

## Delilah cut off Samson's hair, but who cut off his toes? The case against the National Gallery 'Rubens' *Samson and Delilah*'

The painting under examination is the *Samson and Delilah*, now hanging amongst the Rubens paintings in London's National Gallery. The authenticity of this work as an original painting by Peter Paul Rubens is to be questioned in this essay.

The first intimation of the possibility that the painting was not authentic occurred when we were students at the Wimbledon School of Art in 1988. We first noticed the awkwardness of the painting when it became apparent to each one of us individually that the painting was poorly crafted in a number of aspects, unusual for a painter of high technical abilities. The execution seemed crude, the colour unsubtle and uncharacteristic of Rubens' palette. The tonal values were incorrect in relation to the light sources. The handling of the paint was very crude, the draughtsmanship was poor and there was weakness in the depiction of textures. Finally, the relation of the subject depicted to the edge of the painting (in other words the 'framing' of the subject) seemed awkward.

Because of all the above mentioned points we found that the execution of the painting was totally uncharacteristic of Rubens' faultless style and his highly developed, sophisticated skills as a painter; qualities that were very apparent in his other works of the same period as the legendary *Samson and Delilah* which was painted for Nicolaas Rockox in the year 1609.

In order to gain an idea of Rubens' style of this period, we compared the National Gallery *Samson and Delilah* to the following paintings of the same period: *The Adoration of the Magi* (1609), now in the Prado, Madrid; *The Death of Phaeton* (1609) in the National Gallery of Washington D. C.; *The Raising of the Cross* (1610) painted for the Antwerp Cathedral; *St. George and the Dragon* (1606), in the Prado, Madrid; *The Death of Seneca* (1609?), and the *Honeysuckle Bower*, both in the Alte Pinakothek, Munich; and many others from this and other periods. All these display a consistency of quality and style which is not shared by *Samson and Delilah*.

The Honeysuckle Bower

One has only to look at Rubens' magnificent marriage portrait, painted in the same year as *Samson and Delilah*, to be reminded of the skills and subtleties he was capable of in 1609. In this double portrait, the powerful overall design is complemented by an amazing attention to detail and a technical perfection of execution. Rubens' flawless ability to depict a multitude of textures in this picture may be contrasted with the monotony in the rendering of all textures in the National Gallery's *Samson and Delilah*. All the richness in the *Honeysuckle Bower* of the brocade fabrics, laces, precious stones on the jewellery, skin, leather and vegetation is reduced to bland similarity of treatment in the variety of heterogeneous objects depicted in the National Gallery painting.

'Brief Encounters: Rubens Van Dyck'

In the recent exhibition 'Brief Encounters', the National Gallery's *Samson and Delilah* was compared with Van Dyck's *Samson and Delilah*, on loan from the Dulwich picture gallery, and the visitor was given the unique opportunity to see the two paintings for what they really are. In the National Gallery picture, the textures of the fabrics are painted in such a bland and non-descriptive manner that Andrew Graham-Dixon was prompted to write in his article, 'The Hair Apparent', (The Independent, Tuesday 19 March 1991): 'Van Dyck outpaints Rubens in the depiction of fabrics, rendered here with a liveliness and dash that makes their equivalent in the Rubens seem ponderous and inert.'

Mr Graham-Dixon was receptive to the National Gallery's invitation to look at the two paintings with a fresh eye. The result was that he achieved precisely this desired end: he 'saw', as painters see, without preconceived notions, the shapes and colors which were actually before his eyes. Mr Graham-Dixon perceived the truth that became so very apparent with this recent exhibition of the two works hanging in the same room: which was quite simply that the Van Dyck is a much better painting and that Van Dyck *does* outpaint Rubens' imitator in the rendering of the fabrics.

