

3. *Portrait of Alexander Mornauer*



- Artist* The Master of the Mornauer Portrait (active about 1460–80)
Medium Oil
Support Conifer wood
Size 44 x 36 cm
Date About 1470–80

Additions and alterations to this picture may have been a deliberate attempt to make it look like the work of a famous artist and thereby increase its value.

The subject When this picture was purchased by the National Gallery in 1990, the sitter was against a striking blue background and he was wearing a skull cap. Examination showed that the blue was painted over a brownish 'wood-bark' background and that the hat was originally taller. This raised the following questions: *when* were these alterations made, and perhaps more interestingly – *why*?



The picture before cleaning
Notice the blue background and the smaller hat



The picture after cleaning

Early history The early history of this painting is not known. Nineteenth century engravings suggest it was almost certainly in the great house at Stowe, having been acquired by the Marquess of Buckingham at some time between 1788 and 1797. It was first recorded in the 1797 guidebook to Stowe as *Martin Luther* by Holbein. Certainly a blue background was commonplace in portraits by Holbein and his contemporaries in the 16th century.

However, the sitter is not Martin Luther. He can in fact be identified by the letter he is holding as Alexander Mornauer, who became Town Clerk of Landshut in Bavaria in 1464 and was replaced in 1488. His signet ring has the image of a 'Moor' on it. (Moor is an old-fashioned, and to the modern way of thinking a rather offensive, name for a Northwest African Muslim – and is of course a pun on Mornauer's name.) The identity of the painter is not known, but it certainly cannot be Holbein who was not yet born when Mornauer was alive.

*A blue background
that could not be
original*

The blue paint of the background was examined by microchemical tests, **energy dispersive X-ray microanalysis** and **X-ray diffraction** and was found to be **Prussian blue**. This colour was not known before the early 18th century – over 200 years after the painting was originally made. So the blue background had to be a later addition.

Could this have been a deliberate attempt to raise the value of this painting and make it more appealing to an 18th century English aristocrat? A Holbein portrait of someone famous like Martin Luther would be of far more interest to a collector than an unknown artist's portrait of a mere town clerk. The transformation of the original painting certainly happened between the early 18th century – when Prussian blue first became available – and 1797, the year when it was first recorded at Stowe. It was sold from Stowe in 1848, and then sold again in 1866 – by which time it was attributed to Dürer – another big name!

After its purchase by the National Gallery in 1990 the painting was examined closely.

The panel is a soft wood, probably pine or fir. It consists of two horizontal pieces; the join goes through Mornauer's upper lip. The top edge has been cut down, possibly to remove wormy wood. The white **ground** was shown by X-ray methods to be **dolomite**, a kind of limestone found especially in the Dolomite mountains of Tyrol. So the painter may very well have been Tyrolean rather than Bavarian.

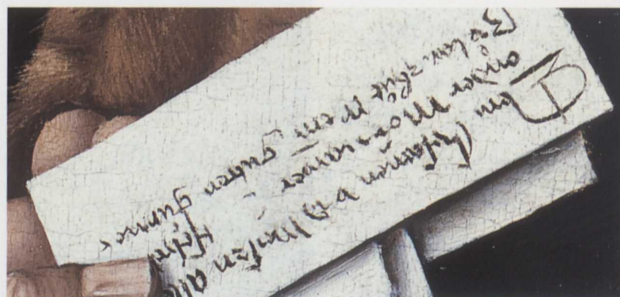
Infrared radiation and **infrared reflectography** show detailed underdrawing, which consists of two types of carbon-black pigment directly on the white ground. The paint layers are directly over the underdrawing: there is no **imprimitura**.

The cross-sections taken from the background and the X-radiograph showed that the blue paint filled cracks in the original wood-coloured underlayer, proving conclusively that this blue layer was a later addition. The blue overpaint contained **lead white** as well as Prussian blue. The **medium** for the overpaint was found by **gas chromatography** to be heat-bodied poppy oil – *ie* poppy oil partly pre-polymerised by heat – which appears not to have been used as early as the 15th century. The overpainting was done over two layers of old natural resin **varnish**, the presence of which was shown by its fluorescence in ultraviolet light. The binding medium of the original painting was shown – also using gas chromatography – to be **linseed oil**.

The blue overpainting was certainly not done because of damage to the painting, because the background has emerged from beneath it in a very well-preserved state. Cleaning showed that the painting was in excellent condition. The shadow of the hat is now clearly visible. After cleaning, the letter became not only more clearly visible but transcribable – the name Mornauer is clear. The tiny head on the seal ring on the left thumb also became clear. The textures of the fur and hair are particularly impressive.



Detail of the sitter's ring



Detail of the letter

Pigment analysis showed that the original range of purples – some almost crimson – used in the garments has now discoloured to brownish clothes and an almost black hat. The robe was painted using blue **azurite** mixed with red **lake**. This mix is fairly translucent in oil, and – like pure azurite paints – it darkens and becomes brownish with time. This is probably due to a chemical reaction between the copper-containing blue pigment and components of the oil. The original colour of both robe and hat was a translucent purple-brown. The reddish under-robe is painted using **vermilion** and red lake.