

Painting Inside the Box: An Underdrawing Example

William Sharp (1900-1961) was an artist mainly known for his political cartoons, particularly those criticizing the Nazi party in Germany in the early 1930s. This work eventually forced him to flee Germany and ending up in the United States where he continued producing political cartoons as well as illustrating books, magazines, and becoming a well-known illustrator at legal trials¹. To acknowledge William Sharp's lifetime accomplishments, the Queens Museum of Art hosted a retrospective of his work in 2002-2003².



Figure 1. *Swiss Village* by William Sharp. Oil on Canvas. 20" x 24". 1930s. Private Collection

The painting *Swiss Village* by William Sharp (Figure 1) demonstrates how the RevealScan™-M can be used to detect underdrawings such as grids and perspective lines. Underdrawings usually illustrate the painter's thinking and methodology, such as which objects/features in the painting were positioned and shaped in advance. Given Sharp's background as a cartoonist and illustrator, it seems natural that he would be inclined to have at least some preparatory sketches for his paintings.



Figure 2. Infrared image (1450 nm) showing a grid extending underneath the painting.

The RevealScan™-M system was used to acquire a series of images in the visible and near infrared (NIR) range. NIR images show clearly a grid that extends throughout the painting, see Figure 2. The grid must have been the artist's method to keep the various parts of the painting in proportion. It is interesting that horizontal grid boxes are in fact serially numbered. Figure 3 shows the top left corner of the painting where the horizontal and even the vertical numbering is clearly seen.

Underdrawings are sometimes guides to help with proper perspective. In this case several perspective lines are visible on the rooftops and on either side of the road, indicating that the artist used perspective lines in the image details in the painting to keep a cohesive sense of distance and perspective throughout the entire composition. The extensively numbered grid and plethora of perspective lines show Sharp's precise and careful methodology when creating this painting.



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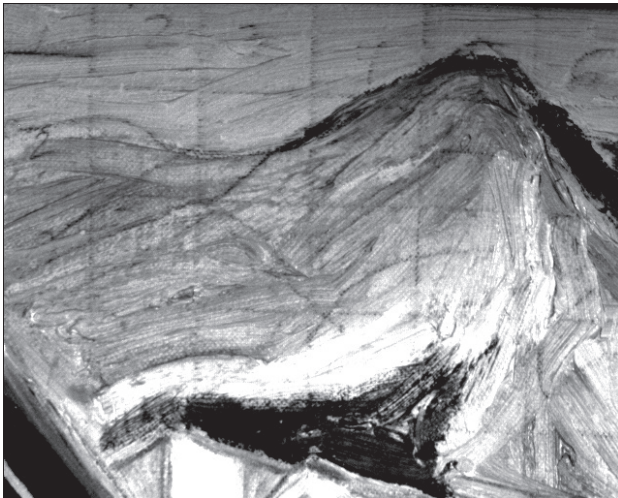


Figure 3. Infrared image (1450 nm) of the top left corner of the painting. The numbers 1, 2, and 4 are visible along the left side of the image and the numbers 1-4 and 6 are visible along the top of the image. The top of the number 5 is partially visible, but partially hidden by the mountain peak

Combining visible and infrared parts of the recorded images with RevealScan Analysis software enhances the fine pencil lines of the underdrawings to an even greater extent. When combining the 1450 nm or 1650 nm wavelength image with the red wavelength image as in Figure 4, the grid and the perspective lines by the road (Figure 4a), the car (Figure 4b) and the café (Figure 4c) are even more distinctly visible. The combination images also highlight underdrawings of circles with several tangent lines underneath the tables and a shape on the road above the people sitting. From the circles and lines, it seems that Sharp is playing with the perspective a bit, creating the illusion that the viewer is staring down at the tables. Using the RevealScan™-M instrument and the RevealScan Analysis software to treat the data to uncover such details adds a whole new appreciation and understanding of the artist's process.

