

Report on the examination of the painting

***Venus (1912)* by Mikhail Larionov**

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Location and date of the report: Museum Ludwig, Cologne, May 2017

1. Identification of the artwork

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| object type: | painting |
| genre: | canvas painting |
| title: | <i>Venus</i> |
| artist: | Larionov, Mikhail (1881-1964) variations in spelling: Larionow, Michail Larionoff, Michel Larionow, Michail Larionov, Michail Fedorovic |
| signed: | right lower corner, recto ¹ |
| date of object: | 1912 (as given in the museums files) |
| inventory number: | ML 01332 |
| owner: | Museum Ludwig, Cologne Donation of Peter and Irene Ludwig (Ludwig Collection) |
| location: | Museum Ludwig, Cologne |
| material/ technique: description in catalogues / museum files: | Tempera on canvas |
| description after technical study: | Oil paint on woven support |
| Actual size of object without frame (height x width x depth): | 56,0 x 73,5 x 2,0 cm |

¹ Due to earlier restoration treatments done before acquisition of the painting the signature is not clearly visible anymore with the naked eye. The area is covered with a thin brownish glazing (see figure 10). Images of the painting published in earlier exhibition catalogues show it more clearly.

2. Technical investigation

Methods of examination:

The investigation of the painting *Venus* was carried out in February 2017 by Verena Franken and it contained the examination of the artwork with the naked eye and with a stereomicroscope² in different light sources (incident light, raking light, reflective light). In addition, results of investigation under ultraviolet light (UV) are considered in the following text.

2.1 Canvas support

The support is not a typical artists' canvas. Its structure and colour are similar to straw. The type of textile weave is a tabby weave. The fabric is of relatively low density. It is quite open, of a coarse and irregular nature showing much variation of the "threads" in both directions (see Figs. 1 and 2). Neither a z-twist nor s-twist was detected (see Fig. 3). As no selvage is preserved warp and weft directions cannot be determined unambiguously. Flat and thicker "threads" are present in both directions recto (see Fig. 3). Some fibres stand proud of the surface and are not integrated to the structure (see Fig. 4). As the canvas support has been lined signatures, inscriptions or labels are not visible on the reverse.

2.2 Stretching

The painting has been lined and re-stretched on a new stretcher. The tacking margins were cut away at the current turnover edge. Therefore the position of the original turnover edge cannot be determined and no original fastening points are preserved (see Fig. 5). There is no evidence how the canvas was stretched by the artist.

The lining canvas is mounted at the tacking margins with totally 92 new tacks of the same type. They were inserted at regular fastening intervals of 2,0-3,5 cm spacing and were driven into the tacking margins of the lining canvas. Additionally, adhesive was used to secure the lining canvas on the reverse of the stretcher.

² Firm: Wild Heerbrugg, type: 308795, magnification: x 10-40.

2.3 Stretcher

The current stretcher is not original. The original strainer or stretcher is not preserved. There is no evidence for its type and size (for example no stretcher marks are discernible). It was changed possibly when lining treatment had been done. The new stretcher with ten expansion keys (all keys are present) and with vertical centre-bar measures 56,0 x 73,5 x 2,0 cm. It appears to be composed of softwood. The stretcher bars are mitred at the corners and they are fastened by mortise-and-tenon joints. The high degree of finish and regularity suggest that the stretcher is machine-made. On the reverse of the stretcher there are no labels. There are only residues of a recent paper label at the left lower corner. Additionally, the inscription 'x 302' is noticed on the right stretcher bar³.

2.4 Sizing and ground layer

In contrast to all other Larionov paintings belonging to the Ludwig collection which were investigated there is no ground layer on the front side of the canvas. No use of a sizing layer was observed.

2.5 Underdrawing

No evidence for an underdrawing was found by investigation with macroscopic and microscopic means (magnification of x 40). It is rather to suppose that the artist worked directly without underdrawing.

