Illumination of Parts Unknown:

Infrared Photography and UV-Induced Visible Fluorescence Photography of *Socrates Tearing Away Alcibiades from the Embrace of Sensuality*

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Abstract

Jean Baptiste's under-appreciated work *Socrates Tearing Away Alcibiades* was studied by means of a technical art historical method in which art historical background research was combined with a technical analysis of the work itself. Regnault's work can be situated in the context of the French Neoclassical art historical period. A visual of the subsurface layers of *Socrates Tearing Away Alcibiades* revealed crucial choices made by the artist during this period which sets him apart from his contemporaries. In order to achieve the visualization of these layers, IR photography of the painting was conducted. Infrared photography makes use of longer wavelengths of light which can 'pass' through the surface of a painting and are able to be reflected back into a specially modified camera. The findings of this study (both technical and art historical) revealed that Regnault maintained a dual interest in the themes of restraint and indulgence.

Introduction

In the latter half of the eighteenth-century, a new sentiment began to make its way amongst French artists and appreciators alike. The lighthearted Rococo style of painting no longer satisfied those who sought art with a greater moral import and gravity of meaning. Through the adoption of the themes of antiquity, the contemporary Frenchman chose to refashion himself (and perhaps, also his political aims) in the likes of the greats of old. In place of an aesthetic which prized frills, sensuality, and decorative elements arose an aesthetic-ethic of austerity, restraint, and civic duty. Virtue and virility seemed to take prominence over fashion and feminine concerns.[1]

Still, while we may look to the revolution some decades ahead as a sign of the growing social importance of masculine heroism and virtue, a struggle emerged in the heart of artists torn between these two regimes. Jean-Baptiste Regnault is one of many such painters whose struggle can be seen most intimately in his works. Born in 1754, Regnault began his studies at the Academie de France alongside Neoclassical painters such as Jacques-Louis David and Jean-Francois-Pierre Peyron. At times, Regnault drew inspiration directly from the content of their work.[2,4] Still,the artist sometimes attempted to distinguish himself from the French school by signing pictures with the epithet “Renaud de Rome”.[3] This tendency suggests Regnault is unusual even among his Neoclassicist peers.

Regnault’s career alone sets him apart from the other artists with whom he is usually grouped. He began his activities in the art world by creating boudoir works for wealthy clientele and seems to never have entirely been able to do away with his appreciation for sensuous forms. This is evidenced by the reemergence of boudoir-style works (albeit in a larger format) at the end of Regnault’s life.[4] Christopher Sellers, a preeminent scholar of Regnault’s works, notes that the

early works of Regnault usually have "an easy sensuality that contrasts favorably with the highly charged emotional atmosphere pervading the erotic themes of the younger generation of neoclassical painters".[4] Moreover, unlike other boudoir paintings, Regnault's contained a kind of "18th-century frankness" in which nudes are placed in contexts which are justifiable yet not wholly appropriate.[4] Here we can see the emergence of a dialectic in Rengault's work - pleasure and deprivation - in which each element is more exemplified by the others' presence. While many of Regnault's works throughout the rest of his life include classical narratives and take up the themes of heroism and virtue that we normally associate with Neoclassical painters, it must be wondered whether aspects of his appreciation of the feminine can also be seen in these works.

Interestingly enough, Regnault was both praised and criticized by contemporaries for his use of bright colors. These were especially prominent in his depictions of the female form. The *Journal des Artistes et des Amateurs* once criticized him for his overindulgent use of pink tones and an "exaggerated freshness" evident in his paintings.[5] Still, another influential art writer, Quatremère de Quincy, praised Regnault for his "pure drawing and brilliant color".[4] Regnault's use of bright colors sets him apart from others who preferred to deal more exclusively with darker tones and the sense of gravity which could be evoked by them. Sellers writes that Regnault's later nude figures have "more of nature than of the ideal, a vitality conferred by a sensitive appreciation of the color values of fair skin - a palpable, immaculate milk-white blushing pink at points of pressure, and shading into opaline blues".[4]

