

Down to the Ground: a historical, visual and scientific analysis of coloured grounds in Netherlandish paintings, 1550-1650

This article introduces a new research project that investigates the impact of coloured grounds on Netherlandish Golden Age paintings. The project relates to the MoCMA network through its team members, who are connected to MoCMA.

Coloured grounds originate in late 15th-century Italy and spread North around 1550. They gave rise to a new way of painting, with an emphasis on tonality and chiaroscuro, culminating in for example, the work of Rubens and Rembrandt. Currently we have no overview of the transfer mechanisms that influenced the successful spread of coloured grounds to the Netherlands, their impact on painting technique and visual effects, and the influence of advances in Early Modern optics and colour theory on their development.

In *Down to the Ground*, art historians, conservators and scientists investigate the impact of coloured grounds through three interwoven subprojects. PhD candidate Moorea Hall-Aquitania focuses on the spread of coloured grounds, PhD candidate Lieve d'Hont on the role of ground colour in the painting process, and postdoc Dr. Michaël Maria develops innovative non-invasive depth-resolved spectral imaging instrumentation (DRSI) to support research into visual and optical characteristics and colour changes. Thanks to the rich and varied data and cutting-edge scientific methods available to the project, an interdisciplinary and holistic approach to this topic is possible for the first time.

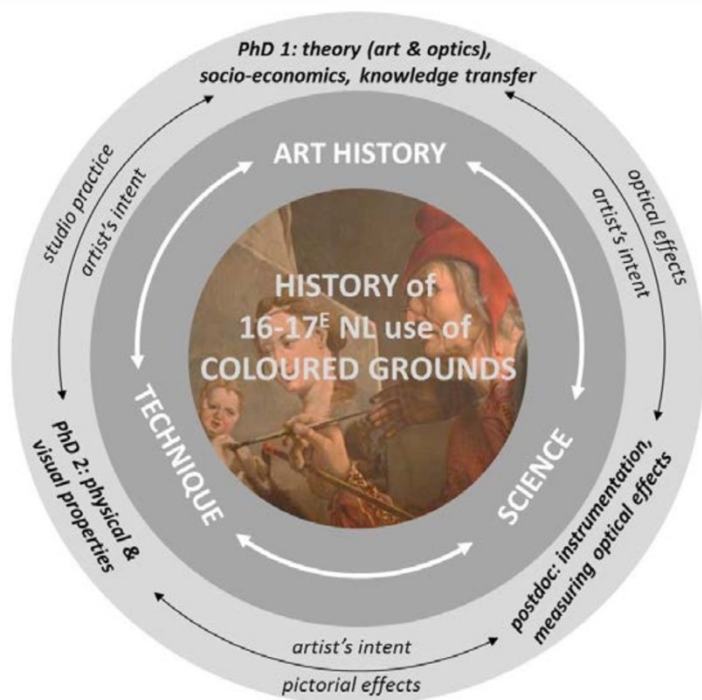


Figure 1 Interdisciplinary cooperation within *Down to the Ground*

In three subprojects (PhD1, PhD2 and postdoc), in-depth research is performed into historical, technical and visual aspects of coloured grounds. Themes of common interest connect the fields and function as building blocks for the synthesis.

This research will conclude with a much-needed standard reference work that provides insight into the complex mix of cultural and technological factors that allowed coloured grounds to develop, disclosing their influence on the character, methods and visual appearance of Netherlandish Golden Age paintings. In this project, changes in style and technique will be studied in tandem, examining the ways they interlink during this important period.

The key objective of the project is to create an interdisciplinary history of coloured grounds that:

- establishes how the use of coloured grounds spread to Netherlandish painters between 1550 and 1650;

- discloses the motives for and reception of coloured grounds between 1550 and 1650, and how they were influenced by contemporary scientific insights;
- determines how coloured grounds changed painters' practices in the Netherlands;
- creates an understanding of the visual qualities of paintings with coloured grounds, at the time of their making and as they age;
- situates these findings within an art historical framework.

Addressing old and pressing matters about the relation between technique, style and society in innovative, interdisciplinary ways, *Down to the Ground* gives the transition to and impact of coloured grounds its rightful and crucial role in the history of painting. The project cooperates closely with several national and international partners, including CATS, where Dr. Anne Haack Christensen is conducting a 2-year part-time research project entitled *Artists' mobility and painting practice in Denmark 1580-1680. A study of the introduction of coloured ground layers*. The project looks into how painters active in Denmark in the 17th century were inspired by other painters abroad through their travels around Europe and how this influenced their use of materials for ground layers and ultimately introduced coloured grounds into Danish painting practice. The *Down to the Ground* project and the CATS project will work closely together in developing a shared infrastructure for paint samples as well as discussing methodology and results.

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 Project partners: Netherlands Institute for Art History RKD, The Hague, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, Frans Hals Museum | De Hallen, Haarlem, Mauritshuis, The Hague, National Gallery, London, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp.
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