2.6 Paint layer

In many areas the canvas is not covered by a paint layer; the colours were probably not applied up to the turnover edge (see Fig. 5). The palette is limed to white, red, brown and dark brown-to-black tones (see Fig. 6).⁴ The paint layer has a mat surface and it is water-sensitive.⁵ The brown paint is glossier than the others. Especially the white tone seems to be brittle indicating that it probably contains a low amount of binding agent. It is supposed that a brownish orange tone was mixed by the artist. This single tone was used for a larger space of the nude's body (see Figs. 7 and 8).

The paint has been applied with a brush. However, no clear brushwork is discernible. Thin layers of varying thickness are used. In some parts paints were applied so thinly that the tops of the threads are not covered with paint (see Fig. 9). The brownish orange tone was applied predominantly as thin application or as fluid, diluted paint (Figs. 7 and 8). Especially in the lower part of the painting the canvas was covered with a very thin brownish and in parts reddish paint. It is scarcely visible with the naked eye (see Fig. 10). However, it is discernible with the microscope (see Fig. 11) and under UV illumination, too. Lines and small dots as well as different patterns were utilised to represent motifs such as a branch with leaves (see Figs. 12, 13 and 14).

The two cats in the left upper part of the painting were painted in more detail. A pattern of short brush strokes painted in white and red tones was used (see Fig. 16). A similar pattern with short brush strokes in diagonal direction was used for the nude's headdress and for the

³ Localisation considered from the reverse.

⁴ White paint (see especially cloth), red paint (see cats, hat of nude and pattern of cloth), orange tone (see body of the nude), brown paint (see outline of nude or cats and background), black paint (see left cat).

⁵ Water-sensitivity was tested in areas with white, red and brown paint (magnification: x 40).

cloth (Figs. 17 and 18). Sometimes colours were applied layered upon one another (see Fig. 21).

Larionov is known to have executed a series of Venuses, both drawn and painted. There is a significant similarity to Larionov's 'Venus with cats'⁶ (see also report on archive review). The paint layer has a sketchy character and was applied quickly. A brushy outline was used for the composition, especially to paint the contours of the nude's body with brown paint (width of the outlines of approx. 5 mm, see Fig. 19). The outlines of the nude's body were first drawn with a dark brown tone. Afterwards the body's shape was filled with brownish orange tone. Then outlining was painted with dark brown colour and a few details of the nude's body were highlighted in a reddish tone (see Fig. 20). Optical microscopic investigation reveals that first the dark brown paint (often as outlines), then the white and at last the red tone were applied for the areas of the two cats as well as for the pattern of the nude's headdress and of the cloth. It is not possible to detect whether the painting's background or the nude's body was painted first. No major revisions or changes are visible in the composition under normal conditions or magnification.

2.7 Varnish

Neither the macroscopic and microscopic investigation nor the examination under ultraviolet light gave an evidence for the presence of a varnish. No evidence for a former removal of varnish was detected (no residues of varnish in depths of the paint layer, no structural change of the paint layer caused by swelling and no over-cleaning of the paint layer).

⁶ 'Venus with cats', a gouache on paper, dated to 1925/1930, from the collection of the Centre Pompidou.

3. Photographic documentation

4.1 Technical aspects

localisation of Figure 1



Figure 1: *Venus*, detail macro, upper right part of the painting, raking light. The weave is coarse and irregular showing much variation in both directions.

localisation of Figure 2



Figure 2: *Venus*, microscopic photograph, x 10, the nude's right hand, incident light.

localisation of Figure 3



Figure 3: *Venus*, microscopic photograph, x 20, the nude's right hand, incident light.