Lest we think that there is little direct connection between Regnault's phases of boudoir painting - done publicly at the start of his career and privately towards its end - and his mythological works, or that no such clear dialectic can be seen in his early boudoir paintings, we can turn to the works done in the height of Regnault's popularity, i.e., the 1780s, 90s, and

perhaps early 1800s. Regnault's 1785 study *Socrates Tearing Alcibiades from the Embrace of Sensuality* provides an excellent case in point. Not only is its theme directly relevant to the question at hand, but also is the first in a series of works made on the myth in question, and can help to indicate consistencies and changes in Regnault's style over time.

The painting is held in the collection of the Smart Museum of Art in the University of Chicago. Created in 1785, only four years before the beginning of the French Revolution, it presents an interesting opportunity to probe the artistic concerns of Regnault as well as his technical choices. The origins of the myth that is taken up in the painting can be indirectly linked to the contents of Plato's *Symposium*. Interestingly enough, the text features no direct mention of Socrates attempting to remove Alcibiades from the embrace of any such figure. However, much of their dynamic in *The Symposium* is central to the ideology of sexual improvement which would be intended by such a removal. This can be best seen in Socrates' discussions with the oracle Diotima. Most crucially, Diotima stresses what is particular about homosexual relationships, a theme running through the course of the Symposium: the intercourse involved can be an platonic intercourse of virtue, in which the older main is "teem[ing] with accounts of virtue" to pass into the younger man (209b8).[6] As sexually suggestive as this account may seem, we must note that homosexual love is considered to be more ideal due to its potential for the improvement of the soul and propagation of virtuous character instead of bodily pleasure.[6]

This form of love can be best understood in the context of the Athenian notion of paiderastia. Paiderastia was moderated by the supposition that it was the duty of the older male in the relationship to instill virtue in the younger. Given that Socrates was "found guilty of corrupting the young men of Athens", we must consider the degree to which Plato uses the example of Socrates' students as a challenge to the notion that he was violating pederastic

principles and corrupting the youth. Alcibiades is a case in point in this regard. Notorious in *The Symposium* for his promiscuity with both men and women, Alcibiades tries to seduce Socrates, but is continuously rejected because he continues to seek physical pleasure and does not attempt to acquire virtue. Even in Alcibiades' appeals to Socrates' inner virtues, it is suggested what is really at hand is an inadequately disguised base form or love, or, as one source describes it, a desire for a "passive, slavish, female pleasure-seeking role". Thus, Alcibiades fails because he is not willing to give himself to "slavery for the sake of virtue" (184c2-3).[6] He has never really loved Socrates' soul, but rather has stayed tied to the popular notion of sensuous love. Here we can see that while Socrates may have had homosexual relationships with some of his students, his relationship with Alcibiades is not of such a sort. Alcibiades is Socrates' problem child, at once pitied and reprimanded. Indeed. his final presence in the *Symposium* shows him arriving with a flute-girl, a disappointing sight indicative of his preference for the life of fancifulness and pleasure.[6]

Thus, from the original text it is quite clear that Alcibiades and Socrates are not substantially sexually involved, and that the most salient theme for Regnault may very well have been Alcibiades' struggle (and eventual failure) to live a life of virtue. Still, from the espoused notions of pederasty in *The Symposium*, it is clear that there is a homoerotic undercurrent to Socrates' relationships with his students that may very well have been partially transferred to that with Alcibiades. This may or may not have been referenced by Regnault in the painting.

From the direct observation of the work, it seems that an overtly homosexual narrative was unintended by the painter. Alcibiades is feminized and faces away from Socrates while being embraced by a mostly nude woman. Given that the homoerotic tension of interest would necessarily be between Socrates and Alcibiades rather than Alcibiades and another man, it is safe

to assume that Alcibiades' feminization is the gendered realization of his lack of virtue. Furthermore, Socrates has his body turned away from Alcibiades, suggesting that he intends to lead the man away from his bodily pleasure rather than himself becoming involved with the student. His anger and powerfully upturned wrist suggest righteous indignation more than a lover's jealousy.