We could add to this ‘fresh’ observation of Mr. Andrew Graham-Dixon’s that we feel the exhibition helped us to confirm our previous feeling about the two paintings: the student does not outpace the master; it is rather the attribution to the master which must be re-examined. Would Mr Graham-Dixon have made the same statement if he were to compare the *Honeysuckle Bower* in Munich with the Dulwich Van Dyck? Our original intuition, that the National Gallery picture might possibly not be the original *Samson and Delilah* painted by Rubens for Nicolaas Rockox in 1609, was reinforced by the exhibition mentioned above, organised by the National Gallery in the spring and summer of 1991. The unique opportunity of having the two *Samson and Delilah* paintings of ‘Rubens’ and Van Dyck in the same confined space, isolated from all other paintings in the museum, gave us yet another chance to confirm our feelings that there was something vital amiss in the ‘Rubens’ picture: the excellence of its execution.

#### Research Report

The National Gallery’s *Samson and Delilah* was bought at Christie’s in 1980 on behalf of the National Gallery. It was cleaned and restored by the National Gallery’s Restoration Department and was exhibited in 1983 in an exhibition series ‘Acquisition in focus’.<sup>1</sup> The Restoration Report was published in the National Gallery’s Technical Bulletin, in Volume 7 of the same year. There is a great deal of existing documentation that proves that Rubens did indeed paint a picture of the Samson myth, but a great deal of material has now been accumulated to suggest that the picture in the National Gallery may not be the original version of the composition.

Naturally there would have been no reason to investigate the history of the painting had not its attribution seemed questionable to begin with. In the Gallery, it strikes one immediately that *Samson and Delilah* seems unrelated to the other works by Rubens, in terms of composition, colour, tonal values, draughtsmanship, and paint handling. The apparent inadequacy of these indicated that some research into the provenance of the painting was necessary.

#### Provenance

Rubens was commissioned to paint *Samson and Delilah* at some time during the period 1608-1609, shortly after his return to Antwerp after an eight year stay in Italy. His client was Nicolaas Rockox, (Antwerp, 1560-1640) a close personal friend and patron. Other works which Rubens painted for Rockox during this period were: *The Adoration of the Magi*, and the small ‘Triptych of *Doubting Thomas* to be placed above his tomb and that of his wife Adriana Perez in the Church of the Recollects’<sup>2</sup> Rockox was one of the most influential citizens in Antwerp: he was elected Burgomaster nine times during his lifetime and was a leading official of the Guild of Arquebusiers of Antwerp. It was this Guild that commissioned Rubens to paint the *Descent from the Cross* triptych for its altar in Antwerp Cathedral, during the same period. Rubens would have regarded the commission as an important one, for besides being an important man himself, Rockox was in a position to display the work before many others of sufficient station to be regarded as prospective clients. In Christopher Brown’s book *Flemish Paintings*, he points out this fact, when he says: ‘As Rockox entertained the leading citizens of Antwerp in this room, the painting would be a prominent advertisement of Rubens’ skills’<sup>3</sup>. A master at the height of his creative powers, Rubens would have done his utmost to demonstrate his talents to the full. *Samson and Delilah* would have been a painting of assured excellence.

The painting hung in Rockox’s great salon for 31 years, from 1609 until 1640 when he died. During this time, two artists made copies of it, Frans Francken II and the Dutch print-maker Jacob Matham. Van Dyck was also influenced by it, and painted his own *Samson and Delilah*, now in the Dulwich Picture Gallery.

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<sup>1</sup> There was a publication to coincide with this exhibition called ‘Rubens’-*Samson and Delilah*, London, 1983.

<sup>2</sup> R. A. D’Hulst & M. Vandenven, *Corpus Rubenianum*, Ludwig Burchard, Part III, the *Old Testament* p.111.

<sup>3</sup> C. Brown *Flemish Paintings*, National Gallery publications 1987, p.18.

The first written documentation of the painting occurs in 1640. It is numbered among the possessions of Rockox in the inventory drawn up after his death, dated 19-20 December 1640. 'In the large parlour: a painting, oil on panel and its frame, of *Samson and Delilah*, made by Mr. Rubens'<sup>4</sup>. This is the last mention of an original painting of this subject by Rubens until 1929: a period of 289 years.

