
Section 3

New Visions of a New World

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Introduction and Summary

Kim Sloan

This section of the conference proceedings takes into account five quite different ways of seeing John White's watercolours of the New World, all of them informed by close physical examination, by the naked eye or through a scientific instrument, of the various pigments John White laid on the paper. Each author also views them through years of experience in their own particular area of expertise and brings that knowledge to bear on what they see: a paper conservator, a research scientist, a researcher who recreates the original tools and techniques, a curator of miniatures and a practising botanical artist. Through their eyes we can ourselves see John White's watercolours in a completely new way and with new understanding.

Paper conservator Alice Rugheimer provides some insight into the amount and type of work involved in preparing works like this for an exhibition and how the work that she and her colleagues carry out on the drawings can help us to reconstruct their history. Close examination can reveal the original order of the drawings in the album in which they were first mounted – which in turn reveals a thematic Elizabethan way of looking at the world and different cultures, quite different from the imposition of our own modern chronological ordering of events. The physical changes that were the result of the fire, smoke and water damage occasioned by the album being in a fire in the 19th century and the changes in colour, through chemical reactions to those elements and to the air, and fading caused by exposure to light, all explain that what we see now is not what John White or his contemporaries saw. The damage caused to the paper itself during the transfer of the drawings from one album to another or to a museum mount is evident once you know what to look for. Finally, she explains what we can and can't do to repair or reverse such damage and how they can be protected for the future.

Janet Ambers analyzes the pigments scientifically with non-invasive technology to show exactly which earth and mineral pigments were used, where they came from originally and speculates on how John White acquired them and whether they were expensive or easily available. She explains how they have reacted and changed over time and what further work might be done, given time and access to the works. Both Janet Ambers' and Alice Rugheimer's papers are the summaries of work carried out by them and other colleagues and they are analyzed in more detail with further illustrations and tables in their article with J. Bescoby, J. Rayner, D. Hook and A. Simpson in 'New Visions of a New World: The conservation and analysis

of the John White Watercolours' in *British Museum Technical Research Bulletin*, 1, 2007, 9–22.

Timea Tallian has been studying and recreating historic methods of limning for several years as part of a thesis on the Elizabethan limner Nicholas Hilliard's materials and techniques. She discusses each of the tools and pigments White used and how he made them and applied them to the paper. She also answers questions about portability of these materials and the type of results that could be achieved with them, helping us in our questions about whether White's drawings were made from life on the spot, on board ship or once he returned to England.

Katherine Coombs' paper was not delivered at the conference but as a public lecture during the exhibition and it was so enlightening about who else limned at the Elizabethan court and how and why, that we asked her to revise it for publication here. Her unique ability and experience as Curator of the National Collection of Miniatures at the Victoria & Albert Museum gives her a perspective on John White's place amongst his contemporaries that helps us to understand why they are unique surviving examples in the early stages of the evolution of a national school of painting in England.

Finally, Sally Birch, a practising botanical artist, brought her own vision as a working artist to the way that she looked at the natural history and figure drawings. She found herself seeing things that art historians and natural historians previously writing on White's drawings had never commented on. It seemed clear to her that John White had created a template of a figure and used it over and over again with a few variations in many of his figures and she explains how and why an artist would use techniques that contradict our modern notions of artistic originality and 'genius'. She was also particularly intrigued by the relationship between the John White drawings and the other versions of them in the Sloane album purchased from White's descendants in the early 18th century and which have been all but ignored in the scholarly literature, and asked herself which came first, who was copying whom and which was the more 'professional' illustrator.

All of these papers raise as many further questions as they answer and they are published here not as the final word on John White and his technique, but, in the spirit of the conference, to encourage others to look with new eyes and ask new questions that will help us better to understand John White's and his contemporaries' visions of the New World.