If Socrates embodies the pederast but not the homosexual, what, then, is his relationship to or interest in Alcibiades? Socrates' excessively virile stance can be read as pederastic in comparison to that of Alcibiades: we see in Alcibiades' impatience and soft physique a disdain for the hyper-masculine and a rejection of Socrates' virtues.[7] At first glance, it may seem as if Socrates is but a foil for Alcibiades, used by Regnault to emphasize Alcibiades' life of sin. However, interestingly enough, Socrates is also rendered foolhardy in his overly vigorous attempt to tear away Alcibiades.[7] Thus, one interpretation of *Socrates Tearing Away Alcibiades* (1785) is that Regnault made use of gendered comparison as a means of adding dimension to both characters. It seems as if Regnault is out to suggest that even someone as virtuous and aggressively heroized as Socrates can be ridiculed for his overinvestment in Alcibiades. In turn, perhaps there is a sort of agency which we may attribute to Alcibiades: his lack of virtue is not simply the result of temptation but also a choice.

Other interpretations of Socrates and Alcibiades may help to shed further light on Regnault's different narrative priorities as an artist. Popular 15th century author Marie-Catherine de Villedieu refashioned Alcibiades into a well-meaning but erring student needing correction by Socrates. Jean-Francois Pierre Peyron, who likely read a reprinted version of her tale which had recently become redistributed, then created a work entitled *Socrates Tearing Away Alcibiade from the Charms of Pleasure* (1782). Though Peyron may have borrowed from Villedieu the

narrative of a virtuous Socrates attempting to correct his erring student, he ignores her kinder portrayal of Alcibiades by emphasizing his promiscuity via the inclusion of two evidently keen courtesans.[8]

Peyron was a peer of Regnault's at the Academie and is largely considered to have been a stylistic influence on Regnault. Still, it seems that Peyron's depiction of promiscuity and moral conflict likely piqued Regnault's interest because of its content rather than simply its stylistic attributes. Interestingly, the Alcibiades in Peyron's work differs the most substantially of the three similar figures seen also in Regnault's work. Peyron's Alcibiades casts his head down in shame and begins to remove a wreath (an indicator of frivolity) from his head; he is turned towards the outstretched Socrates as if he is in the process of departing from the scene.[8] Meanwhile, Regnault's Alcibiades is still literally wrapped within the arms of his beau, partially facing away from Socrates despite being forcefully pulled by the man. Here, the tearing away of Alcibiades is not so successful or complete.

In any case, it is likely that the subject continued to hold interest for Regnault, as he returned to this theme in 1810, creating a much larger painting of the same subject. This painting is unfortunately lost to history. [2] Still, the availability of its smaller sister for technical analysis presents a rare opportunity to learn more about the painter's choices and technique.