#### History of a Copy

The next reference to a *Samson and Delilah* painting is in the inventory drawn up after the death of Guillelmo Potteau of Antwerp, dated 2 August 1692. The reference is to a copy: 'Item, another chimneypiece, representing *Samson and Delilah*, being a *copy* after Rubens.'<sup>5</sup> The next owner of a painting of this subject seems to be 'Councillor Segers, living on the Meir at Antwerp'<sup>6</sup>. During the last two years of Segers' ownership of the picture (1698-1700) it becomes the subject of correspondence between the Antwerp dealers Forchoudt. Marcus Forchoudt writes to his brother<sup>7</sup> Guillermo in Antwerp on the 13<sup>th</sup> of December 1698 saying that the Prince of Liechtenstein has visited requesting that he asks his brother to examine the painting closely, and if he becomes convinced that it is unquestionably a work by Rubens and that it was painted after his return from Italy, to buy it for 1250 Patacons. The work was sent off from Antwerp after the 5<sup>th</sup> of June 1699. On the 17<sup>th</sup> of June of the same year, Marcus wrote to his brother: 'I have received Rubens' *Samson* painting, but when I examine it closely, it seems to me more like a *copy*, and M. Segers sold it as a Rubens, which is unfair; I fear that Prince Adam will not keep it.'<sup>8</sup>

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of July, Marcus Forchoudt again writes to his brother, 'In your last letter I was pleased to see that your amateur considers the *Samson and Delilah* painting an original'<sup>9</sup>. The amateur to whom the letter refers is Councillor Segers; Forchoudt implies that since Segers believed and insisted, in all good faith, that the painting he owned was the original, then he cannot possibly have known very much about art. On the 5<sup>th</sup> of September, the Prince saw the picture and negotiations began. It was finally sold in Vienna on the 30<sup>th</sup> of March 1700, by the Forchoudt firm. Denuce informs us that the Company's register does not mention the buyer. In the archives of the Liechtenstein Collections there is 'no trace of a purchase of a work called *Samson and Delilah*<sup>10</sup>'

Then, in May 1700, the painting became part of the collection of the Prince (Johann Adam Andreas of Liechtenstein), although no documentation of the sale has been found. The three catalogues which the Liechtenstein Collection published throughout the next 180 years (dated 1767, 1780 and 1873) in which a painting of the same subject is listed, *do not attribute this painting to Rubens*. It is in fact attributed to Jan van den Hoecke, a minor Flemish master and student of Rubens (baptised on the 4<sup>th</sup> of August 1611 in Antwerp, died in 1651 in Brussels<sup>11</sup>). The painting was kept amongst their treasures for 180 years, and was

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<sup>4</sup> R. A. D'Hulst & M. Vandenven, *Corpus Rubenianum*, Ludwig Burchard, Part III, the *Old Testament* p.111.

<sup>5</sup> R. A. D'Hulst & M. Vandenven, *Corpus Rubenianum*, Part III, the *Old Testament* p.107.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> In the *Corpus Rubenianum*, Guillermo Forchoudt is at one point said to be Marcus' father (p.107)

<sup>8</sup> '...le 17 juin 1699 Marcus Forchoudt ecrivait: 'J'ai bien reçu l'oeuvre 'Samson' de Rubens, mais lorsque je l'examine de pres elle m'apparait plutot comme une copie, et M. Segers l'a vendue comme un Rubens, ce qui n'est pas juste; je crains que le prince Adam ne la gardera pas. ' H. G. Evers, *Samson et Delilah de Pierre Paul Rubens*, Apollo, Chronique des Beaux Arts, Dec. 1942, p.6. Our emphasis.

