The *Samson and Delilah*: an opportunity to inspire learning and engagement, while addressing a longstanding question of public trust

An Open Briefing Note for the Trustees of the National Gallery, 8 June 2022

It is now 25 years since the National Gallery promised a public debate on the authenticity of its prized *Samson and Delilah* "over the next few months". In the intervening years the public controversy around this painting has only grown, yet the promised debate has never materialised.

Equally concerning, there is no reference on the painting's label or on the National Gallery's website either to the long-standing challenges to the painting's authenticity, or to the many uncontested facts that constitute an important part of the painting's story but do not fit the official narrative.

Key among these are the *Samson and Delilah's*:

a) Lack of provenance - the painting appeared out of the blue in Paris in 1929, and there is no convincing evidence to link it either to Rubens' long-lost painting on this subject of around 1609 (last documented in 1641), or indeed to the Liechtenstein Collection's *Samson and Delilah* (lost after 1881) that was in any case never attributed to Rubens.

The painting was quickly upgraded from a supposed Honthorst to a Rubens by Ludwig Burchard, for its sale to German industrialist, August Neuerburg, in 1930. Dozens of Burchard's attributions to Rubens have since been overturned – including others sold to Neuerburg. It is also notable that Burchard did not include the painting in *Unknown Masterpieces*, a review of little known and rediscovered paintings that he co-edited that same year.

In short, there is nothing to link the National Gallery painting to the original work by Rubens last seen in 1641, and Burchard was very fallible.

b) Strange style - all agree the *Samson and Delilah* looks unlike other paintings by Rubens. A National Gallery press release of 1997 acknowledges this and offers an explanation: "The picture does not look like the other works in the Gallery by Rubens

because it is the only work in this Collection typical of the artist when he returned from Italy to Antwerp in 1609".

This argument does not stand up to scrutiny. The style is strikingly different to paintings from the exact same period, such as *The Raising of the Cross* of 1610 (with which it shares many models), and *The Honeysuckle Bower* of 1609.

The painting is crude throughout the *Samson and Delilah*, uncharacteristic of Rubens at any point in his development. This includes the handling of the protagonists, while secondary elements like the carpet or statue are particularly slapdash – with no parallels that we can identify in Rubens' surviving oeuvre.

In 2021, a widely reported AI analysis by Swiss-based company *Art Recognition*, 'trained' on 148 original paintings by Rubens as well as other images from the period, found the National Gallery's *Samson and Delilah* not to be an original artwork by Rubens with a probability of 91.78%. The efficacy of the method is supported by an accuracy on the validation set of 83.94%.

c) Paint and preparation - bizarrely, for a Rubens of 1609, the Samson and Delilah shows signs neither of *pentimenti*, "the corrections made during the painting process that have unintentionally become visible with the passage over time" as Nico Van Hout puts it in his *Rubens Unveiled*; nor of *craquelure*, the fine network of cracks in the paint – the natural product of ageing – that you would expect to see in a painting from this period. Intriguingly, the Gallery's *Technical Bulletin (Volume 7)* of 1983 remarks that "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."

The palette too is very unusual. Most striking by far is the absence of any blue pigment, even in optically blue areas. This is in contrast to the rest of Rubens oeuvre. For example in the near contemporary *The Raising of the Cross*, Rubens used four different blue pigments (noted by the conservators of that work with the observation that blue was 'particularly dear' to the artist).

There are several other unusual features revealed in the *Technical Bulletin* – though it is certainly not the last word on this painting, being based on the science of 40 years ago. One wonders what an up-to-date technical analysis of the painting using today's methods would reveal. As anybody in the field of art scholarship knows, the scientific tools available for studying the physical composition and structure of a painting have

become vastly more sophisticated, easier-to-use and in relative terms cheaper since 1983 when the *Technical Bulletin* was written.

Knowledge of Rembrandt's work, both among scholars and art-lovers, has been enormously advanced by the application of these tools, for example by the Rijksmuseum which invited the public to follow its investigation of its most famous painting, *The Night Watch*. The National Gallery could make a huge contribution to the understanding of Rubens by scrutinising *Samson and Delilah* in a similar spirit of openness. We are aware that a dendrochronology test was carried out in the 1990s, but that did not put an end to public controversy over the painting, and a much greater range of instruments is now easily available.

d) Divergence from eyewitness copies – last, but far from least, two separate representations of the original *Samson and Delilah*, both produced just a few years after the original was painted, diverge dramatically in their composition from the National Gallery version. The first is an engraving by Jacob Matham, made as early as 1612. The second is Frans Francken II's 1630-35 *Supper at the House of Burgomaster Rockox* depicting the room the painting was created for.

Both show Samson's outstretched foot complete, with space to the edge of the painting, forming a classical triangular composition that would be typical of Rubens and of the time. In the National Gallery painting, the protagonist's foot ends abruptly, painted without toes (not cut down later, since one can see where the paint ends on the wood): a wholly uncharacteristic way for Rubens to handle his hero.

Both also clearly show three soldiers in the doorway at the top right. In the National Gallery painting there are five. One, the only figure without a helmet, looks directly out at the viewer. Many critics have suggested this is a playful cameo of whoever made this copy of Rubens' original.