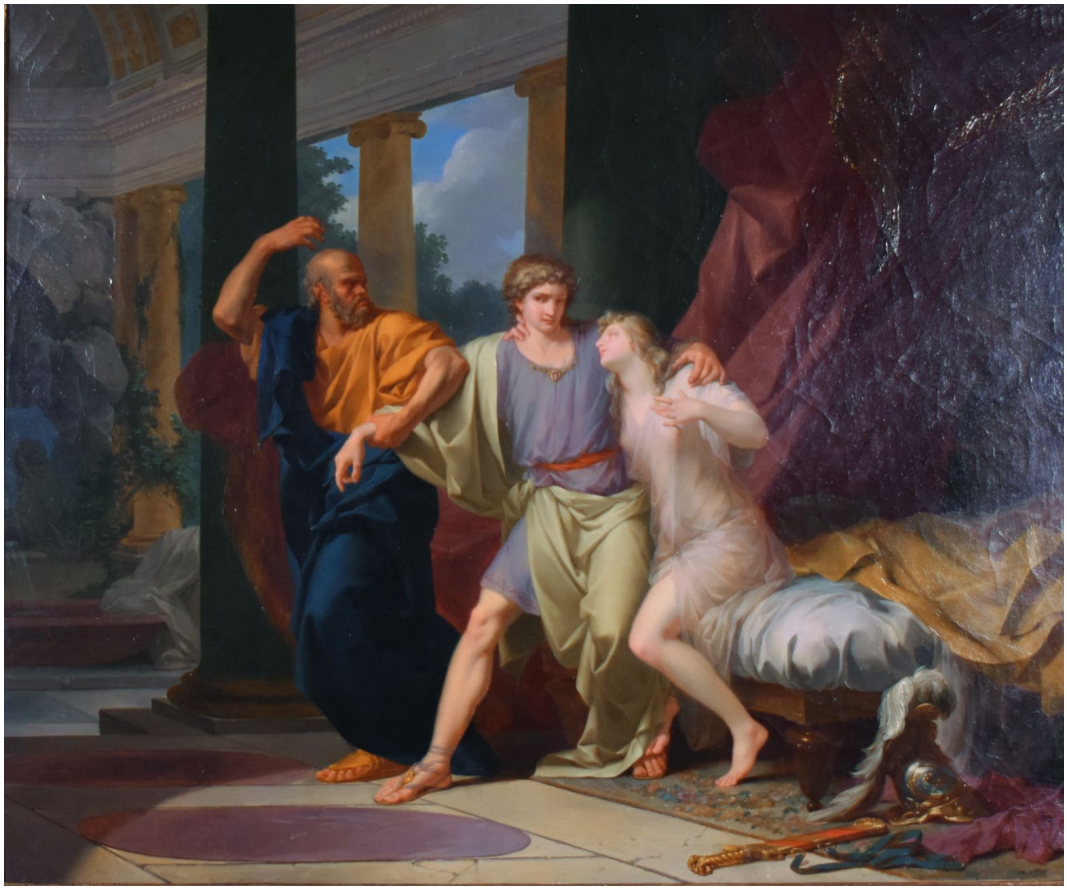
Methods

Infrared photography of *Socrates Tearing Away Alcibiades* was undertaken using a full-spectrum converted Nikon D3500 camera with an 18-55mm f/3.5-5.6G VR Lens with an IR-passing filter set consisting of a 590 nm, 665 nm, 720 nm, 850 nm, and 950 nm longpass filters. The 850 nm filter proved best for obtaining an informative and clear infrared picture. Two LED lamps were positioned six feet away from the painting at forty-five degree angles from the

central horizontal axis of the work.[9] No filter was used in order to create visible light images of the work. Images were white-balanced or converted to grayscale using Adobe Lightroom.

A rudimentary iPhone 7 Plus camera was used to document the fluorescence features which were observable under UVA and UVB light.