<sup>1</sup> 'Dans ta derniere lettre, j'ai vu avec plaisir que ton amateur tient l'oeuvre *Samson et Delilah* pour un original. ', Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> E. Benezit, *Disctionnaire critique et documentaire des Peintres, Sculpteurs, Dessinateurs et Graveurs*, Librairie Grund, 1976, p.718.

finally sold in 1880, *again not as a Rubens*, by the then Prince Johann II, to an unnamed buyer<sup>12</sup>. It might be relevant to note at this point that the Liechtenstein Collection to this day owns some of the finest paintings from Rubens' own hand. The ownership of such masterpieces has established a long tradition of very high standards of connoisseurship and expertise among the Princes' generations of heirs. In fact, the collection is unique amongst the family collections of Europe, in respect of the quantity of art treasures which it possesses. One is tempted to think it certain that had the real *Samson and Delilah* been in this environment, one so sophisticated in matters of art connoisseurship, for 180 years, it would surely not have passed unnoticed. Contrasted with all the originals around it, a copy would have stood out even more. The measurements of this painting as they appear in the three above-mentioned catalogues are as follows: 1767 Catalogue (in Italian): No. 391: Height, 5 feet 9 inches, Width 6 feet 5 inches. [The foot and inch at this period were different to today's], 1780 Catalogue (in French): No. 683: Height, 5 feet 9 inches, Width, 6 feet 5 inches. And the 1873 Catalogue (in German): No. 182: 185 x 204 cm.

The National Gallery *Samson and Delilah* appears in Paris, in 1929 (This is according to the National Gallery, the Liechtenstein picture). After a gap of forty nine years during which time the whereabouts of the Liechtenstein copy are undocumented, the National Gallery *Samson and Delilah* first appears in 1929, in Paris. Its dimensions are 185 x 205 cm.

This time, the newly found painting was attributed to Honthorst, the Dutch Caravaggist<sup>13</sup>. It was in the hands of the dealers van Diemen and Benedict and in 1930 it was sold to August Neuerburg, a private collector from Hamburg. Prior to the purchase, Neuerburg had asked the advice of Dr. Ludwig Burchard, on this and another painting which we know of, that of Isabella Brant, a cut down version of the Uffizi original. Dr. Burchard, the initiator of the *Corpus Rubenianum* pronounced both the paintings as original works done by Rubens. The modern scholar Hans Vlieghe, however, has, in Vol. II of the *Corpus Rubenianum*, dismissed Burchard's attribution of the Isabella Brant painting. On page 58 of this volume he writes: 'this is a repetition, cut down on all four sides, of the portrait in the Uffizi in Florence. Burchard regarded it as an original work by Rubens, in fact as the first version of the portrait, but I cannot detect Rubens' hand in its workmanship.' On Burchard's advice, Neuerburg bought both paintings as original Rubens paintings.

The Restoration Report

The restoration report of the National Gallery painting<sup>14</sup> offers us no evidence of the painting's authenticity. In fact, it provides further reasons for speculation. The report explains that at some past date, the hardwood panel on which the picture is painted was planed down to the very fine thickness of 3 mm. - a practice used until recent years by the restorers to combat warping – and set into blockboard to protect and strengthen it.<sup>15</sup> This process, which occurred before the acquisition of the painting by the National Gallery, probably during this century<sup>16</sup> has excluded the possibility of ever knowing whether or not the characteristic encaustic stamp of Rubens' usual panel-maker was ever present, as it is present on the National Gallery's Portrait of *Susanna Lunden (Le Chapeau de Paille)*(no. 852).<sup>17</sup> Neither can the presence of the red seal, applied in 1733 to certain paintings owned by the Liechtenstein Collection at the time, ever be checked.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Apollo, Chronique des Beaux Arts, 1942, p.6.

<sup>13</sup> Christie's Catalogue for the 1966 sale of the modello, Lot 66.

<sup>14</sup> Joyce Plesters and David Bomford *Samson and Delilah: Rubens and the Art and Craft of Painting on Panel*. National Gallery Technical Bulletin, Volume 7, 1983, p.30-49.

<sup>15</sup> Joyce Plesters and David Bomford *Samson and Delilah: Rubens and the Art and Craft of Painting on Panel*. National Gallery Technical Bulletin, Volume 7, 1983, D. Bomford, p.31.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid D. Bomford, p.30.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid J. Plesters, p.35.