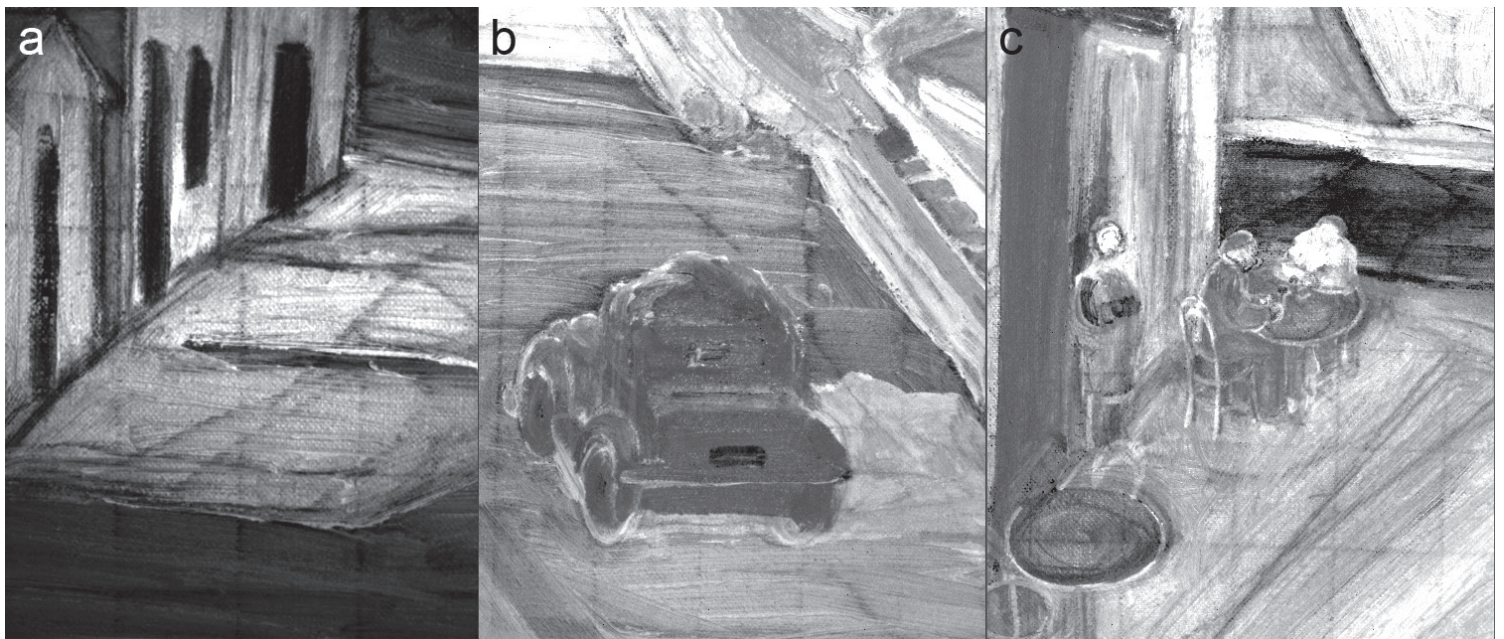


Figure 4. a. Combination of 1450 nm and red wavelength images enhancing the perspective lines by the roadside b. Combination of 1650 nm and red wavelength images showing perspective lines by the car c. perspective lines and other underdrawings by the café including sketches of circles on the table, outline of the edge of the sidewalk, and a shape on the road above the two people sitting at the table.

1. William Sharp - Kiechel Fine Art. (2017, August 23). Kiechel Fine Art. <https://kiechelart.com/artist/william-sharp/>

2. Queens Museum. (2025). Queens Museum | The Pointed Pen: William Sharp's Courtroom Drawings, Political Caricatures, and Book Illustrations from the 1930s-1950s. Exhibition. <https://queensmuseum.org/exhibition/the-pointed-pen/>