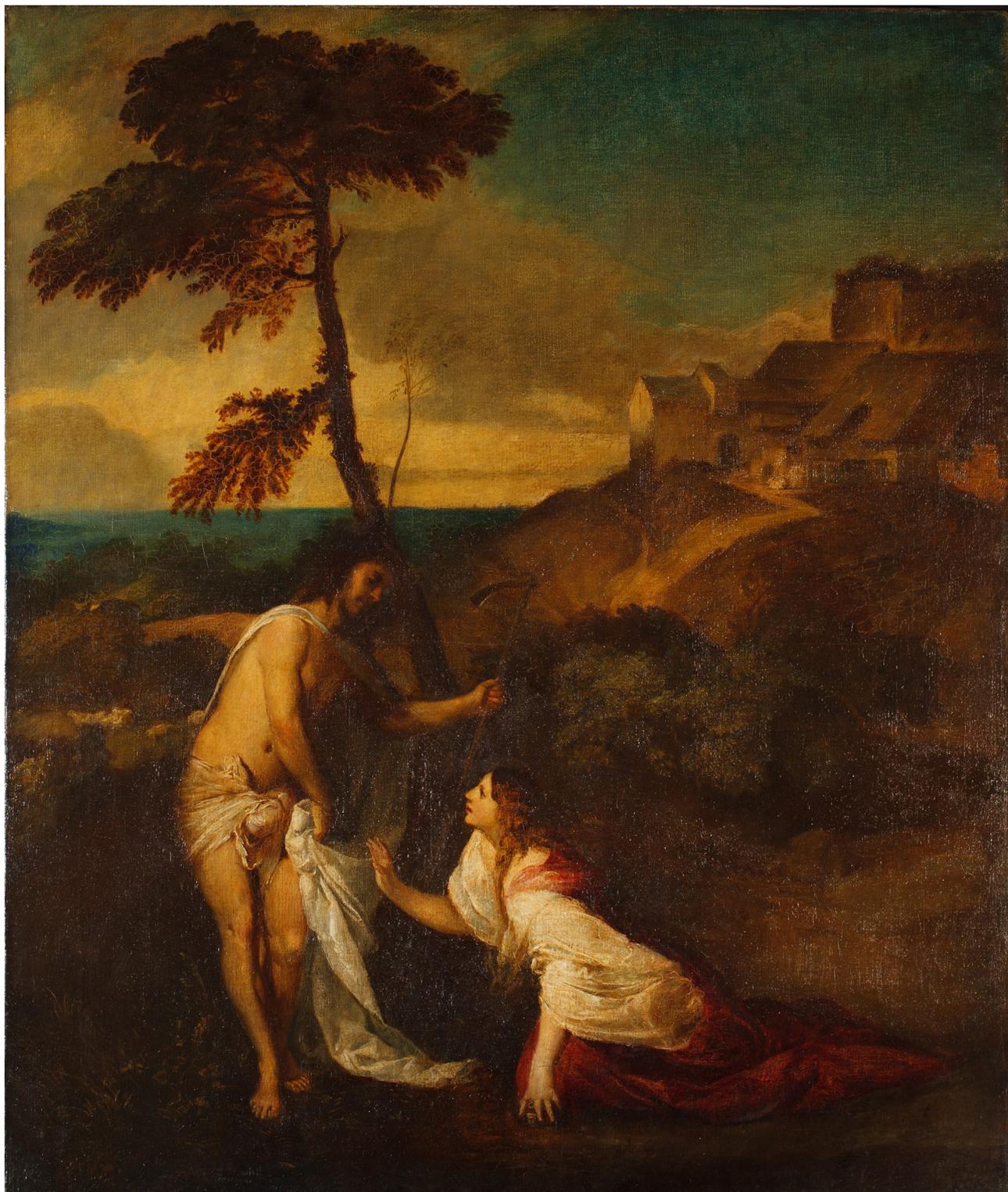


Figure 1 Ambrose McEvoy, *Noli me Tangere*, 1899–1901, after conservation treatment. © Estate of Ambrose McEvoy (image: Megan Levet).

parallels with other parts of Titian's early oeuvre. The Christ figure appears to be modelled on the same man as Christ in Titian's 1514 *Baptism of Christ*. Likewise, there are similarities in the landscape with Titian's earlier works, particularly *The Holy Family with a Shepherd*, 1510 and the *Concert Champetre*, 1511.¹

The landscape is simple, and such 'ordinary' surroundings emphasise the universality of the redemptive message of Christ's resurrection. Perhaps the central visual

significance of the work (and of particular interest for McEvoy) lies in Titian's handling of colour. Art historians have noted the work as being one of the most 'colouristically intense' of Titian's early paintings, and whilst he used a reduced number of colours compared to his other works of the period, the range of those colours is broad indeed.² For example, the whites in the foreground – Christ's loincloth, his robe and Mary Magdalene's chemise – are depicted in different tones to create varying effects and textures.

McEvoy's copy

McEvoy painted his copy of *Noli me Tangere* over a period of approximately two years with oil paint on a commercially primed canvas, using thin glazes in the drapery and foliage, and thick, impasto areas detailing the buildings in the background. The length of time spent on the painting has resulted in a complex layer structure with multiple areas of reworking. The painting measures 108 × 90.5 cm, almost identical in size to the original by Titian, which measures 110.5 × 91.9 cm. It remains in a stable condition, unlined, and on its original stretcher. Distinct networks of drying craquelure are visible in the areas of particularly medium-rich paint, a phenomenon typical of works made by artists experimenting with oil media around the turn of the century.³ Upon arrival at the Courtauld for conservation treatment, the most notable material feature was the highly disfiguring discoloured varnish. Despite this, and considering it is one of the first fully finished paintings from McEvoy's surviving known work, *Noli me Tangere* demonstrates a basic competency with oil paint and a clear intention to faithfully copy the original.

