Technical analysis of Abraham Janssens' *Entombment* in the National Museum in Warsaw*

Technical analysis of Abraham Janssens' *Entombment* revealed some interesting data affording a better understanding and interpretation of the painting. Conservation treatment presented a unique opportunity for a thorough examination of this work. Several paint samples were analysed to establish the structure of the ground and the paint layers, as well as the painting techniques, pigments and mediums employed.

**Support**

For his painting, Janssens used a fine, plain tabby weave linen canvas (16 threads in the warp and 20 in the weft). No original tacking margins are present in the canvas. The extant turnovers (on the sides and at the bottom) are fairly shredded and partially covered by paint related to the colours of the front surface. The top edge must have been trimmed at some point and is now straight, 1.5 cm above an existing seam. Observation of the threads around the edges of the canvas reveals no recurrent distortion of the weave pattern. The absence of cusping along the edges and the presence of well-preserved paint on the turned-over edges, and the uneven margins on the sides and the bottom of the painting can be considered as proof of past alteration.

Close examination of the canvas yields some insights concerning the painting's original format. The support was made up of two pieces of canvas sewn together. The difference between the two pieces of canvas on either side of the seam parallel to the upper edge is quite obvious. The added strip must have been much wider than it is now, given the missing cusping and tacking margins as well as its straight, cut edge. Let us first discuss the measurements of the main part of the canvas. Presently the painting measures 155 x 180.5 cm plus margins of about 2 cm on both sides and 3 cm at the bottom (fig. 1). Consequently, the width of the main cloth including the turned-over margins is about 156.5 to 157 cm. In the Antwerp area in the first half of the 17th century, cloth was generally woven with a standard width and most commonly measured in units called 'ell of Brabant' of approximately 69.6 cm. One of the possible canvas widths for the main part might have been 10/4 ells (approximately 174 cm) or 9/4 ells (approximately 157.6 cm). The size of 9/4 ells exactly matches the present measurement of the main piece of canvas, however taking the later reduction of the canvas into account, an additional 16.5 cm at the bottom would not be disturbing. On the contrary, it would complete the present composition, especially considering the practice of stretching the canvas which would have used some of it (at least 3 cm) and another centimetre for sewing the canvases together. Preparing the canvas involved stretching it over a
Fig. 1
Diagram of the construction of the canvas support.

strainer, and then sizing and priming it. For smaller paintings, the canvas was simply tacked to the sides of the framework. For larger paintings, pieces of canvas (or, as in our case, two pieces sewn together), were attached inside the strainer with cords. The cords were laced through holes drilled in the frame bars at regular intervals, and the edge of the canvas. The cords allowed control of any possible sagging and waving of the expanding, moistened canvas. Stretching tensions created a wavy pattern of the threads near the edges where they were pulled outward at the points where the cord had been laced through the canvas. This characteristic cusp- ing, which was fixed by sizing and priming, can now be observed when examining the original backs of the paintings or their x-radiographs, though often this pattern is still visible in the painting's surface, particularly in raking light.¹

Since there are no traces of any cusping along the lower edge of the canvas, it is more likely that the main part of the canvas support measured 10/4. How big was the originally added strip? Technically, two equal pieces of cloth could have been joined together, in which case the seam would have been in the middle. The minimum reasonable width would be an additional ¾ ell whereby the composition's height could have been about 180 cm. Accordingly, the composition should be wider by at least 5 cm on either side since no wavy deformations of the threads can be observed. Painting sizes were also described in dimensions of 'doek' or canvas, which we now suspect were related to measurements in Brabant ells, similarly divided into 'half-doecxkens' (half canvasses) or 'quaertkens' (quarter canvasses).¹ Since the height of the compositions is so close to the standard size of 10/4 ell (2 and ½ 'doecxkens'),