localisation of Figure 4

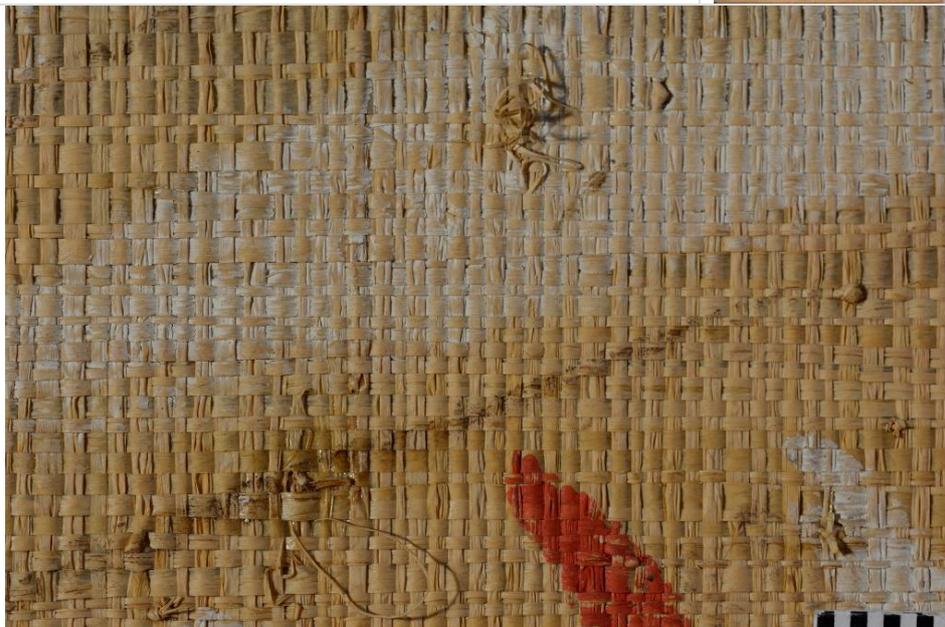


Figure 4: *Venus*, detail macro, right lower part of the painting, incident light. Some bundles of fibres stand proud of the surface and are not integrated to the structure.



Figure 5: *Venus*, detail macro, lower left corner, incident light. As the tacking margins were cut away at the current turnover edge the position of the original turnover edge cannot be determined and no original fastening points are preserved. During lining treatment the original canvas was embedded and fixed to the lining canvas with a white material.

localisation of Figure 6

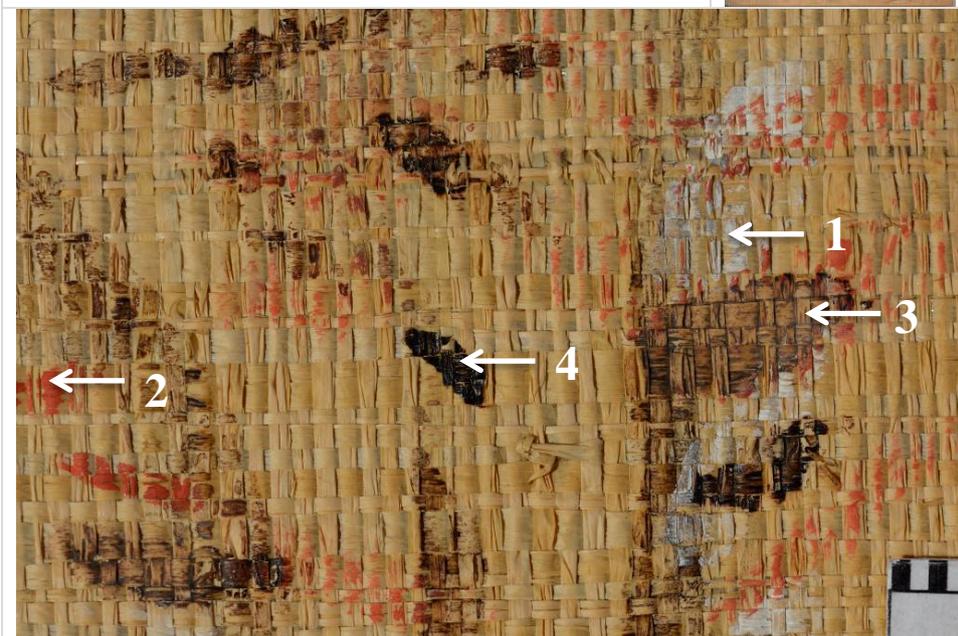
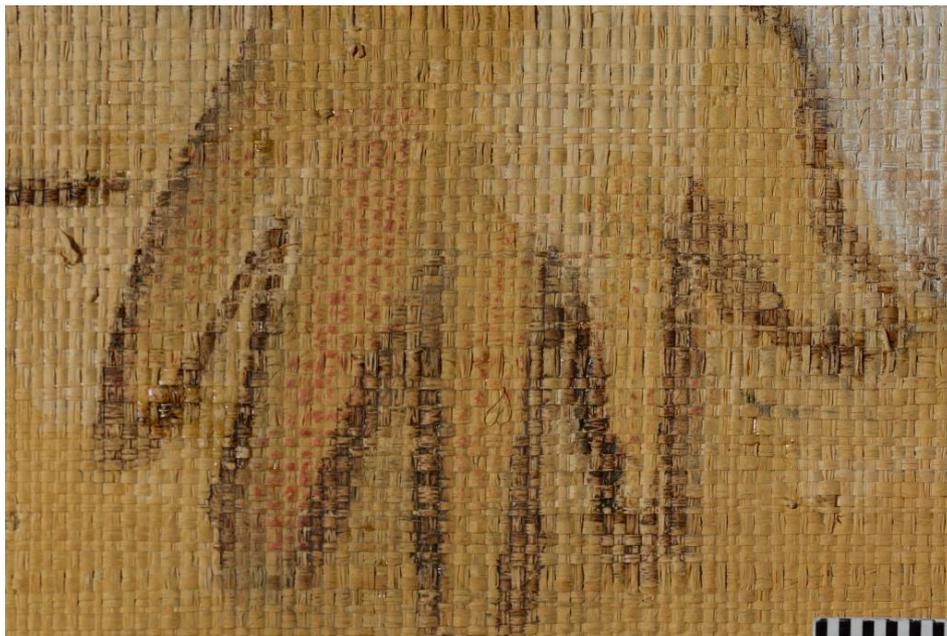


