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Hidden newsprint, painting found beneath Pablo Picasso artwork

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WASHINGTON: Scientists have peered into the thick layers of Spanish artist Pablo Picasso's famous Blue Period painting, unveiling a page from a 1902 French newspaper and traces of another artwork.

Researchers from National Gallery of Art in the US conducted hyperspectral infrared imaging of Picasso's *Mother and Child by the Sea* - a painting in the collection of the Pola Museum of Art in Japan.

The analysis revealed portions of printed text in French similar to newsprint.

Using the readable text, Keiko Imai, chief curator, Pola Museum of Art, was able to identify the source of the text as an issue of the French daily newspaper *Le Journal* published on January 18, 1902.

While the reason for the presence of newsprint in the paint layers is a mystery, the discovery is significant for Picasso scholars due to the proximity of the date to the artist's move from Paris to Barcelona.

The study also provided more information about a prior paint composition seen in the X-radiograph.

The infrared images also show another earlier signature by the artist in the opposite orientation.

"I was surprised and fascinated by this finding in a painting I have always admired at our museum.

We were able to officially confirm that Mother and Child by the Seawas painted after the date of the newspaper article used on the canvas," said Imai.

"We routinely focus our cameras on a sheet of paper with printed text prior to placing the painting on the easel," said John Delaney, senior imaging scientist, National Gallery of Art.

"To verify we were in good focus, we pointed the camera first at the face of the mother and to my surprise immediately saw newspaper text in her face!" said Delaney.

"The presence of a paper interleaf begins to make sense of the fine wrinkling in the surface texture and the gentle undulations observed in several areas over the surface," said Sandra Webster-Cook, senior paintings conservator, Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) in Canada.

"It suggests that the paper does not perfectly conform to the underlying paint surface," said Webster-Cook.

"What is exciting about this finding is that the sheet from Le Journal that Keiko Imai has identified offers Picasso scholars a firm date before which the seated woman in the composition underneath was painted," she said.

"The January 18, 1902 date of the paper interleaf is also of interest, as it is known Picasso returned to Barcelona from Paris sometime in early January 1902," she said.

Picasso is commonly known to have reused canvases and often integrated elements of previous compositions into his subsequent works.

Indications of earlier compositions are often visible on the painting's surface, and can be linked to distinctive crackle patterns, different paint colours visible through cracks and abrasion or at the edges of works, and the texture of dried impasto formed from previous paint layers that do not correspond to the painting's final composition.

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