The development of McEvoy's practice

McEvoy's copy of Titian's *Noli me Tangere* is one of his earliest surviving and documented works.⁴ Based on his diary entries, which record regular attendance at the National Gallery (NG) in September 1899,⁵ it seems that he started work on it in the autumn of that year. He would have been 22 at the time, a similar age to Titian when he painted the original, having already studied at the Slade School of Fine Art from 1893 to April 1898.⁶ McEvoy was embarking on a journey of self-education at this point, studying other Old Master paintings after having felt dissatisfaction with his training at the Slade. Shortly after leaving the Slade, McEvoy also became a member of the New English Art Club which, by the first decade of the 20th century, was dominated by pictures showing 'the enclosed environment of reading, piano playing and quiet reflection, in the familiar surroundings of a consciously crafted space'.⁷ Many of McEvoy's early pictures would conform to this genre.

McEvoy's career, cut short by his early death from pneumonia in 1927, has often been divided into two contrasting phases, with a break identified in or around 1915. The first phase focused on small-scale interior scenes such as *The Ear-Ring* (c.1911) alongside continuing experimentation, exemplified by his use of thick and loose handling of paint in *The Church of St Jacques* (1912). His attempts at classically inspired movement in *The Seasons* (1905) appear to owe a debt to Poussin and a further interest in the Italian Renaissance is in evidence in the series of pictures of the Life of Christ painted for the Long Tower Church, Londonderry which he undertook between 1906 and 1908 in collaboration with his wife Mary.

By contrast, McEvoy's focus after 1915 was increasingly centred on the individual at the expense of the

surroundings, and it was as a portraitist that he found critical acclaim and commercial success. Two early portrait paintings, *Mrs Charles McEvoy* and *Mrs Cecil Baring*, date from 1915 and 1916 respectively. In 1916, during the First World War, he was attached to a Royal Naval division and spent three months producing portraits of naval officers, many of which are now in the collection of the Imperial War Museum. High society portraits became his staple after the end of the war, and he was in sufficient demand that he could charge up to £1,000 for a single portrait.⁸

The development of McEvoy's practice has attracted a degree of negative comment from art historians. One view, not atypical, was that 'the young Slade-trained artists, all of whom were eventually caught in the English trap of professional portrait painting – Augustus John, Ambrose McEvoy and William Orpen'⁹ and that McEvoy's gifts were 'eroded by a demand for society portraits.'¹⁰ McEvoy (and Orpen) had 'squandered their talents' although it was noted that 'they never reached the glittering degradation of de Laszlo and the later Lavery'.¹¹ Perhaps as a consequence, McEvoy has been left out of surveys of British art altogether, even when Augustus John and William Orpen gain a mention.¹²

The focus in this paper is on McEvoy's early practice and his interest in the technique of Titian and others to see how he sought to emulate that technique and whether (and, if so, how) his interest in it developed across the course of his career.

'Old Master' techniques

McEvoy's diary entries, notes and other writings made around the time that he was working on the *Noli me Tangere* explain the reasons for his interest in Old Master techniques: it was a question of aesthetic judgement. However, it is not clear if he was influenced in this concern by other individuals or writings, or whether (as is suggested by his notes) it proceeded from close observation. He wanted 'to draw attention to a defect in modern pictures which seems to me, as a painter ... the prevailing lack of quality in the pigment itself, which appears harsh, flat, and positive in treatment when compared with the beautiful surface of old pictures'.¹³ Yet he was clear that the answer lay both in understanding the approach taken by certain Old Masters and by their technique. McEvoy added that 'The defect [was] fundamental and [arose] from neglect or ignorance of certain fundamental laws of colour which were universally recognised up to the time of the Pre-Raphaelite heresy.' He then concluded that (what he regarded as) poor surface quality of modern painting was attributable to 'wrong methods, inefficient training, and a loss of technical traditions'.¹⁴

These concerns led him to search for a method that was identifiable and reproducible. He asked at one stage: 'can we draw up any formula which can include the ... great painters ... such as Turner, Gainsborough, Reynolds, and Titian?'¹⁵ A significant problem that McEvoy faced in his endeavour to identify a sweeping theory on Old Master techniques was

that a large number of Old Master paintings were covered in highly discoloured and oxidised natural resin varnishes – popularly referred to as ‘museum soup’¹⁶ – which significantly ‘yellowed’ their appearance and would have hampered McEvoy’s ability to interpret them. It was not until after McEvoy’s death that Titian’s *Noli me Tangere* was cleaned, restored and relined in 1957–8. The NG’s conservation records note that the restoration revealed brighter, vivid colours. The treatment also removed a considerable amount of overpaint, revealing that the billowing upper portion of Mary Magdalen’s red skirt and the back of her bodice had been painted over, changing a curvaceous woman into a slim one. An additional branch on the right side of the tree had also been added, along with passages of darker land extending over the bright blue background.

Removal of the overpaint revealed original paint that was better preserved than other parts of the painting abraded during earlier cleaning attempts.¹⁷ McEvoy copied *Noli me Tangere* before the 1950s treatment, consequently the altered appearance of Titian’s painting, in combination with the lack of contemporary scientific evidence of his technique, makes McEvoy’s copy a representation of what he *thought* Titian’s techniques were at the time, rather than what we know they are today.

Another Venetian work that McEvoy copied in his early career was Veronese’s *Rape of Europa*, also in the NG. While it seems that Veronese’s painting was relatively unobscured by discoloured varnish when it arrived at the NG in 1831, by 1851 there were reports that the varnish had darkened. Furthermore, the NG’s records indicate that an additional layer of varnish was added in 1881.¹⁸ This led to questions about its authorship and must have made McEvoy’s attempts to discover the so-called ‘Old Master’ technique from it all the harder. McEvoy’s copy, now in a private collection, confirms this: the paint is altogether darker and much of the detail of the top right of Veronese’s painting is lost in the McEvoy copy.