<sup>18</sup> Catherine Johnston, *Paintings from the Liechtenstein Collection*, Apollo, May 1988, p.324: '...a red seal corresponding to the Liechtenstein inventory of 1733 when seals were placed on all the paintings that had

The setting into blockboard has thus prevented dendrochronological (tree-ring dating) tests from being carried out because, according to the report, gaining access to the edges of the panel by removing it from the blockboard would endanger its stability.<sup>19</sup> *The painting has not been scientifically dated.* The report states that: ‘...since the date and provenance of the painting are not in doubt, dendrochronology would in this case have served little practical purpose’<sup>20</sup>

The assumption has therefore been made that the National Gallery painting is the same as that commissioned by Rockox. And yet the painting’s provenance can hardly be thought reliable when we consider that the last documentation that we have of the original is the inventory, which was drawn up at the death of Nicolaas Rockox in 1640 – the same year that Rubens died. This narrows down the assurances of its authenticity to the subjective opinion of Ludwig Burchard acting in the capacity of an adviser to a prospective buyer in 1929.

Other parts of the restoration report deal with the comparatively straightforward cleaning of the painting<sup>21</sup> (the painting’s faults cannot be blamed, therefore, on bad restoration or cleaning techniques) and the minimal cracking and good overall condition of the paint. To quote the report again: ‘the impasto of the candle flame and the locks of Samson’s hair seem to have retained the gloss and freshness of newly applied oil paint’<sup>22</sup>

The Francken Picture and the Matham Engraving

There are, today, two known copies contemporary to the original *Samson and Delilah*, both done from the original, by artists of the circle of Rubens and Rockox during the period when it hung over the fireplace in Rockox’s home. The first, a depiction of Rockox’s groote Saleth, is a picture known as *The Five Senses* by a contemporary of Rubens, another Flemish painter, Frans Francken II (1581-1642)<sup>23</sup>. The second is a print etched c. 1613, by the Dutch engraver Jacob Matham, (1571-1631)<sup>24</sup>.

The Francken, dating between 1630 and 1635,<sup>25</sup> is a painting of the groote Saleth of Nicolaas Rockox, commissioned by him, in which *Samson and Delilah* is shown hanging above the fireplace. After establishing that Francken was considered so accurate in his depiction of these private art collections that

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been bequeathed by Prince Johann Adam Andreas (1657-1712). Christopher Brown in his *Rubens’ Smson and Delilah*. ‘Acquisition in Focus series, London, 1983, p.18. States without doubt that the No. 18 in white paint on the front of the panel (left hand, lower corner) is conclusive evidence that the National Gallery painting is the same one owned by the Liechtenstein Collection.

<sup>19</sup> Joyce Plesters and David Bomford *Samson and Delilah: Rubens and the Art and the Craft of Painting on Panel*. National Gallery Technical Bulletin, Volume 7, 1983, p.36.

<sup>20</sup> Joyce Plesters *Samson and Delilah: Rubens and the Art and Craft of Painting on Panel*. National Gallery Technical Bulletin, Volume 7, 1983, p.36.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid David Bomford, p.31.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid Joyce Plesters, p.30.

<sup>23</sup> *Oxford Companion to Art*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1975, p.433.

<sup>24</sup> E. Benezit, *Dictionnaire critique et documentaire des Peintres, Sculpteurs, Dessinateurs et Graveurs*, Librairie Grund, 1976, p.252. Two different versions of Matham’s print exist to our knowledge. In one of them Delilah’s hair is falling down over the right side of her neck, whereas in the other it only falls over the left side.

<sup>25</sup> H. G. Evers, *La Galerie d’Art du Bourquemesre Rockox*, Apollo – Chronique des Beaux – Arts, Oct. 1942, p.11.

his work was used for documentation purposes<sup>26</sup>, it was essential to make detailed comparisons between the Rockox *Samson and Delilah* as depicted by Francken and the version hanging in the National Gallery. There are striking differences between the two concerning composition, color and tonal values.

