



*The effects of cleaning are shown in these before-and-after photographs of Botticelli's canvas "Three Miracles of St. Zenobius." When parts of the kneeling figures had been washed away, skeletons were revealed, which presumably had been covered up by a squeamish former owner*

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has all happened before. Let us turn back the files of *The Times* 100 years, to October, 1846, and we shall find a letter from the young author and critic, John Ruskin. It's about exactly the same subject. And John Ruskin's letter is so vehement—and so plain rude—that the letters of to-day seem mild and polite by comparison. Here is what Ruskin wrote. He was 27 years old, by the way.

"I had seen in Venice the noblest works of Veronese painted over with flake-white with a brush fit for tarring ships! I had seen in Florence Angelico's highest inspiration rotted and seared

into fragments of old wood, burnt into blisters, or blotted into glutinous maps of mildew; and I returned to England in the one last trust that though her National Gallery was a European jest, her art a shadow, and her connoisseurship a hypocrisy, though she knew neither how to cherish nor how to choose, and lay exposed to the cheats of every vendor of old canvas, yet that such good pictures as through chance or oversight might find their way beneath that preposterous portico, and into those melancholy and miserable rooms, were at least to be vindicated thenceforward from the mercy of republican, priest or painter, safe alike from musketry, monkery and manipulation."

So you see, the cleaning of pictures, or "manipulation" of which Ruskin complains so eloquently—in fact a little too eloquently—has been a bone of contention ever since the Gallery opened.

I went along to have a look at the pictures myself of course, as soon as the trouble started. And speaking personally, I'd like to say I don't think the cleaning has damaged this "Woman Bathing," by Rembrandt. Maybe some of the paint has been removed, and maybe that mellow glow of old varnish has gone. But looking at the picture now after the cleaning, it seems so lovely, so powerful, and so mysterious that I, for one, am quite happy for it to be just as it is.