Indeed, it is clear from McEvoy’s extensive notes and essays detailing the exact combinations of glazes and scumbles that he believed the Old Masters used, that he did not fully understand their techniques. For example, he claimed ‘Rubens would paint a figure by first drawing it in Terra Vert for the flesh’ and that he used ‘Bitumen for the shadows’ when in fact Rubens’ simple and systematic flesh modelling used pink tones and combinations of earth pigments for the shadows.¹⁹ Likewise, the absence of technical analysis until the latter half of the 20th century resulted in many myths about how Titian achieved his atmospheric landscapes, sumptuous textiles and his depiction of human flesh.²⁰ Beliefs included the use of brown grounds, monochrome underpaintings, additives to his oil medium and the application of many final touches and multiple glazes.²¹ McEvoy was one of many who treated these myths as truths. A direct comparison of the results of the technical study of McEvoy’s painting with research on Titian’s painting techniques highlight the differences in McEvoy’s interpretation of *Noli me Tangere* between what we now know today.

Preparation and compositional planning

The colourman’s stamp on the canvas verso shows that McEvoy used a commercially primed ‘D’ grade Reeves & Sons canvas. He did not aim to reconstruct Titian’s working process by hand-priming his canvases, but to copy them using available materials and technical information, and to imitate or ‘copy’ form, colour and surface appearance as closely as possible using these materials. A ‘D’ grade canvas was one of the most ‘expensive’ canvases in the Reeves catalogue.²² McEvoy’s choice could illustrate his desire to use the best quality materials to, in his own words, ‘cure’ the declining quality of modern pictures. Alternatively, his choice may have been an attempt to match the ‘fine weave’ and smooth texture of Titian’s *Noli me Tangere*.²³ Regardless, McEvoy’s choice of materials for a painting that was not intended for commercial sale, is significant as he was living in economically challenged circumstances at the time.²⁴

The commercial ground is a bright white layer composed of lead white and translucent chalk particles.²⁵ Atop this, McEvoy applied a thin wash of ochre and an additional thick beige ground layer. This second ground layer appears to be a mixture of lead white, zinc white, yellow ochre and bone black.²⁶ By comparison, Titian’s paintings featured a gesso layer, followed by a priming layer containing drying oil and lead white and sometimes some lamp black to obtain a softer grey.²⁷ It is likely that McEvoy applied both the wash of ochre and the second ground layer to dull the brightness of the commercial white ground in an effort to render subsequent paint layers softer and warmer, and closer to what he observed in Titian’s discoloured *Noli me Tangere*. As we know, McEvoy was not copying a bright and vivid painting.

McEvoy’s style and choice of technique frequently changed²⁸ and he often made multiple preparatory drawings for his paintings in a variety of media including pencil, watercolour, gouache, ink, pen, chalk, charcoal or a combination of these. As outlined in his sketchbooks, McEvoy had a three-day approach for sketching adopted from his studies of Old Masters such as Brunelleschi. The first day included ‘blocking out’ his composition, the second a ‘line drawing marking beautiful lines’, which implied form, and the third day was to ‘absolutely state some form’.²⁹ Evidence of multiple preparatory sketches ranging from loose and vague pencil scribbles to highly detailed ink and watercolour drawings exist for many of his portraits, which often also exhibit a grid laid over the drawing. Squaring up grids have been used by artists and their workshops for centuries as an effective way to transfer small drawings to large canvases; Titian and his workshop were known to use this method.³⁰ Considering how faithful *Noli me Tangere* is to the original in terms of its composition, it is therefore likely that a grid system was used to transfer one of the numerous detailed sketches McEvoy is likely to have made during his two-year study.

No preparatory sketches have been found for *Noli me Tangere*,³¹ and no evidence of an underdrawing or transfer method was found in the infrared reflectography image (Figure 2).³² However, McEvoy’s notes from September



Figure 2 Ambrose McEvoy *Noli me Tangere*, 1899–1901 (OSIRIS infrared reflectography imaging). © The Courtauld Conservation Department.



Figure 3 Ambrose McEvoy, *Noli me Tangere*, 1899–1901 (X-radiograph). © The Courtauld Conservation Department.

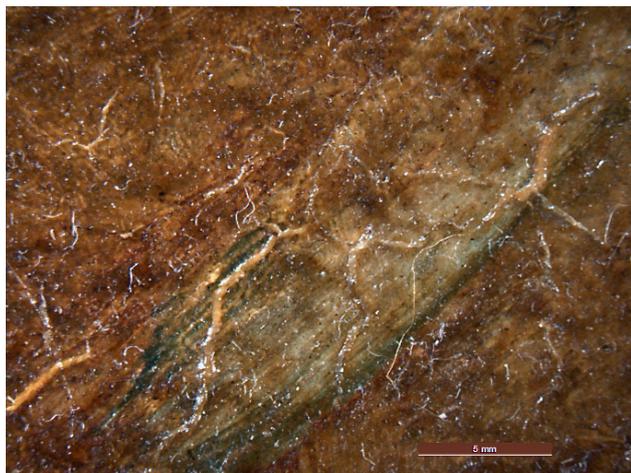


Figure 4 Ambrose McEvoy, *Noli me Tangere*, 1899–1901, detail of green lines outlining Christ's clothing over his left shoulder (before varnish removal). © Estate of Ambrose McEvoy (image: Megan Levet).

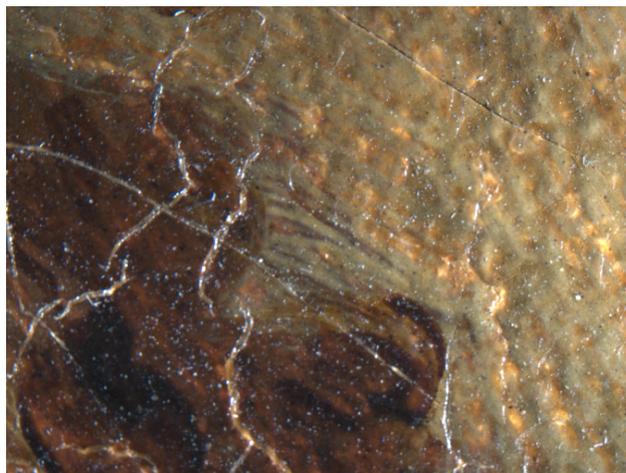


Figure 5 Ambrose McEvoy, *Noli me Tangere*, 1899–1901, detail of foliage in the tree with green sky layer painted on top. © Estate of Ambrose McEvoy (image: Megan Levet).