Firstly, the overall effect is noticeably different. The Francken copy is a warmer painting where the light sources are directional: the candle flame and the torch on its stand cast the soft illumination that naked flames usually provide, whereas in the National Gallery version the scene seems almost stage-lit from the front with a cold, harsh light that renders the flames impotent.

The colour too is very different. Where the bright and luminous colours in the Francken combine to give an integrated whole, the more violent colours in the London version strike a discordant note. Delilah's skirt, for example, is a warm red ochre and vermilion in the Francken, whereas, in the other, it is replaced by a harsh alizarin crimson that competes for the viewer's attention with the equally strong blue of the barber's clothes, the purple of the hanging fabric and the gold of the drapery. This competition inhibits the viewer from focusing on the important event taking place, especially since the dull brown of the background is also lit up. In the Francken copy, the background is subdued, focussing the onlooker's attention on the important figure group. Samson's back, which is of a warm red color in Francken's painting is, in the National Gallery painting, a green closer to terre verte, and heavy black shadows have appeared on Delilah's elaborate clothing where none exist in the Francken version.

Naturally, Francken might conceivably have subordinated the colours of the paintings he was copying to his own overall color scheme, but there are major compositional differences that are inexplicable. Firstly, let us look at the position of the old woman holding the candle. In both the Francken painting and the Matham engraving, a contemporary work, her head is almost directly above Delilah's so that the flame of her candle stands out brilliantly against the dark of the barber's shoulder. In the National Gallery's version, the woman's head is set further back with the light of her candle rendered impotent against the pale brown background of the painting.

The alteration in the old woman's position also changes the relationship between the four heads. In Francken's version they are closely grouped, once again focussing attention on the figures as a whole, an effect already emphasised by the subtle lighting. The National Gallery picture loses this quality, appearing disjointed by comparison. Other points worth mentioning are that the perspective of the doorway is altered, the area of the picture taken up by the carpet is much greater and the hanging drapery above the old woman's head is completely different to the one in Francken's work.

These differences, however, are of little significance when compared with the most startling discrepancy. Samson's outstretched foot, in relation to the door frame and to the right-hand edge of the painting, is the cause of this intrigue: the National Gallery version shows the foot positioned well to the right of the line of the door, if we were to extend it downwards, *with the toes missing, severed by the edge of the panel*. Francken's copy on the other hand depicts the foot within this line and in its entirety, with a considerable gap between it and the panel's edge. This completes the powerful pyramidal composition of the figure group. Matham's engraving also shows the complete foot in this position. The composition in the Francken painting is completed by the arch of the alcove in the background; the top of this arch is severed in the National Gallery painting. It is important; also, to bear in mind that this work is dedicated to Rockox himself, as we are told by an inscription on the bottom of the plate in Latin<sup>27</sup>. The inscription states that Matham had looked at the original painting with admiration. The theory, therefore, which has been

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<sup>26</sup> 'Faithful miniature reproductions', *Oxford Companion to Art*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 195, p.433. General catalogue, Alte Pinakothek Munchen 1986, p.211, 'a specialist in the depiction of picture galleries with an accurate reproduction of the paintings contained therein.'

<sup>27</sup> Dedicace: Nobili et amplissimo V. D. Nicolaeo Rocoxio/ Equiti, pluries Antwerpiae Consuli, elegantiarum omnium/ Apprime studiso, Iconem hanc in aes se incesa, cultus et ob/ servantiae causa, tu quod archetypum tabula artefice Pet. Pauli/ Rubenii manu depicta apud ipsu(m) c(um) admiratione spectantur, Matha(m) L. M. D. D.

expressed by R.-A. D'Hulst and M. Vandeven in the *Corpus Rubenianum* III, p.111, that Matham did not work from the original is not valid. Surely two contemporary artists so familiar with the painting could never have made the same crucial error. The above mentioned *Corpus* authors, state that Matham worked from the oil sketch for *Samson and Delilah* as well as from the drawing which exists today. They give no satisfactory evidence to support their claim.

