



James Watson. *Lady Stanhope*. c. 1766. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Fund

Yet two hundred-odd years can make their mark. When master paintings were being readied for the reopening of the BMA's grand galleries of European art last January, Sir Joshua Reynolds's superb portrait of *Lady Stanhope as Contemplation* (1765) took her turn under the microscope in the Museum's conservation lab. She underwent numerous examinations, including x-rays and pigment tests.

Some of her color—the rosy hues of her face and dress—had faded. “Reynolds knew that some of the pigments he used would lose their color,” said BMA Conservator Mary Sebera. “But he continued to paint with them because he liked the effect that they produced.”

Lady Stanhope needed a thorough cleaning and a few areas touched up. Surface dirt was removed with cotton swabs. Layers of yellowed varnish were carefully dissolved away with a chemical solution formulated especially for the painting. And small areas of damage disguised with

Conserving Beauty

Gazing out of the canvas like a muse, surrounded by the accoutrements of a cultured lady, one would hardly think that she has had some work done.

paint—long before the work entered the BMA's collection in 1938—were removed to bring the painting back to its purest state.

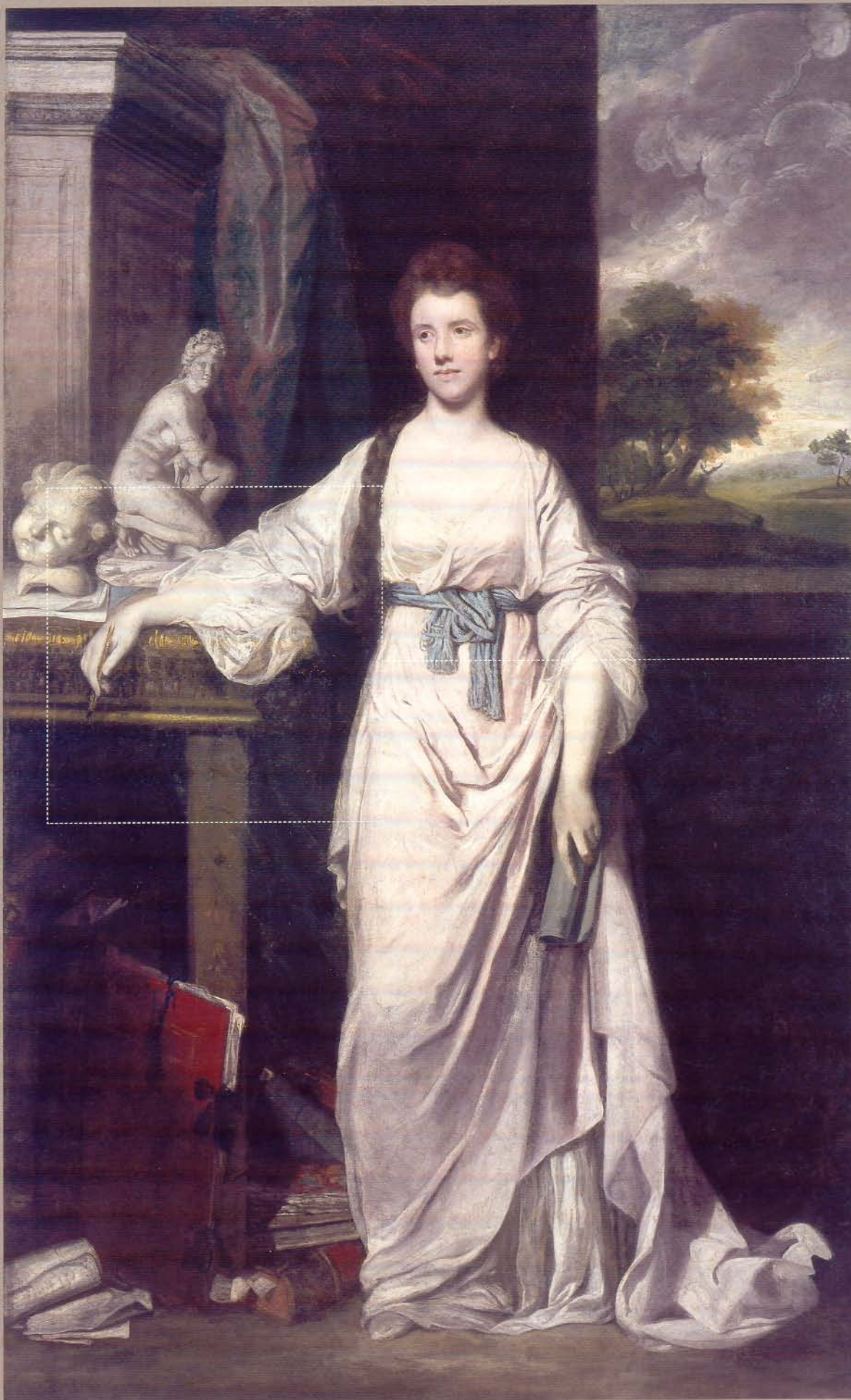
As a result, it was discovered that part of the landscape behind the figure was missing, and the train of Lady Stanhope's dress where it fell against the floor ended in patches of blank canvas. Fortunately, Erica James, the BMA's Advanced Intern in Paintings Conservation, discovered a mezzotint of the painting during a research trip to London (see above). Created by renowned printmaker James Watson, a mere year after the Reynolds portrait was painted, the publication or the print attested to Lady Stanhope's popularity and importance. It also revealed several missing details.

Conservator Carol Christensen, who treats paintings at the National Gallery of Art and other museums in the Washington area, discovered the remnants of a patterned drapery that began at the top left of the painting and ended on the floor along Lady Stanhope's right side. She brought it out of the shadows, yet refrained from

repainting the bold pattern seen in the engraving. A tree rejoined the landscape behind the Lady's shoulder, and the fall of her dress against the floor was recreated.

All of the retouches are reversible, separated from the original painting by a layer of varnish, and they were as minimal as possible. “We want to restore a painting to the point that the damage doesn't detract from the pleasure of viewing it,” said Sona Johnston, Senior Curator of Painting & Sculpture. “We are thrilled to have been able to bring *Lady Stanhope* back to her rightful beauty.”

Conservation was made possible through a grant from the Institute of Museum Library Services, a federal agency that fosters innovation, leadership, and lifetime of learning. The BMA's Advanced Intern in Paintings Conservation was funded by the Getty Grant Program.



Detail of Sir Joshua Reynolds's *Lady Stanhope as Contemplation* during conservation



Detail of James Watson's *Lady Stanhope* mezzotint

Sir Joshua Reynolds. *Lady Stanhope as Contemplation*. 1765. The Mary Frick Jacobs Collection, BMA 1938.177