1899 suggest that he may have been working on a preparatory watercolour study of *Noli me Tangere*: 'After breakfast I did my composition of Christ and Mary Magdalen for some time and put it in watercolour, very curious effect quite unintentional quite dull. I expected it to be very brilliant and glowing. Cheap watercolours are partly responsible. Mem. Don't buy Reeves' cheap watercolours again'; no such surviving work in watercolour has been identified. It is unlikely McEvoy worked out his composition without drawing it first and more probable that he used a medium that is transparent to infrared radiation.³³

The notion that the composition was carefully planned is reinforced by the X-radiograph which shows negligible *pentimenti*: only the angle of the buildings has been adjusted and Christ's outstretched hand moved a few millimetres (Figure 3). There is also evidence of planned reserves for the figures and lower sky area. Reserves feature in many of Titian's paintings and, 'as seems to have been his habit', he began with the landscape in *Noli me Tangere*.³⁴ As the varnish was removed during the conservation treatment of the painting, McEvoy's possible drawing method became apparent as evidence of thinly painted green lines outlining Christ's clothing was revealed (see Figure 4). These green

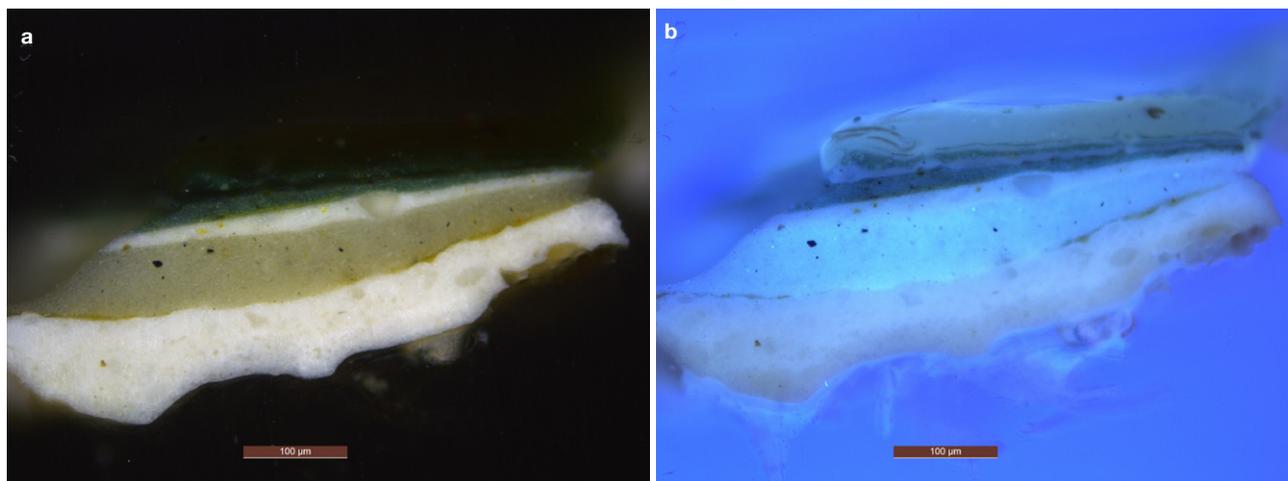


Figure 6 Ambrose McEvoy, *Noli me Tangere*, 1899–1901, (a) normal light and (b) ultraviolet light cross-section photographs of a sky paint sample taken from a small damage in the top right quarter of the painting. The layer structure of the sample shows a lead-based white commercial ground, ochre wash (visible in the UV photo), a second beige artist-applied ground containing mostly zinc white, an additional white paint layer (also containing mostly zinc white), a thin blue green paint layer, an unpigmented oil-based layer and a final blue paint layer. Two varnish layers with an interlayer of dirt are visible in the UV photo. © Estate of Ambrose McEvoy (image: Megan Levet).

outlines and marks became visible under scumbles of white paint in Mary Magdalen's drapery and suggest that McEvoy did indeed plan his composition, but in green paint rather than using a carbon-based material.

One of McEvoy's later subjects, Daphne Pollen (née Baring) recalls a sitting with McEvoy that he began by painting her in monochrome, as was 'the method of Titian and other Venetians, and Gainsborough'.³⁵ In his sketchbooks, McEvoy consistently wrote about the use of monochrome underpaintings, also referred to as 'dead-colouring', as a technique used by Old Masters, including Titian, to both map out compositions and provide the tonal modelling. Later technical studies revealed that Old Masters frequently utilised underpainting for areas of painting such as drapery or flesh, where the grisaille underpaint provided the bases for flesh tones and established the sculptural logic before colour was added.³⁶

McEvoy practised the technique himself when studying at the NG, but with varying success. For example, *Bessborough Street*, completed in 1900, displays a brown monochrome colouring over a broadly white ground in 'the manner of early Titian'.³⁷ McEvoy recorded that he also 'tried to paint the Rembrandt in the National Gallery on this black and white plan' but failed to achieve the correct tonal values so he then 'started several portraits and a copy of the Titian'.³⁸ It remains unclear whether McEvoy is referring to *Noli me Tangere* here, but it suggests he may have experimented with the technique. Moreover, McEvoy is recorded to have used undermodelling in his later work, but instead of using blacks, browns, umber or whites, 'the figure would be drawn in vivid greens or blues' to give a 'vibrant quality to the finished portrait', consistent with the bright green lines observed in *Noli me Tangere*.³⁹ The build-up of layers in all paint samples taken from the painting, however, do not suggest an undermodelling system was used but that most likely the bright green outlines were employed locally to map out the figures and not the entire composition.

