



Behind the scenes at the National Gallery.

By Sarah Berry

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Sarah's career at the National Gallery began almost by accident. She worked there initially whilst as a student in the photographic department. Later, she returned in a full time capacity following a chance meeting in a street with a member of the Gallery, starting off by covering leave in the photographic department, moving on to the retouching department. Her final role in her 20 year tenure was head of the photographic department.

Her fascinating talk and slides highlighted a whole range of activities that take place within the organisation: from that of curator, conservator, the scientific dept., art handlers, framing dept., the registrar's dept., the library & archive dept., the visitor services & security dept. through to the education dept. Many of these we don't think about on a day to day basis, but when mentioned it's obvious that they are required.

Many of the functions are inter-related. For example, photography is used to determine the authenticity of many pictures and to learn more about how they were originally produced. Photography using infrared light can pick out paint at different depths from the surface and can be used to confirm an artist's style across a range of works. It also reveals changes to paintings, where the artist had a change of mind and altered the posture of the subject or details in a landscape. Raking, in which the pictures are lit from the side is used to detect surface features such as brush strokes, again to confirm authenticity. UV light will pick out the different pigments used in the paints as well as varnishes – this has uncovered artist's experiments with different paint mixtures. Xrays will reveal the damage suffered by a painting, for example if it ever got wet.

The photographic department itself has undergone a tremendous transformation over the years. The original thin and delicate photographic plates of early archives were at great risk from the environment they were housed in, as well as those wanting to knock through the space in which they were kept. Persistent work by Sarah and her team eventually paid off in that they now have their own environmentally controlled storage area. The move from plate to digital photography was no less dramatic, it took 18 months work to digitally photograph the whole collection, mounting them on a special stand and scanning sections at a time. Even the Anrep mosaics in the entrance to the Gallery have been carefully digitised, although the camera had to come to them.

Parts of Sarah's talk also covered the background history of the gallery. That and information on current exhibitions can be found at <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/>