#### The Modello and the Drawing

We also have the evidence provided by what is considered to be the modello, Rubens' own oil sketch for *Samson and Delilah*, now in the Art Museum, Cincinnati<sup>28</sup>, which does, in the present form, tally to some degree with the National Gallery picture as far as the composition is concerned, in that Samson's foot does go off the edge of the panel, and the old woman is further back from Delilah's head. Julius Held, however, a world authority on Rubens, talks about this modello in his book on Rubens' oil sketches, saying that: 'the toes of Samson are missing, which is an unlikely manner for Rubens to handle such a detail', and he thinks it, 'likely that the sketch has lost small sections on either side'<sup>29</sup>.

In the Christie's Catalogue for the sale of the modello, there is an illustration of it with two additional sections on either side. Was Professor Held referring to these 'small sections' lost on either side? The small painting, today in Cincinnati, which is allegedly the 'modello' for the original painting, was purchased from Christie's on the 25<sup>th</sup> of November 1966 as lot 66, the property of a gentleman. Where was it before that? In fact, the whereabouts of the original modello are drawn up after the death of Johannes Philippus Happart of Antwerp as 'Item, a sketch by Mr. Rubens of *Samson and Delilah* '(Denuce Kunstkamers p.334)<sup>30</sup>.

Although in this report we are not concerned with the authenticity of the modello, it is nevertheless interesting to note that the Cincinnati oil sketch is the only Rubens modello painted on softwood, namely conifer. This is a unique exception to practically all the Rubens oil sketches which 'follow the Early Netherlandish tradition of the wood being oak'<sup>31</sup>. At the time when Ludwig Burchard authenticated the National Gallery painting in 1930, the modello was most probably not known. At least we now have no record of its whereabouts being known at that time. It seems odd to think that no more penetrating questions were asked about the authentication of the modello, when the last we know of the original is three hundred and five years earlier.

There is one point that must be made concerning the color of the oil sketch. Delilah's dress is painted in a warm reddish brown rather than the alizarin crimson of the London painting. The restoration report offers an explanation for this by comparing the costs of the pigments, suggesting that it would have been wasteful to use the more expensive crimson pigment in a preparatory study, but bearing in mind that both Rubens and his client were exceedingly wealthy men, this is not a strong argument. It is also unlikely that Rockox would have requested the change, acknowledging Rubens as he did to be a great master. In any case, the color in Francken's copy is closer to the color of the modello; it is also clear that Francken worked directly from the full-scale painting.<sup>32</sup> From our experience of the color red in Rubens' oeuvre, the violent alizarin crimson dress in the National Gallery painting is totally uncharacteristic. The familiar feature of his paintings was to have a large red area in a generally more subdued color harmony. This was executed with Mastery and the red was invariably a warm fire-red with vermilion highlights. Next we come to the drawing for the painting. The provenance of the drawing is unknown. It was first exhibited in Amsterdam,

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<sup>28</sup> *Samson asleep in Delilah's Lap*: Oil sketch (fig. 76), Cincinnati, Ohio, Cincinnati Art Museum, Inv. No. 1972-459. *Corpus Rubenianum*, Vol. III, p.114.

<sup>29</sup> J. S. Held, *The Oil sketches of Peter Paul Rubens*. Vol. 1, Princeton University Press, 1980, p.432.

<sup>30</sup> *Corpus Rubenianum*, Vol. III, p.114.

<sup>31</sup> National Gallery Technical Bulletin, p.114.

<sup>32</sup> As well as the fact that Francken's painting depicts the whole room, suggesting that he worked *in situ*. H. G. Evers asserts that; 'Frans Francken a travaille d'apres la peinture'

in 1933, as no. 67, reproduced as a Rubens of 1610. It is now in Amsterdam, Collection of Mrs. I. Q. van Regteren Altena.<sup>33</sup>

#### Technique

We have now studied the technical deficiencies in the execution of the National Gallery Painting; we have collected a very comprehensive catalogue of faults which are demonstrated by comparison with works of that period. This can be done when visual material is included. The simple addition of black to a color in order to make shadows, and white to make highlights is something which cannot be seen in other paintings by Rubens.