Painting technique

Titian displayed great virtuosity in the handling of lead white and a mixture of translucent pigments, often in overlapping layers of opaque and transparent pigment mixtures, and it was his depiction of light and colour that McEvoy tried to emulate.⁴⁰ For example, in the tree in Titian's *Noli me Tangere*, the leaves were built up in thin translucent layers of 'brownish paint mixed from yellow and red earths with some verdigris, sometimes with indigo and lead-tin yellow' with only the leaves at the very top of the canopy painted in a brighter mixture of verdigris, lead-tin yellow and white.⁴¹ These individual leaves were carefully dabbed on, allowing the translucent brown layers to remain visible through the foliage. In McEvoy's copy, the same thin layering of colours can be found in the darkest areas of paint on the tree trunk in a similar combination of earth tones, umber and likely some lake pigments.⁴² However, the logic in McEvoy's technique deviates as a subsequent light green sky layer extends over the edges of the leaves, making the outline less defined (see Figure 5). It appears as though McEvoy had already painted the sky and tree, but subsequently reworked the area, rendering it bulky and distorting the feathered appearance of the lighter brushstrokes underneath.

Under magnification, a green-blue paint layer can be seen covering some of the most significant drying cracks in the sky. Likewise, a layer of paint has also been washed over the thickest drying cracks in the blue horizon paint. This indicates that, within the two years of painting *Noli me Tangere*, significant drying defects had formed, causing McEvoy to rework large areas of his painting to mitigate the distracting network of cracks. This type of drying defect has been linked to poorly drying pigments such as zinc white, as well as the experimentation of lean and oil rich paint layered in quick succession.⁴³ However, XRF and SEM-EDX analysis show a lead-containing pigment is dominant in all paint layers (on top of the second artist applied ground),

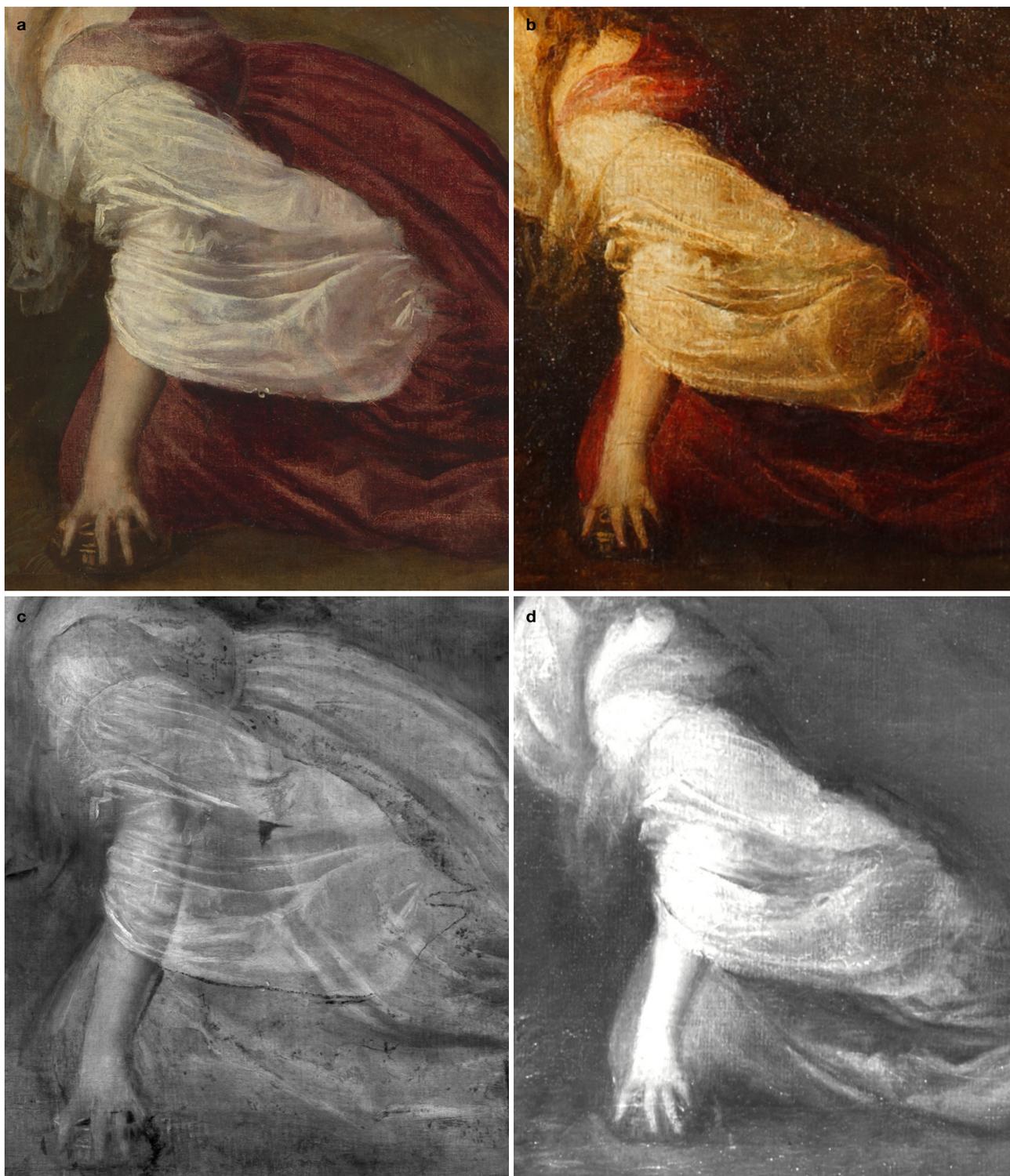


Figure 7 Details of normal light (NL) and infrared reflectogram (IR) comparisons of the Magdalene's drapery: (a) Titian (NL), (b) McEvoy (NL), (c) Titian (IR) and (d) McEvoy (IR) from Ambrose McEvoy's *Noli me Tangere* 1889–1901 (© The Courtauld Conservation Department) and Titian's *Noli me Tangere* c.1514 (© The National Gallery Company Limited). (Image from 'Cat. 7 *Noli me Tangere*', *National Gallery Technical Bulletin* 34, 2013, p. 66.)

indicating McEvoy used lead white more extensively in his painting, and may have restricted the use of zinc white to paint mixtures and the second ground layer. This also suggests the drying defects may also result from McEvoy's manipulation of the medium content in the paint layers.

