The critic of The Daily Telegraph claimed that ‘the beauty of the picture is seriously impaired…the patina of natural age has disappeared and, I think, the touch of the master along with it…the upper layer of the work has been destroyed.’ More than fifty letters appeared in the press on the matter and the arguments continued into 1937. Nowadays the painting is considered one of the most beautifully preserved of all seventeenth-century paintings.

During World War II, when the National Gallery paintings were mostly in storage in Manod quarry, Wales, some 70 were cleaned by nine different restorers, including Helmut Ruhemann, formerly restorer to the Berlin museums, who had come to London in 1933 and was invited in 1934 by the Director, Sir Kenneth Clark, to be consultant restorer to the Gallery. In 1946 the paintings were seen by the public for the first time in their newly cleaned state. One hundred years and one day after Verax’s letter to The Times of 1846, another letter to the same newspaper inaugurated a new but familiar process.

Controversy was followed this time by an explanatory exhibition of Cleaned Pictures [6] at the National Gallery in 1947, and then the establishment of an international commission under the chairmanship of Dr J. Weaver, which concluded that ‘no damage was found to have resulted from the recent cleaning’.

The most important result of the Weaver report was to set out clear guidelines for a new Department of Conservation which had been established the previous year. For the first time, the Gallery would employ its own restorers and they would work on paintings inside the building rather than in private London studios. At first, the department operated in unsatisfactory conditions in Room 9 amid constant dust from plaster loosened by war-time bombs. Later, air-conditioned studios located above the exhibition rooms were made as part of the post-war reconstruction programme and were opened in 1960 [7].

In the basement, large workshops were equipped for structural conservation – then a routine and somewhat unconsidered activity, the importance of which was to be considerably reassessed over the next three decades.

The paintings conservation department now employs nine people engaged on the practical treatment and technical examination of paintings. It works in daily collaboration with curatorial, scientific, framing, photographic and exhibition departments in maintaining, studying and displaying the collection. In recent years, research into European painting techniques has been a growing part of the department’s activities – as well as continuing research into the fundamentals of conservation practice. Eastlake’s belief that the conservation and restoration of paintings demand a detailed understanding of the painter’s methods, materials and intentions remains central to all that the department does.
The concept of restoration has always been somewhat dubious, since it implies returning a painting to its original state—something that cannot realistically be claimed. In the past, it was a term that included all kinds of repairs to damaged paintings—the mending of broken panels and torn canvases, the fixing of flaking paint, the cleaning away of yellow varnishes, the filling of holes and the retouching of missing passages. It became an activity that was deplored when it apparently went too far—when original paint seemed to be scoured away, when retouching of losses turned into wholesale repainting, when compositions were completely altered to suit notions of contemporary taste.

Nowadays, the emphasis is on conservation, the preservation of paintings by means that do not necessarily involve active treatment. This approach is described in more detail later. The main purpose of the Gallery's conservation department is to prevent deterioration: to maintain the status quo. Much of its work is routine and often goes unnoticed, but is nevertheless vital. Every picture in the collection is inspected regularly and notes of condition made; problem pictures are watched constantly. As a result of routine inspections many minor problems are solved before they become major ones. Flaking or blistering paint, cracks...
34. After Carlo Dolci, *The Virgin and Child with Flowers*, after 1642, oil on canvas. 78.1 × 63.2 cm, before cleaning.

35. 34, after cleaning.
The painting was first cleaned, removing the grey dirt with distilled water and a few drops of pure soap solution, applied in small amounts with soft brushes that did not catch the points of the impasto. The recovery of the original colours was dramatic [60]. The detaching paint was then treated on a specialised low-pressure suction table, developed in recent years at the National Gallery [59]. With highly controlled suction, warmth and humidity from the reverse, and the use of minute quantities of refined sturgeon’s glue, this fragile painting was stabilised in an operation that would have been inconceivable a few years before. It has been left unvarnished, as close to its original appearance as possible. In order to protect the vulnerable surface, it is framed behind low-reflecting glass.

58. 57, photographed with transmitted light.

59. 57, on the suction table.

60. (Opposite) Detail of 57, showing a newly cleaned area, during treatment in 1985-6.
Gallery’s scientific department, and helped to show the shape of the nose bone as it must originally have been painted. Together with the careful recovery of areas of Holbein’s original paint, it was possible to attempt a reconstruction of the skull and bring it closer to what the artist must have painted.

Cleaning, restoring and reframing the picture took over three years, and we can now appreciate the achievement of this great portrait once more. Holbein’s signature is now clearly legible on the lower left-hand side. The lute-case which lies on the floor under the shelves was uncovered and many details of Jean de Dinteville’s black costume are now clear, as are the marvellous contrasts of different textures of fabrics – silk, satin and velvet – so characteristic of Holbein. The picture is also revealed as exceptionally colourful, highlighting contrasts between Dinteville’s pink satin sleeve and the turquoise blue of the astronomical globe and between the predominant red of the table carpet and the green damask curtain [74].