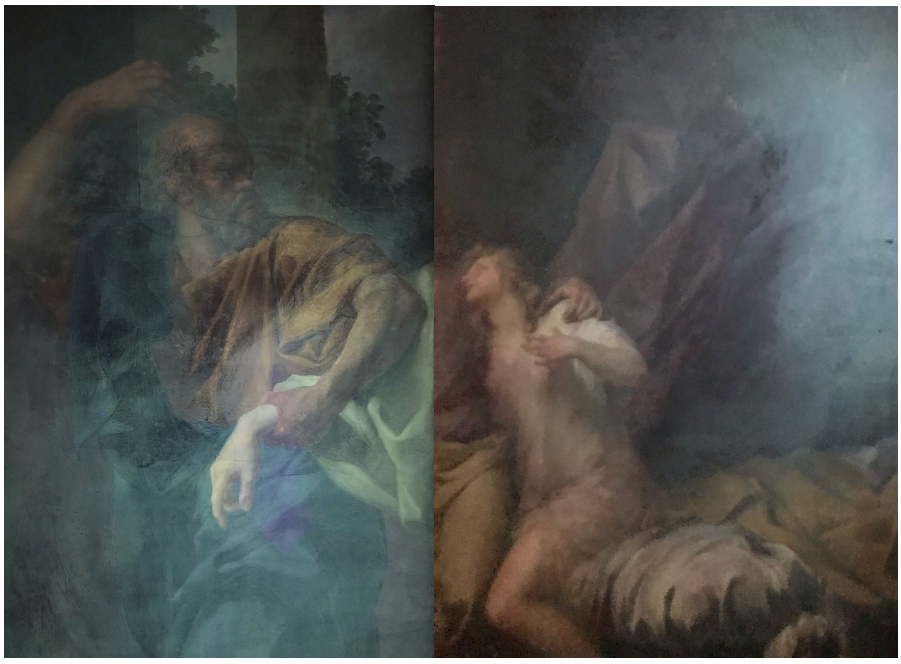
Results



Baron Jean-Baptiste Regnault, Visual light photograph of *Socrates Tearing Away Alcibiades from the Embrace of Sensuality*, 1785, Oil on canvas, 23 1/4 × 28 3/4 in., Chicago, the Smart Museum of Art.

Overall infrared photograph of *Socrates Tearing Away Alcibiades from the Embrace of Sensuality* taken with a 850 nm longpass filter.

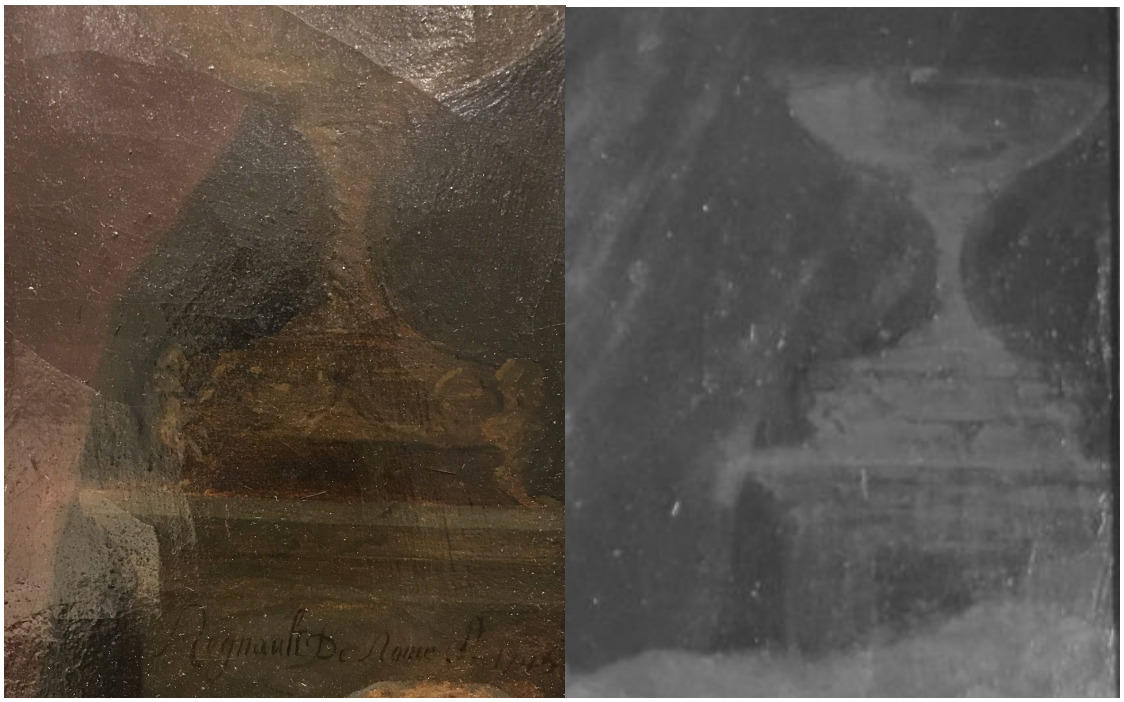
From a visual examination of the painting under ultraviolet light, several phenomena of note were able to be identified. The greenish fluorescence visible most prominently in the proper left upper corner of the painting is indicative of aged varnish. Under visible light, varnish tends to darken a yellow-ish brown color over time, darkening the painted image and muddying its overall appearance.Interestingly, evidence of overcleaning was visible in the uneven removal of varnish around the torso of Socrates. Some conservators have been known to concentrate their efforts at varnish removal on the central figures of a painting. This functions to create a 'spotlight' effect in which these figures can be seen with greater clarity. Still, this technique achieves clarity of the central subjects at the expense of that of the background, potentially distorting the original intent of the artist should he have wished for the enduring prominence of certain additional elements.