Figure 6: *Venus*, detail macro, left upper part of the painting, incident light. The colour palette is limited to white (1), red (2), brown (3) and dark brown-to-black (4) tones.

localisation of Figures 7 and 8



Figures 7 and 8: *Venus*, details macro, left lower part (feet) and lower-mid part (hand), incident light. The flesh tone which was probably mixed by the artist was used for the space of the nude's body as fluid and diluted paint.

localisation of Figure 9



Figure 9: *Venus*, detail macro, upper right corner, incident light. In some areas where the paint was applied as thin layer the heights of the threads are only barely covered by paint.



Figure 10: *Venus*, detail macro, lower right corner, incident light: Signature. Parts of the background area were covered by a thin brownish glazing which is barely visible with the naked eye.

localisation of Figure 11



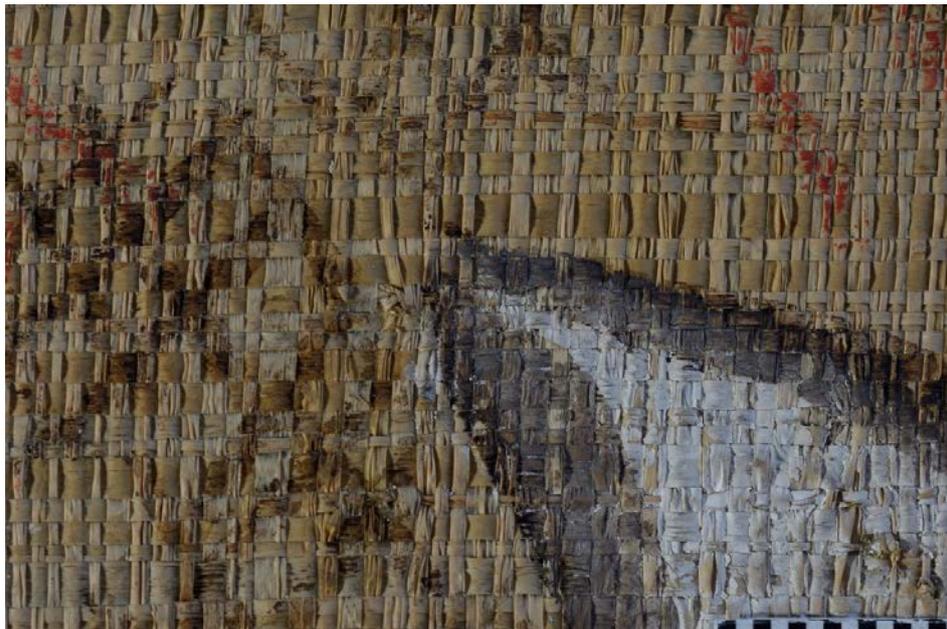
Figure 11: *Venus*, detail macro, left lower part of the painting, incident light. In the background area the canvas in parts was covered by a thin red application.