It is perhaps due to the extensive cracking in *Noli me Tangere* that McEvoy went on to simplify his palette after becoming wary of the drying properties of certain pigments

when carried in varying quantities of oil. He claimed that one should 'avoid chrome, lakes, greene and a host of elaborate pigments' so that paintings can 'withstand the action of time' and championed umber and earths as 'safe driers'.⁴⁴ Yet, despite his wariness, it is in the passages of rich earth pigments that the most significant drying craquelure are visible. A pitted surface is particularly prominent in the areas of brown reworking around the bushes in the

background. Here, the composition of the paint has resulted in an unusual drying effect where the medium appears to have sunk into the interstices of the canvas, leaving a rough surface of regularly spaced and evenly sized pits formed in the canvas weave. A paint sample taken from a raised crack between the figures of Christ and Mary Magdalen reveals McEvoy applied numerous thin paint layers, probably in quick succession, subsequently starving underlayers of oxygen which contributed to the drying defects.

McEvoy continually reworked and edited *Noli me Tangere*, adding multiple paint layers, sometimes very late into the painting process. In a sample taken from a damage in the top right corner of the sky, there is a thin unpigmented layer, likely to be either an oiling out layer or a thin varnish layer, between two blue-green paint layers (see the transparent layer in normal light and the same layer fluorescing in ultraviolet light in Figure 6). McEvoy may have applied this unpigmented layer to re-saturate the initial blue paint layer that had become matte upon drying and applied an additional blue paint layer to reinforce the intensity of the blue. The thickness of the layer, however, is more indicative of a varnish layer in comparison to a thin oiling-out layer.⁴⁵ This could reflect McEvoy not using the technique of oiling out appropriately, or more likely that he was applying retouches to a varnished painting and continued to develop the background of *Noli me Tangere* late into the painting process. Varnishing a painting before completion to saturate the colours and retouching certain areas is a common technique that has been used by artists for centuries and a technique of which McEvoy was probably aware. For example, Jan Van Eyck, an artist whose technique McEvoy studied and made many notes, applied additional glazes on top of a varnish layer in passages of red drapery in *Margaret, The Artist's Wife* (1439, National Gallery, London) to deepen the colour of the folds, so the subsequent glaze remained sufficiently glossy without the need for another varnish layer.⁴⁶ Whether McEvoy knew Van Eyck used the technique is unknown. McEvoy's painting *Bridge at Le Puy* (1899) was made at the same time as *Noli me Tangere* and is also recorded as having many reworkings visible in UV, indicating they are also on top of varnish layers.⁴⁷ Reworking and retouching may have been a common practice in McEvoy's painting technique at the time and evidence the care he took to ensure that the colour, saturation and finish of his paintings, and his copy of *Noli me Tangere*, were exactly as he intended.

Titian also edited the composition of *Noli me Tangere* extensively. For example, he obliterated the buildings and areas of his landscape 'with a layer of paint rich in lead white that registered strongly in the X-radiograph'.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, the X-radiograph of the painting was never seen by McEvoy hence it is pure coincidence that both painters took a long time revisiting and editing their work.

In terms of drapery, the technique used for painting Mary Magdalen's pink dress in Titian's *Noli me Tangere* follows a simple structure with an initial light pink opaque layer of lead white and red lake, followed by upper glazes

of red lake applied thickly in shadows and thinly in the highlights to allow the bright underlayer to remain partially visible. In contrast, McEvoy built up his drapery from the beige ground, using a thick, medium-rich red layer composed from vermilion and lake pigments.⁴⁹ This was tinted with a zinc white scumble on top to recreate the rich pinkness. In Titian's version, the diaphanous linen of the Magdalen's sleeve displays some impasto in the denser folds and is clearly distinguished from the gauze of her veil, painted much more thinly by dragging an almost dry brush over the paint layers beneath.⁵⁰ By comparison, McEvoy's white scumble technique resulted in more heavily worked and opaque drapery, losing this sense of transparency (see Figure 7). The presence of the over-paint and discoloured varnish on the original by Titian is likely to have affected the gentle transitions and modelling of his drapery.

Despite his imperfect attempts to recreate the exact combination of masterful glazes Titian employed for *Noli me Tangere*, McEvoy's copy nevertheless exhibits a sophisticated attention to detail, differentiating the undertones of the three passages of white drapery, subtly transitioning between passages of earth tones, and carefully modelling the pearly flesh tones of Christ. The paint is textured and carefully placed, demonstrating hints of the painterly talent for which McEvoy was renowned in his later career.

McEvoy and art history

It is clear from his writings and his work that McEvoy's interests in Old Master painting extended beyond Titian's *Noli me Tangere*. Another NG work by Titian that interested McEvoy was the *Holy Family with a Shepherd*. Although there are no surviving sketches or painted copies of the work, McEvoy's writings focus on the technical aspects of the work: 'we find the shadows in Titian often very thickly glazed – note the red skirt on the Virgin in the picture of the Virgin and the child'.⁵¹ The Venetian theme is continued in Veronese's *Rape of Europa* in the NG, which McEvoy copied, as discussed above.

Beyond Renaissance Venice, McEvoy's writings reveal his high regard for Rembrandt. Although no surviving copies of Rembrandt's work by McEvoy have been identified, his notes of an attempted copy reveal the 'trial and error' nature of his approach. For example, he wrote that he 'took up a little painting I had of a Rembrandt etching ... I had sketched it lightly in black and white and then, when it was dry, put pure yellow ochre and vermilion on. I dragged it over the surface so that the white showed through. When I glazed this with raw sienna pure it had a wonderfully rich and charming appearance ... I put some more paint on and tried to get it more definite, but rather spoiled the effect, but it may be good to work on'.⁵² This shows McEvoy's single-minded approach to discovering the right technique, even at the expense of spoiling a painting. These paintings were not intended for sale – they were purely for his own educational purposes.

