

The x-ray image of a nativity scene, discovered under another painting. The baby Jesus can be seen centre left.

Jul 16, 2024 09:26 BST

## Musician gives new life to hidden nativity painting

**A painting hidden for hundreds of years under another work of art has been given a new lease of life after being used on the cover of former MGMT guitarist Hank Sullivant's new album, *The Color of Heaven*.**

The painting, which is owned by [The Bowes Museum](#), depicts a nativity scene, including a baby in a manger, a wise man or Magi, and the outline of a stable building, and [was discovered in 2019 by art conservators at Northumbria University](#).

It had been hidden for around 400 years after being painted over with an image depicting the beheading of John the Baptist and was only discovered when an x-ray was taken to determine possible damage to the painting's wooden frame.

The discovery received international media coverage and led to American musician and singer Hank Sullivant coming across the story last year while researching potential images for his band Kuroma's latest album.



Musician Hank Sullivant (photo credit: Ansley West)

Having begun his career as a rock musician, in recent years Hank has developed an interest in choral music, particularly 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Anglican hymns, and recently taught himself to play the church organ.

His interest in x-ray images of paintings, combined with *The Color of Heaven's* religious links, meant he felt an instant connection to the nativity scene, and he contacted [Senior Lecturer in Conservation of Fine Art Nicky Grimaldi](#) to ask permission to use it.

As he explains: "I first came across x-rays of paintings about 10 years ago and aesthetically they really appealed to me. They have a haunted quality and so much texture and form. The longer you look at them an image starts to reveal itself.

"When I finished my latest album and began looking for an image for the

front cover, I started searching for x-ray images and came across the nativity scene discovered by Nicky.

“It immediately appealed to me – the section with the crib was very luminous and seemed to reflect the sound we had been seeking to create through our music.

“One of the songs on the album, *Neverending Night*, is written from the perspective of the Magi when they find Jesus – the joy at recognising him as the son of God, but also the sorrow when they see the sadness in his future, and so this painting just seemed to fit perfectly.”

The painting of John the Baptist is believed to be around 400 years old and belongs to The Bowes Museum, having been collected by its Founders Joséphine and John Bowes in the 19th century.

It is painted in a late medieval style and probably formed part of a larger altar piece. As was typical of the era it is painted onto a piece of canvas spread over a large panel made from planks of wood, usually oak, pine or even chestnut.

However, in the years between the painting being made and The Bowes Museum taking ownership, this wooden structure had begun to deteriorate. Museum curators therefore worked in collaboration with experts from [Northumbria's renowned Conservation of Fine Art MA course](#) to assess the damage.

Assistant Professor Nicky Grimaldi led the investigations and discovered the nativity scene. She said: “I think it’s wonderful that this painting, which has been covered up and hidden for all these years, is now being seen by people around the world through Hank’s music.



Assistant Professor Nicky Grimaldi pictured with The Bowes Museum panel painting, under which the nativity scene was discovered.

“It really shows the power of art – how an image can be interpreted in different ways and how people can feel this incredible connection to an image despite it having been painted hundreds of years ago.

“We know nothing about the artist who painted the nativity scene, and only have this ghostly x-ray image to go by – but it still gives us a tantalising glimpse of what the original painting would have looked like.”

Nicky has worked with a range of heritage organisations throughout her career to help uncover the health and history of paintings. As well as the John the Baptist painting, Nicky has also worked with The Bowes Museum to uncover the secret behind its painting [The Death of Lucretia](#), believed to be by Italian Baroque painter Guido Reni, or one of his apprentices.

In 2011 she hit the headlines when she discovered [a portrait of Susanna](#)

[Trevelyan by Thomas Gainsborough](#), situated at Wallington Hall in Northumberland, and thought to have been over-painted by the studio assistants of his rival Sir Joshua Reynolds.

And last year, while working with the National Trust at Seaton Delaval Hall, she was able to shed light on [the history of a painting of sisters Frances and Sarah Delaval](#), painted by Newcastle-born artist William Bell.

[Find out more about studying Conservation of Fine Art at Northumbria University.](#)

---

### **Northumbria University:**

UNIVERSITY OF THE YEAR 2022 (Times Higher Education Awards)

Northumbria is a research-intensive university that unlocks potential for all, changing lives regionally, nationally and internationally.

Two thirds of Northumbria's undergraduate students come from the North East region and go into employment in the region when they graduate, demonstrating Northumbria's significant contribution to social mobility and levelling up in the North East of England.

Find out more about us at [www.northumbria.ac.uk](http://www.northumbria.ac.uk)

Please contact [media.communications@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:media.communications@northumbria.ac.uk) with any media enquiries or interview requests

### **The Bowes Museum:**

The Bowes Museum is a charity managing a Grade 1 listed accredited museum and Grade 2 listed parkland in Barnard Castle. Founded by Joséphine & John Bowes 150+ years ago, this purpose-built Museum brings together an extraordinary, Designated collection of European fine and decorative art as a cultural resource for the people of Northern England, where today we celebrate artists, designers and makers.

The Bowes Museum receives funding from Durham County Council and, as a National Portfolio

Organisation, receives support from Arts Council England. Arts Council England is the national development body for arts and culture across England, working to enrich people's lives.

[www.artscouncil.org.uk](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk)

The Bowes Museum is a member of the Discover Durham partnership of attractions, whose commitment is to promote Durham as an exciting and vibrant group travel destination and to provide the travel trade with a professional and knowledgeable service.

[www.thisisdurham.com/discover-durham](http://www.thisisdurham.com/discover-durham)

Admission to The Bowes Museum is £13.50 for local members (residents of County Durham and Darlington), £15.50 for members (residents elsewhere), £18.00 for a day ticket, £19.80 for a day ticket including gift aid. Under 18s, full time students and carers are free.

As a registered charity (number 1079639) The Bowes Museum needs to generate more than half of its income each year to care for the historic collection, buildings and parkland. Donations are vital to its work. Visit <https://thebowesmuseum.org.uk/support/> for more information.

## Contacts



### **Rik Kendall**

Press Contact

PR and Media Manager

Business and Law / Arts, Design & Social Sciences

[rik.kendall@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:rik.kendall@northumbria.ac.uk)

07923 382339



**Andrea Slowey**

Press Contact

PR and Media Manager

Engineering and Environment / Health and Life Sciences

[andrea.slowey@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:andrea.slowey@northumbria.ac.uk)

07708 509436



**Rachael Barwick**

Press Contact

PR and Media Manager

[rachael.barwick@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:rachael.barwick@northumbria.ac.uk)

07377422415



**James Fox**

Press Contact

Student Communications Manager

[james2.fox@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:james2.fox@northumbria.ac.uk)

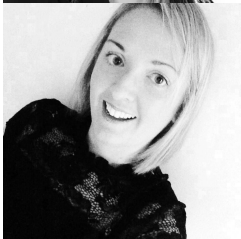


**Kelly Elliott**

Press Contact

PR and Media Officer

[kelly2.elliott@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:kelly2.elliott@northumbria.ac.uk)



**Gemma Brown**

Press Contact

PR and Media Officer

[gemma6.brown@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:gemma6.brown@northumbria.ac.uk)