

Conservation Treatment of the “Portrait of Tan Kim Seng”

BACKGROUND

The “Portrait of Tan Kim Seng” painting was conserved by Anthony Lau, Senior Conservation Officer (Painting) of HCC, for the opening exhibition of the Peranakan Museum in 2008. The painting was a donation to NHB in 2006.

Mr. Tan Kim Seng was a wealthy merchant and a well-respected man in the Chinese community in the 19th Century. He was born in Malacca in 1805. He came to Singapore in 1840 to start the Kim Seng and Company and became a very successful trader. Throughout his life, he generously funded many various institutions and public/government projects, including the building of a road, Kim Seng Road, which is named after him. He also contributed a lot to the improvement of waterworks in Singapore - so much so that a fountain was erected at the Esplanade in his honor. In 1850, he was appointed as the Justice of Peace.

CONDITION

The painting was done traditionally in oil paint on canvas by an unknown painter. It has previously been restored prior to the commencement of the treatment. It was found to be in a quite dirty and damaged condition. The painting has been previously wax-lined¹ and as a result of this *impregnation* technique some wax residues were found on the surface of the paint layer. Some tears and paint losses were found on various areas of the painting.

¹ **Wax lining** is an Old Dutch restoration technique which involves a complete impregnation of beeswax onto the back of the painting. This technique was often practiced on fragile canvas in order to add rigidity to the canvas support. However, it is no longer widely practiced in conservation, as there are many problems involved with the technique.

TREATMENT

The treatment of the painting subsequently involved:

- **Dry cleaning of to remove the dirt**

Dust and insect excretions were found on the front and back of the painting. Surface dirt and dust were removed using gentle brush vacuum. Some of the persistent soiling had to be removed by means of mechanical removal, using needle point.

- **Removal of wax residues from surface of painting**

Wax residues from previous wax lining restoration found on some areas on the surface of the paint layer was gently removed using White Spirit swabs. The treatment improved the clarity of the paint color slightly, as the wax had made some of the color appeared darker.

- **In-filling²**

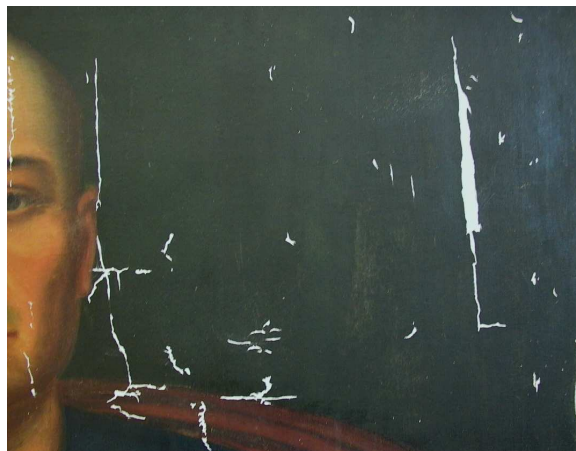


Fig. 1 In-filling of painting

² **Infilling** is a method to restore paint or ground losses in paintings using media such as a mixture of chalk and suitable binder.

- **In-painting**³

After the losses have been in-filled and sculpted back to match the surrounding areas of loss, the painting was then in-painted with pigments mixed with MS2A®. MS2A® is a conservation-grade modified ketone resin which has been scientifically tested for its reversibility and light-fastness. It does not yellowed/darkened as readily as most naturally-derived resins such as dammar or mastic.

After the in-painting was completed, the painting appears more aesthetically integrated and presentable.

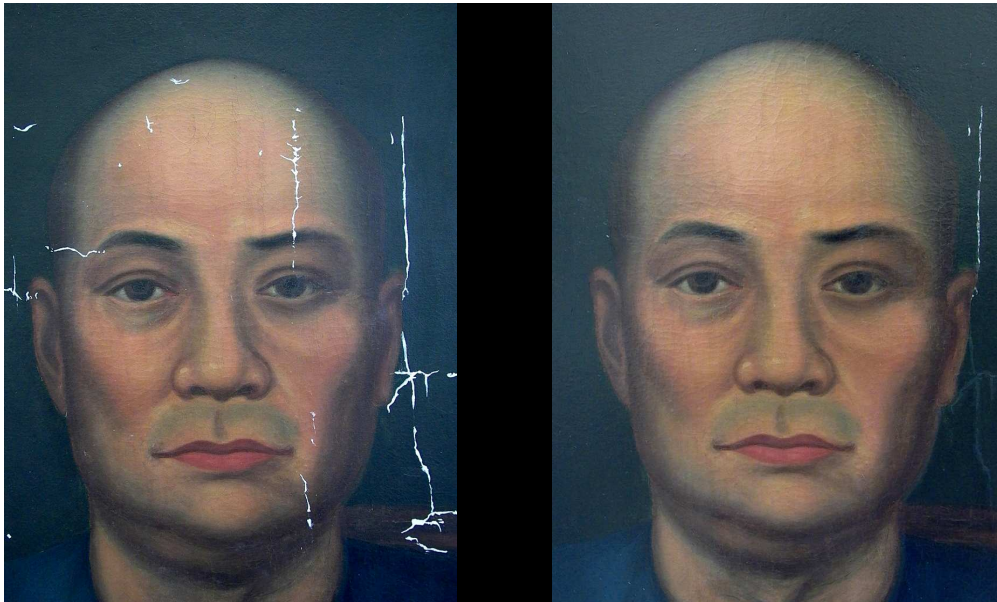


Fig. 2 Before In-painting

Fig. 3 During In-painting

³ **In-painting** is a method to restore paint losses by means of applying reversible paint media in the areas of loss.

- **Selective varnishing**

Some varnish was applied on some areas using a matt polycyclohexanone Laropal® K80 resin-based varnish to ensure even coating on the paint surface of the painting.



Fig. 4 Before In-painting



Fig. 5 After In-painting

The conservation treatment of the “Portrait of Tan Kim Seng” took almost 3 months to complete. However, the end result is extremely satisfactory and now the painting is in a presentable condition for display. Viewers can now enjoy the painting at the Peranakan Museum and see a glimpse of Mr. Tan Kim Seng in his glorious days.