

'What's in a Crack?'

This was an unusual title and an unusual topic for the meeting of Local History Group on Oct 8th, but accredited conservator and restorer of paintings, Sarah Cove, was able to explain how the cracks in paintings reveal the history of the art work and the development of new materials and styles. She used examples of the Newlyn painters like Stanhope Forbes to illustrate her talk. Sarah is a technical art historian and a leading expert on Constable. She seems to spend her time looking into the cracks in paintings with a microscope taking photomicrographs, but also uses infra red reflectography, UV light, raking lights and takes samples of pigments to identify the materials used and discover the history of the painting.

Sarah explained that there are several reasons for cracks appearing in paintings. Age is a factor, but Stanhope Forbes and the Newlyn artists painted 'en plein air' which could cause problems in wet weather leading to drying cracks as the canvas dried out as in his 'Fish Sale on a Cornish Beach' 1885 which was painted out of doors in the wind and cold with sand blowing around...he had to downsize the canvas he was using to cope, and the artist's model is said to have fainted from the smell of rotting fish as he took so long to paint. He did work from photos too and Sarah recommended that his studio, Anchor Studio in Newlyn, is worth a visit.

In 1843 oil colours started to be made in tubes with a wider range of colours and using new pigments. Other materials were added to mix the paints such as wax, sugar and starch which can dry badly and cause cracking. The colours used can be identified to date a painting as can the make of the canvas.

Brush technique can also be studied. The Newlyn School used square brush techniques after Bastian-Lepage, with broad flat even brushstrokes. It is possible to see changes of mind (pentimenti) by the artist when wet paint has been used on semi dry paint, or where the resins from dark paints took longer to dry than the lighter ones.

Sarah's expertise revealed for us how the paintings evolved and proved a fascinating insight to the history of painting technique and how the provenance of a painting is tested. Thank you to Sarah for such an interesting talk.