# Long-lost medieval Dance of Death panel rediscovered at Hexham Abbey



A wooden panel that had been lost for over three decades at Hexham Abbey in Northumberland has been identified by art conservators as the potential missing piece in a series of medieval panel paintings known as the Dance of Death sequence. This discovery could fill a long-standing gap in one of the Abbey’s most significant artistic treasures.

The Dance of Death series comprises four surviving wooden panels dating from around 1500. These panels depict Death personified as a skeletal figure visiting influential figures of the time, including a cardinal, a king, an emperor, and the Pope. For years, scholars and art historians have speculated that a fifth panel existed, believed to portray the “introducer or caller” figure, based on a 1790s sketch by antiquarian John Carter.

The rediscovered panel had last been seen in the 1990s before being found in 2017 in the triforium of Hexham Abbey—a section seldom accessed due to its difficult location. Due to the panel’s poor condition, the Hexham Abbey Conservation Group sought the expertise of Dr Charis Theodorakopoulos, a heritage scientist at Northumbria University.

Dr Theodorakopoulos utilised a spectral imaging camera capable of examining the panel across various wavelengths of the electromagnetic spectrum. By merging images taken at red, green, and blue light wavelengths, her analysis revealed the presence of a figure dressed in Tudor attire. This figure is believed to represent the “caller” from the Dance of Death sequence.

“The discovery of this panel that may belong to the Dance of Death series of paintings is a monumental achievement for Hexham Abbey and for art conservation,” Dr Theodorakopoulos said. She added that the find not only revives an important piece of art history but also showcases how modern technology can unveil hidden aspects of cultural heritage.

Tom Kelsey of Hexham Abbey highlighted the value of this collaboration: “The technical skills that Dr Theodorakopoulos and Northumbria University brought to our investigations cannot be underestimated. Melding together the spectral analysis and the history of the Abbey’s medieval art collection has proved so helpful – and will be of enduring interest to many academics and interested observers.”

The Dance of Death paintings hold a unique place in British church art, offering vivid representation of medieval attitudes toward mortality. They depict Death visiting figures regardless of social standing, delivering a poignant commentary on life’s transience. These panels are particularly rare survivors, given the widespread destruction of such artworks during the religious upheavals of the 16th-century Protestant Reformation.

Dr Theodorakopoulos is scheduled to present her research during an online talk titled "Multispectral imaging analysis in cultural heritage: The Hexham Abbey panel case, with reference to future AI data validation." This event will take place on Wednesday, 30 April at 3pm. Interested individuals can register for the talk via the Northumbria University website.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.culturednortheast.co.uk/p/lost-medieval-panel-found-in-hexham> - This article corroborates the discovery of a wooden panel at Hexham Abbey that could be the missing part of the Dance of Death series, which depicts Death visiting important figures like a cardinal, a king, an emperor, and the Pope.
* <https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/about-us/news-events/news/possible-lost-dance-of-death-painting-discovered-at-hexham-abbey/> - This source supports the detailed information about the panel being lost for over 30 years, its rediscovery in the triforium in 2017, its poor condition, and the involvement of Dr Charis Theodorakopoulos using multispectral imaging technology to analyze the panel.
* <https://www.magzter.com/stories/newspaper/The-Journal/ABBEY-PANEL-MAY-BE-LOST-DANCE-OF-DEATH-PAINTING> - This article confirms the identification of the rediscovered wooden panel as possibly the missing Dance of Death painting from the medieval series at Hexham Abbey.
* <https://newsroom.northumbria.ac.uk/images/dance-of-death-fifth-panel-painting-dot-png-3234005> - This image and related information from Northumbria University highlight the rediscovery of the panel after being lost for more than 30 years and its importance as part of the medieval Dance of Death sequence.
* <https://havg.org/visitor-guide/dance-of-death/> - This source provides context about the Dance of Death series at Hexham Abbey, including its historical significance, the depiction of Death visiting various social ranks, and the rarity of such surviving medieval wooden panel paintings due to Reformation destruction.