Finally, the presence of craquelure in these areas (visible under raking light) suggested that visible light might reflect unevenly on the surface of the painting, casting a glare which would make scrutiny of the painting additionally challenging for the casual viewer. These

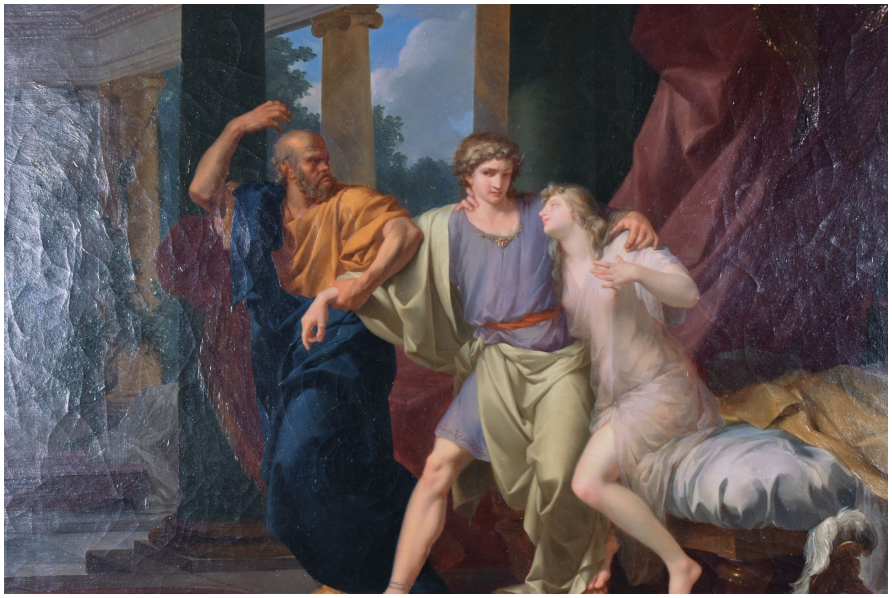
challenges function as motivation for the infrared imaging of the painting. Infrared imaging could allow for revelation of features of the painting which are no longer so visible under normal lighting conditions.

As discussed in the methods section, the 850 nm longpass filter proved best for the production of a clear image in which additional aspects of the painting (and Regnault's process) could be identified. In the proper left side of the painting, a hourglass-shaped chalice or fountain can be seen. Unlike in the visible image, this object stands in stark contrast to the darker drapery behind it. The lighter areas of this object correspond to the section in which Regnault applied the most pigment. Given that Regnault also signed his moniker "Regnault de Rome" on this object, it begs further investigation what the significance of this vessel was for the artist.



Concentrating on the drapery itself, it can be seen that the reddish folds in the same proper left corner were painted with much more detail than can be discerned from the visual image. Aside from allowing a closer look at the different brushstrokes that constitute the twist

and turns of the cloth, the infrared image suggests that stronger folds may have been visible at the time of this piece's initial creation. The curtain may not have recessed into the dark so quickly. On the proper right side of Socrates' torso, a region of light infrared reflectance suggests that a thin layer of pigment was applied to extend the drapery outwards. One is left to consider: were the folds of the drapery meant to rush further towards the figures, seeming to nearly envelop them, and thus contribute to the tension between action and indulgence that is central to this piece?



