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Hilda Rix Nicholas' painting methods and materials in Morocco

While resident in France from 1907 to 1914, the Australia artist Hilda Rix Nicholas travelled twice to Tangiers, in Morocco, staying in the *Hôtel Villa de France*. On her first trip in 1912 she was accompanied by American artist Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937) and spent two months painting. She returned to Tangiers for three months in 1914, accompanied by her sister Elsie (1877-1914). On arrival in Morocco in 1912, Hilda wrote about her first impressions of Tangiers that made her feel as if she were in 'an extraordinarily beautiful dream'.¹ She worked in the *souk* (the outdoor marketplace) every day, painting directly in front of her subjects on small pieces of canvas cut from a large roll of fabric. Before applying paint, she pinned the canvas pieces at each corner to a drawing board. Evidence of this method can still be seen on the paintings, where white 'halos' of unpainted tack-marks are found in the corners, as seen in 'The Souk of Morocco' and the other small oils from Tangiers.

Rix Nicholas painted rapidly, applying thick, confident strokes of bright colour, sometimes with just a single mark to capture the head of a figure in the crowd or a flag flapping in the wind. This thick paint would take time to dry, and consequently when the artist carried the paintings back to her hotel from the *souk*, some areas of the still wet paint became compressed, as seen in the surface of the central white flag and other areas of 'The Souk of Morocco'. Art historian John Pigot observed that Rix Nicholas' drawings made in the marketplace were 'more carefully rendered and completed in several sittings, with finishing touches added later in her hotel room'.² In contrast, Rix Nicholas has made no attempt to cover the pin-holes and white 'halos', nor correct the compressed paint in her small oils. Choosing to retain these marks of process suggests the artist aimed to depict her experience of the *souk* as faithfully as possible in her small oil paintings. These physical qualities embody the artist's experience of painting in Morocco as she captured 'an extraordinarily beautiful dream', an experience still visible in the paintings now here in Australia over a century after their creation.

¹ Letter to two friends from Hilda Rix, 5 February 1912 'To Angels' from Hotel Villa de France, Tangier, Morocco, cited in of *Capturing the Orient Hilda Rix Nicholas & Ethel Carrick in the East*, Waverly City Gallery Touring Exhibition, 1993-4, p. 14.

² Pigot, John 'Les Femmes Orientalistes: Hilda Rix Nicholas and Ethel Carrick in the East' pp. 155-168, in *Strange Women Essays in Art and Gender* Edited by Jeanette Hoorn, Melbourne University Press, 1994, p. 162.



Image: 'The Souk of Morocco', oil on canvas adhered to wooden board, 26 x 33 cm, by Hilda Rix Nicholas, 1912/14. Rix Wright Collection.



Image: Pin holes and white 'halo' at bottom and top right corners of 'The Souk of Morocco' and wooden board auxiliary support visible at edges.

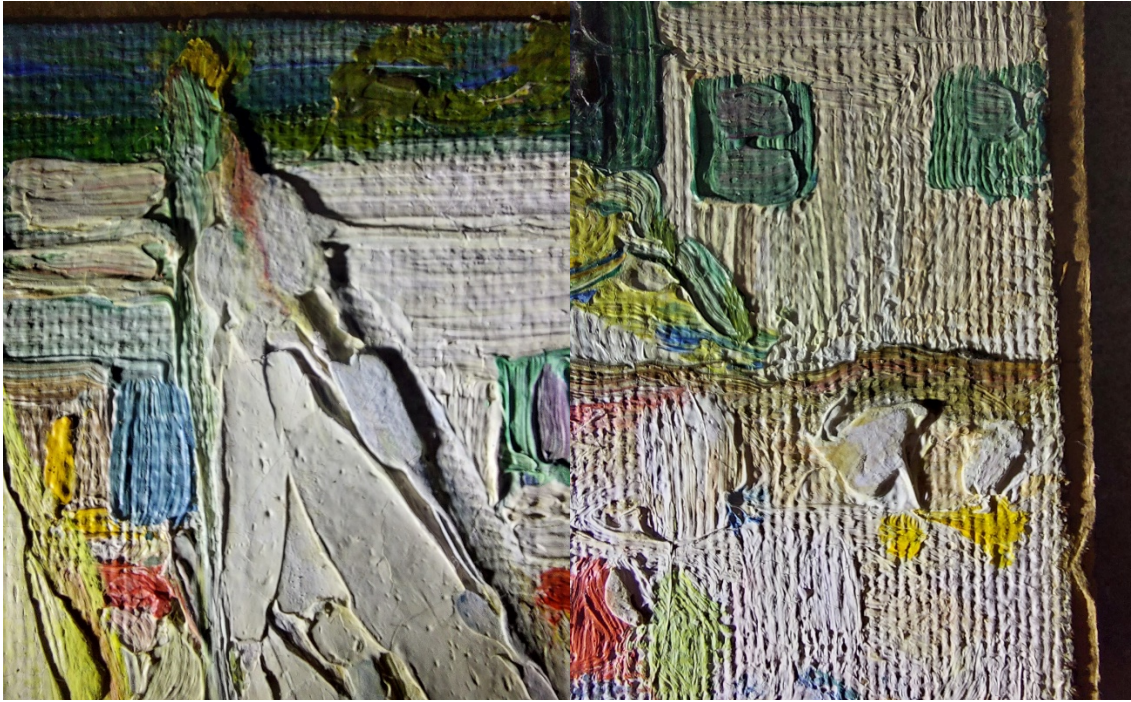


Image: Compressed white paint in the white flag and at right edge of 'The Souk of Morocco'.

Catherine Nunn is an independent painting conservator, an elected Fellow of the International Institute for Conservation and she is also completing a PhD in Conservation and Art History at the University of Melbourne. Her doctoral research focuses on materiality and Australian artists in France in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including Hilda Rix Nicholas. She has published in conservation journals and exhibition catalogues, and lectured in the Masters program at the Grimwade Centre, at the University of Melbourne. Previously, she worked as a painting conservator at the Victoria and Albert Museum, Auckland Art Gallery and in private conservation studios in London on Old Master paintings. Originally trained in conservation at the University of Canberra (1998), she also completed an advanced internship at the Hamilton Kerr Institute, University of Cambridge (2003-5), and a MA (by research) at the University of Melbourne (2011).