McEvoy's other Old Master interests were wide-ranging and included Peter Paul Rubens, Claude Lorrain and Joshua Reynolds. However, it was with Gainsborough that McEvoy shared an aspiration to understand the 'Old Master system' of preparing final glazes.⁵³ It is perhaps therefore unsurprising that McEvoy copied Gainsborough's portrait of his daughter Margaret, now in Tate Britain. This copy was produced around 1900, contemporaneous with *Noli me Tangere*. Indeed, it is in McEvoy's interest in this work that the seeds of his later career as a society portraitist can be perceived.

It seems from his notes that McEvoy's early career was profoundly influenced not only by the methods of Old Master painting, but by art history. One document in the McEvoy archive⁵⁴ is a handwritten table setting out the various Italian artists (up to 1650) separated by 'school' across the top and divided chronologically down the side. It appears to be a document that he added to over time. While some of the names appear out of chronological order (e.g. it lists Pisanello as following the Bellini brothers), it is nonetheless noteworthy for its detailed approach. Moreover, it demonstrates that McEvoy regarded an exploration of art history as part of his process of self-education in a way that mirrored his interest in technique. At the early stage of his career at least, he seems to have been open to the possibility that an understanding of the past and its secrets might hold a key to the future of his own practice.

McEvoy's contemporaries

McEvoy's interest in the Old Masters was by no means unique among his contemporaries. His copies of Old Master paintings can be contextualised in the widespread practice by 19th-century artists of visiting galleries and copying Old Master paintings in front of them. Galleries such as Vienna or Dresden, most notably the Gemäldegalerie, kept detailed recordings of which artists were present, the paintings that were copied and in which year.⁵⁵

The same information could not be found regarding copies made at the NG for this study; however, the gallery did hold 'student days' twice a week for copyists. The students would have had to apply for a student ticket to attend. We cannot ascertain whether McEvoy drew and painted his copy exclusively in front of the original or worked on it at home. He did not mention how long his visits lasted, or whether any of his contemporaries joined him. However, his specific focus on technique was unusual in Britain at the time. Although a detailed discussion of early 20th-century British artists' interests in the Old Masters is beyond the scope of this paper, we will make this point by reference to McEvoy's fellow artists in the New English Art Club.

In the 1890s, a key focus of historical interest for many British artists were Spanish artists such as Velasquez and Goya. Thus, William Rotherstein travelled to Spain in 1894 and was particularly struck by Goya's dark romanticism. Another artist who came to be influenced by the Old

Masters in the 1890s was Philip Wilson Steer. Steer was a Slade teacher at the time McEvoy was a student there and had studied in Paris in his youth where he spent time closely observing the Musée du Louvre's major works. However, it was from 1895 that his work began to incorporate what some scholars have called a 'deliberately anachronistic quality' and he started to experiment with styles drawn from the past.⁵⁶ Again, Steer was influenced by Spain and his painting *The Mirror* (1901) owes an evident debt to the Rokeby Venus in the NG. However, his interests were omnivorous, and his consideration of past masters included Tintoretto, Rubens, Watteau, Gainsborough, Constable and Turner.

Two of McEvoy's direct contemporaries, Augustus John and William Orpen, also made close studies of the Old Masters, but they were more interested in techniques of draughtsmanship – the movement of drapery, gesture or pose – than in painting technique. Perhaps unsurprisingly it was to Rembrandt and Rubens that they turned. Augustus John travelled to Amsterdam in 1898 to visit a Rembrandt exhibition and was captured in particular by his loose drawing style. John's writings even record that Rembrandt was a 'discovery': 'As I bathed myself in the light of the Dutchman's genius, the scales of aesthetic romanticism fell from my eyes, disclosing a new and far more wonderful world.'⁵⁷

What distinguished McEvoy from other British artists was his focus on oil painting technique. Although artists before him – including Charles Haslewood Shannon – had been concerned to revive what they considered to be the superior surface quality of Old Master painting, McEvoy's interest in decoding these artists' painting techniques and his attempts to reduce them to a general formula were unusual. Indeed, such was McEvoy's focus on these aspects that he developed a reputation among his contemporaries for being something of an expert and, at one stage, he acted as a teacher to Gwen John, explaining to her the Old Masters' use of layered glazes.⁵⁸

Later style and practice

McEvoy's early work after his time studying at the NG consisted of carefully considered interiors, landscapes, and figure subjects with a strong reference and visual similarity to the Old Master paintings he had studied. He keenly emulated the techniques and styles he had so carefully researched. As his career progressed however, he gave greater prominence to the human element and concentrated his interest in the power of suggestion and the subtle presentation of a personality. In oil he painted more broadly, with only partially defined areas of fine detail, usually the hands and face of the sitter. McEvoy continued to use scumbles of white paint in the manner of Titian but applied them as a veil onto which he then retrieved the facial features, leaving the rest of the painting with a misty glow. For example, the use of undermodelling and subsequent glazing in the *Portrait of Daphne*

Baring allowed him to convincingly suggest the female form underneath her thin translucent dress, which resonates closely with the white drapery of Mary Magdalen in Titian's *Noli me Tangere*. This comparison clearly demonstrates how McEvoy developed the techniques he learnt from examining Titian, but applied them in a more expressive, unrestrained and modern way.

On the surface, McEvoy's interest in the Old Masters seemed to decline in his post-war career due to having developed his own style, which was very much in demand. However, there is a strand in McEvoy's later work that demonstrates a continued influence of the Old Masters or, more specifically, the Venetian Renaissance painters: colour. On a trip to Italy in 1922, McEvoy went first to Venice where he again studied the work of Tintoretto, Giovanni Bellini and Giorgione. Visual comparison alone of McEvoy's portraits *Mrs S. S. Howland* (1919) and *Mademoiselle de Pourtales* (1925) to Titian's *Portrait of an Unknown Woman ('La Bella')* (c.1536) and *Portrait of Laura Dianti* (c.1520–25) demonstrate McEvoy's continued use of their deep, rich colours and the exploration of light – qualities that Titian and the Venetians so comprehensively mastered and for which they are remembered today.