It is totally out of character for Rubens to use what the National Gallery calls 'bold' handling over the entire surface of a painting. In all his other works, areas of beautiful and infinitely detailed work appear, in addition to areas which have been handled boldly, - a woman's jewellery, for instance, the lace on a ruff, or a flower in the foreground. On the whole, the great downfall of the National Gallery's picture is the crudeness with which it has been painted. Quite apart from the unsubtle transitions from tone to tone and from color to color (look for example on the Venus statue in the background, or at Samson's ear, compared with his own ear in the self portrait of Rubens and Isabella Brant in the *Honeysuckle Bower* painted in the same year) there are two enormous drips of paint on the surface of the work, which no painter with even the most basic training would have allowed himself to do at that period.

One could argue that the painter used a more generalised and bolder approach because he knew that the picture was due to hang above a high fireplace and would only be seen from a distance. However, it is clear from Francken's painting that the lower edge was no more than 2.5 metres from the floor. Also one look at the ceiling of the Banqueting House in London's Whitehall suffices to show that even for a picture that would only be seen from a much greater distance, Rubens spared none of his usual detailed and sensitive handling.

Looking closely at *Samson and Delilah* one misses the vibrant, twisting nature of the brushstrokes themselves. The shapeless, unanimated strokes in this painting seem flat and unexciting when compared with Rubens' usual virtuosity.

#### Conclusion

We have, after this long study, come to the conclusion that the Francken copy of *Samson and Delilah*, is the one closest to the original painting done by Rubens for Rockox. All the facts point to that conclusion. Jacob Matham, for all his *minor* deviations from the Francken, is still the closest to it. Considering therefore that both Francken and Matham had not only seen the original but were very familiar with it, and furthermore that Francken was commissioned by Rockox to paint the groote Saleth and that Matham dedicated his engraving to Rockox, it is, then, extremely unlikely that these two men would wander from the actual composition of the painting they were working from. The National Gallery picture is more like the modello and the drawing, both of which have extremely poor provenance records.

The modello and the drawing are both so different from the Francken and the Matham that we feel it is impossible for them to be used as proof for the authenticity of the National Gallery picture. Even if they are by Rubens' own hand, they are 'sketches' by nature and therefore may differ, legitimately, from a finished painting they have been made for. The finished painting has the 'sketchiness' of the modello and the drawing, another feature uncharacteristic of Rubens.

Whatever Rubens' choice of subject, he was one of those painters who were so naturally gifted that he never seem to fail technically. The basic idea for the *Samson and Delilah* painting is undoubtedly his. The idea itself is so powerful that it has survived a poor execution with enough strength to convince many people that it is actually by Rubens. One possible reason why the National Gallery's painting has been accepted so readily by art historians as an autograph painting by Rubens is that none of them seem ever to have questioned Ludwig Burchard's initial verdict that the painting he looked at in 1929 was the same one

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<sup>33</sup> *Corpus Rubenianum*, Vol. III, p.114.

as that which Rubens painted for Rockox. It is not difficult to imagine his state of mind on being confronted with the picture. He would undoubtedly have been excited at the possibility of having discovered a well documented but lost Rubens. Mark Jones explains how easy it is for even the most experienced and knowledgeable of experts to make mistakes: 'What is being asserted is not that the less well informed may sometimes make mistakes, but that even the most rigorously organised of institutions can, and is occasionally wrong. And this is not, or not simply, because knowledge and experience can never be complete, but because perception itself is determined by the structure of expectations that underpins it'.<sup>34</sup>

Burchard's anticipation of one day discovering the lost work, the fact that his enthusiasm would have been fired by the initial impact of the painting, (which, as we have explained, is considerable, in spite of its obvious deficiencies) may have blinded him to the nature of the actual object in front of him. In conclusion, we feel justified in asking that the National Gallery reconsider their view of the painting.

Euphrosyne Doxiadis, Steven Harvey, Siân Hopkinson:

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<sup>34</sup> Mark Jones, *Fake? The Art of Deception*, British Museum Publications 1990, p.11.