localisation of Figure 12



Figure 12: *Venus*, detail macro, upper-mid part of the painting, raking light. Dots of white paint were applied on the canvas for an area representing a tree.

localisation of Figures 13 and 14



Figures 13 and 14: *Venus*, details macro, upper-mid part of the painting, incident light (top) and raking light (bottom). Lines and a pattern of short brush strokes in diagonal directions were utilised by Larionov to paint the upper background with a sketchy character.

localisation of Figure 15

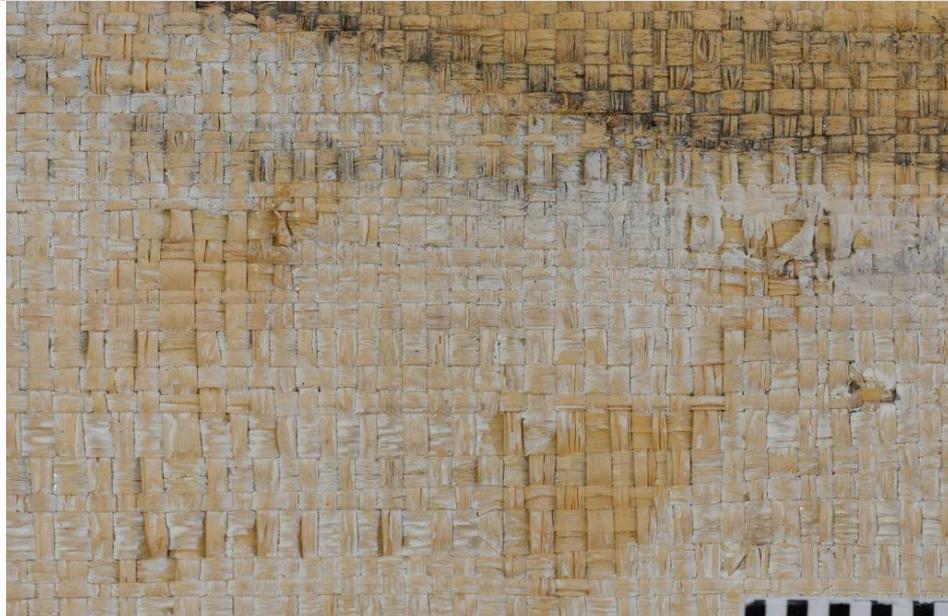


Figure 15: *Venus*, detail macro, lower mid part of the painting, incident light. Within the paint layer the canvas in parts is not fully covered by white tone.

localisation of Figure 16



Figure 16: *Venus*, detail macro, upper left part of the painting, incident light. A pattern which contains short brush strokes painted in white and red tones was used for the motif of the cats.

localisation of Figures 17 and 18



Figures 17 and 18: *Venus*, details macro, upper right (nude's headdress) and lower right part (cloth), incident light. Larionov used a pattern which contains short white and red brush strokes in diagonal direction.

localisation of Figure 19



Figure 19: *Venus*, detail macro, centre of the painting, incident light. Outlines of the nude's body were painted with relatively glossy dark brown colour.

localisation of Figure 20



Figure 20: *Venus*, detail macro, left lower part of the painting, incident light. Details of the nude's foot were highlighted by a reddish tone.

localisation of Figure 21



Figure 21: *Venus*, detail macro, upper left-mid part of the painting, incident light. The colours were applied layered upon one another.

localisation of Figure 22



Figure 22: *Venus*, detail macro, lower mid part of the painting, incident light. Powdery particles are present in the dark brown layer. The white paint seems to be brittle.