Conclusion

If this research has suggested some of the reasons for McEvoy's interest in Titian (and other Old Masters), it has also revealed that interest to be particularly focused on the technical quality of the painted surface. Such a narrow focus was unusual among McEvoy's contemporaries, whose interest in the Old Masters extended mainly to draughtsmanship and stylistic elements. Technical analysis has shown how McEvoy attempted to recreate Titian's technique with somewhat inaccurate results, especially in the intricate layering of final glazes. Furthermore, the research has underlined one of the problems faced by McEvoy in his attempts to recreate techniques used by Titian and others: the appearance of the paintings he so admired was profoundly different to their appearance at the time they were created.

While McEvoy did not directly imitate Titian's technique in his later practice as a society portraitist, there are nevertheless two ways in which his interest in Titian is traceable through his career. First, in his development of a 'method' of painting which incorporated elements that he learned (or thought he learned) from Titian, albeit applied in a more expressive way, and secondly, in his continuing interest in achieving coloristic intensity and exploring the effects of light.

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Notes

1. Joannides 2001: 175–6.
2. Dunkerton and Spring 2013: 65–7.
3. Townsend 2004.
4. Akers-Douglas 2019: 11–12.
5. Ambrose McEvoy, 1899. Archival note *NOT/199*.
6. McEvoy's involvement with the Titian picture has a further biographical significance in that it was in front of this painting that he was introduced to the woman who would become his wife, Mary Augusta Spencer Edwards, in November 1900. The introduction was made by Augustus John who was a close friend and professional intimate. They were married in 1902.
7. McConkey 2006: 92.
8. See the letter from McEvoy to Mary on 3 May 1920 in the context of McEvoy's trip to New York; quoted in Akers-Douglas 2019: 178.
9. Shone 1977: 13.
10. Shone 1977: 13, note to Plate 6.
11. Shone 1977: 13, note to Plate 6.
12. Thus, he does not appear in Frances Spalding's *British Art Since 1900*, London 1986.
13. Ambrose McEvoy, 1903. Archival note 'Some suggestions on the loss of technical tradition in oil painting', *ESS/1*.
14. Ambrose McEvoy, 1903. Archival note 'Some suggestions on the loss of technical tradition in oil painting', *ESS/1*.
15. Ambrose McEvoy, 1903. Archival note 'Some suggestions on the loss of technical tradition in oil painting', *ESS/1*.
16. White and Kirby 2001.
17. Ruhemann 1968: 139.
18. Nethersole 2010.
19. Ambrose McEvoy, 1903. Archival note *ESS/4*; Kirby 1999: 39.
20. Dunkerton and Spring 2013: 4.
21. Dunkerton and Spring 2013: 4.
22. Simon 2017.
23. Dunkerton and Spring 2013: 62.
24. Akers-Douglas 2019: 11.
25. As indicated by the presence of lead and calcium in XRF elemental analysis. X-ray fluorescence (XRF) is a non-invasive technique used to identify inorganic elements.
26. As indicated by microscopy in conjunction with SEM-EDX analysis. Scanning electron microscopy-energy dispersive X-radiography is an analytical technique allowing spatially resolved inorganic elemental analysis.
27. Dunkerton and Spring 2013: 25.
28. No technical studies have yet been published identifying which materials he used were/were not characteristic.
29. Ambrose McEvoy, 1903. Archival note *SKE/33*.
30. Dunkerton and Spring 2013: 17.
31. Ambrose McEvoy, 1899. Archival note *NOT/199*.
32. Infrared reflectography (IRR) is a non-invasive imaging technique that provides information about materials present through their characteristic absorbance or reflectance in the infrared region. Many of the drawings and sketchbooks inherited by McEvoy's grandson Charles Hett were destroyed in a fire. Exactly how much was destroyed is not known so although it is likely that McEvoy made preparatory sketches of *Noli me Tangere*, this cannot be confirmed.
33. The spectral sensitivity of the OSIRIS infrared camera is 0.9–1.7 μm .
34. Dunkerton and Spring 2013: 62.
35. Akers-Douglas 2019: 129.
36. Dunkerton and Spring 2013: 28.
37. Akers-Douglas 2019: 11.
38. Ambrose McEvoy, 1903. Archival note *ESS/4*.

39. Akers-Douglas 2019: 40.
40. Dunkerton and Spring 2013: 25.
41. Dunkerton and Spring 2013: 65.
42. As indicated by microscopy in conjunction with EDX and XRF analysis.
43. Macchia et al. 2015: 484; Mecklenburg et al. 2011.
44. Ambrose McEvoy, 1903. Archival note 'Some suggestions on the loss of technical tradition in oil painting', *ESS*/1.
45. Carlyle 1990, 2001.
46. The National Gallery, *The Cleaning of the Painting* [Jan van Eyck, *Margaret, the Artist's Wife*, 1439]. Available at <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/research/research-resources/research-papers/the-restoration-of-margaret-the-artists-wife/the-cleaning-of-the-painting>.
47. Archival note, Doc 171 Conservation record of *Bridge at Le Puy*, March 1899.
48. Dunkerton and Spring 2013: 62-63.
49. As indicated from microscopy in conjunction with SEM-EDX elemental analysis.
50. Dunkerton and Spring 2013: 66.
51. Ambrose McEvoy, 1903. Archival note *E55/3*.
52. Ambrose McEvoy, 1903. Archival note *E55/4*.
53. Four months after Gainsborough's death Joshua Reynolds praised him for his copies of Old Master paintings, stating 'And to satisfy himself as well as others, how well he knew the mechanism which we so much admire in their works, he occasionally made copies from Rubens, Teniers and Van Dyck, which it would be no disgrace to the most accurate connoisseur to mistake'; Belsey 2019: 987.
54. Ambrose McEvoy (undated), Archival note *NOT/81*.
55. Mohrmann 2006.
56. Tate 1960: 7.
57. Holroyd 1997: 55.
58. Holroyd 1997: 50.

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