

*The VSC: a new tool for watermark research at The Courtauld Gallery, London*

At The Courtauld Gallery in London I was tasked to record, describe, measure and research all watermarks in our collection of around 7,000 drawings. This was made eminently easier when, in 2020, we procured a Video Spectral Comparator, or VSC. Originally developed for the detection of fraudulent bank notes and identity documents by banks and customs officers, this scanner has been repurposed by museums for the technical examination of works on paper. Using a combination of transmitted and infrared light, we are able to obtain new digital images of our watermarks, which are nearly always more legible than those taken with only transmitted light. This process has the added advantage that we usually do not need to remove our drawings from their mounts, thus saving previous time and not requiring specialist handling by a Conservator. We are able to digitally measure and annotate the watermarks and the distance between laid and chain lines to the hundredth millimetre, allowing unprecedented precision in the comparison of watermarks and detection of possible mould-mates. There is a 3D modelling feature which maps the topography of the paper, in some cases allowing us to generate a 3D model of the watermark, particularly useful when watermarks are obscured by media.

With the implementation of our new collections database in 2021 and website in 2023, we have begun adding these new images to our website, so that they can be searched and viewed by any member of the public, with the aim to ultimately upload all watermarks in the collection. This is a relatively unusual step amongst our UK cohorts, but we hope to encourage our colleagues to follow suit, enabling a wider range of high resolution digital photographs of watermarks and their cataloguing data for research by anyone anywhere in the world.

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