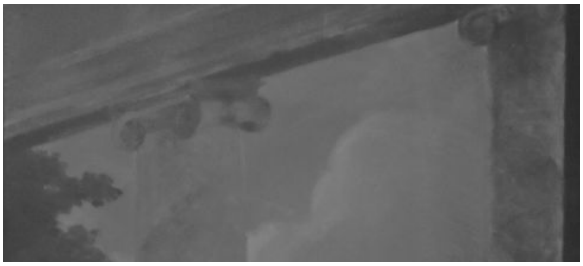
Turning now to the proper left arm of Socrates, an astounding change of heart can be seen in the mind of Regnault. A slight double of the upper portion of Socrates' arm can be seen in the infrared image. This region has a less strong infrared reflectance than the rest of the arm, suggesting that the pigment was removed or covered with an additional layer. Regnault must have lowered the positioning of Socrates' arm after painting in this previous version. Given that Regnault is a student of the French academic style of painting, in which the positioning of the

figures was worked out in preparatory drawings or small painted sketches, this is a significant finding. It suggests that Regnault might have struggled to toe the line between depicting Socrates as aggressively virtuous and overinvested in the fate of Alcibiades. In lowering Socrates' elbow, Regnault moderates the force by which Alcibiades is being pulled away from his indulgence, perhaps lending agency to the figure of Alcibiades and making it seem as if the choice between action and inaction is his to make.

In the heads of Socrates and the female figure, the IR image brings to the fore differences in pigment application. The darker areas in the face of Socrates are evidence of the use of an additional pigment that is minimally present in the flesh tones of the two other figures. This pigment is likely to have contributed to the ruddy complexion of Socrates and his seeming anger at the inaction of his student.

In general it can be said that infrared photography in the 800-900 nm range is well suited for the revelation of areas in which different pigments were used. Aside from the aforementioned areas, additional features can be seen which may be of interest to the art historian of technique. Unlike in the visible image, the proper right corner of the bed frame can be seen clearly. At both

corners one can discern a pattern: curvilinear strokes are used in the constitution of the feet of the bed, whereas straight are used in the area where the feet make the bed frame. Likewise, in the curves of the Ionic columns in the proper right of the painting, one can see that Regnault uses a pigment which appears darker under IR to add dimension to the curved volutes. In most areas, Regnault's brushwork seems to follow the volumetric direction of his forms. The author posits that this sort of form-fitting technique is a consequence of Regnault's academic training.



However, Regnault departs from this technique in a few select areas. Most interestingly, one can see that short, dab-like brushstrokes were used in the purple floor mat closest to the foot of Alcibiades. These brustrokes are indicative of Regnault's mixing of paints directly on the painted surface. To a lesser extent, the direct mixture of color can also be seen in the clothed torso of Alcibiades. Many painters preferred to mix their paints on a palette and then smoothly apply the mixture to a desired region. Perhaps the direct mixing of paint within a single region of color is indicative of Regnault's penchant for experimentation with color. One wonders whether Regnault chafed at the strictures of the academic painting process. Could he empathize with Alcibiades' struggle to live a "proper" life?

Conclusion

Regnault's dual interest in restraint and indulgence is reflected in his subject matter, color choices, and technique while painting *Socrates Tearing Away Alcibiades from the Embrace of Sensuality*. While it remains to be seen exactly where Regnault ended up in his own personal quest to explore virtue and vice, it is clear that the availability of a technical art historical method motivates the reanalysis of his oeuvre. This paper serves as proof of concept that a simple imaging setup can be used to achieve profound insights into the mind of an understudied painter such as Regnault, someone whose concerns might have been previously thought to be lost to history.

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