To explain these major changes in composition, one has to suppose that *both* Matham and then Francken chose to make these two very significant alterations (or 'corrections' given how unusual these elements of the National Gallery painting's composition both are).

Matham includes a written dedication on his engraving which makes this seem even more unlikely: "this image … has been engraved by myself in bronze, with care and attention, depicting the original work painted by the hand of the Master Peter Paul Rubens, which is on view in [Rockox's] house where it can be admired."

> Defenders of the painting tend to avoid this topic altogether, but tie themselves in knots when pushed for an explanation – for example by saying that Francken, working 20 years after Matham, would have chosen to copy the engraving's alterations, despite being in the room where Rubens' original was hanging. The most logical explanation is the simplest: that the National Gallery version – with all its many other faults and inconsistencies, including those described in this briefing – is not the same painting as the one that Matham and then Francken saw.

Take this last point alone. It is surely both relevant and interesting for visitors to the Gallery or its website to know that two contemporary copies of the painting they see before them show a strikingly different composition. Even if it is actually by Rubens, isn't it all the more interesting that these two artists chose to make these major changes?

Not bringing this, or other uncontested facts about the *Samson and Delilah*, to the fore for the art-loving public seems out of step with the Gallery's core objectives as an institution "to inspire learning and engagement'. And further out of step with the commitments in its Constitution to "encourage all aspects of scholarship on the collection, developing research into, and documentation of, the pictures … while ensuring that this work is disseminated" and to "help the widest possible public both in the Gallery and beyond to understand and enjoy the paintings, taking advantage of opportunities created by modern technology."

Instead, the contentious *Samson and Delilah* is designated as one of just 30 'highlight paintings' in the Gallery's vast Collection. In our view, this further dampens critical engagement – prompting visitors to marvel at it as a standout 'masterpiece', but without providing them with the information needed to critically engage with it as an object.

The case against the *Samson and Delilah* has been a matter of public record for several decades. In 1992, artist and art historian Euphrosyne Doxiadis (with colleagues Steve Harvey and Siân Hopkinson) submitted a report to the Gallery laying out many of the points above. Her ongoing research on the painting has been widely covered and continues to this day.

In 1997, Rubens scholar Dr. Katarzyna Krzyżagórska-Pisarek added new findings to the record from her PhD thesis (*Rubens and Connoisseurship, 2009)*, centred around the controversial attribution of *Samson and Delilah*, including research showing how flawed Ludwig Burchard's record of Rubens authentications had been. Faced with this evidence, the then-Director of the National Gallery Neil McGregor said "the scholar raises some serious questions that I cannot answer easily".

In the same year, and building on Krzyżagórska-Pisarek's research material, prominent art critic Waldemar Januszczak took apart the *Samson and Delilah* in a searing article in The Sunday Times, concluding "the one thing all we doubters agree on is that the painting bought by the Gallery for a staggering sum in 1980 is not by Rubens." Januszczak has since changed his position, but has not explained publicly what new evidence or insights led to his about-turn.

And ArtWatch Director Michael Daley has laid out detailed research across decades that questions the attribution to Rubens, including in two dedicated editions of the ArtWatch journal in 2000 and 2006.

For its part, the Gallery has done little to engage with or respond to specific evidence that questions the *Samson and Delilah*. Instead it has fallen back on the authority of the Rubenianum and of prominent experts who support the attribution to Rubens. Yet, we have spoken to many scholars who express doubts about the *Samson in Delilah* in private, but are unwilling to go on the record for fear of the effect on their careers of challenging the establishment line. This strikes us as a most unhealthy situation, to which the Gallery would not want to inadvertently contribute.

In August 2020, Bart Cornelis, the Gallery's Curator of Dutch and Flemish Paintings 1600-1800, wrote, in a letter to Doxiadis: "Nor indeed is there any other technical evidence that would sway what we consider to be the obvious conclusion that the painting is a virtuoso masterpiece by [Rubens]". But whatever the truth, 'obvious' is surely the one thing that this contentious attribution is *not*. As art historian and former V&A Director Sir Mark Jones wrote, "…even the most academically and intuitively gifted of individuals, even the most rigorously organised of institutions, can and will occasionally be 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."

We would hope that the Gallery would instead take a more open-minded and critical approach to the evidence, in line with its objectives and Constitution. As part of this, the positive case for the attribution should be laid out in full, explaining how the painting would be assessed were it discovered today instead of in 1929, without the benefit of almost a century of high-profile incumbency. We believe this is owed to the British taxpayer, to admirers of Rubens worldwide, and to the legacy of the great painter himself.

That is why we now write to ask you as Trustees and custodians of the National Gallery collection take a fresh look at this matter. In our considered view, the Gallery's reputation as a guardian of the national heritage, and of art-historical knowledge, is at stake, and nothing but

good can come of a constructive and open-ended enquiry into a controversy which will not go away.

Specifically, we ask that:

1) The Gallery holds an open public debate on the painting this year, fulfilling its long-overdue promise from 1997 to do so. Over 420 people have signed an open letter to the Gallery requesting this (and over 10,000 have actively engaged with the associated social media campaign) at www.inRubensName.org, where the letter and further documentation on the painting can be found.

2) The painting's label and entry on the website are now updated to present a more balanced and inclusive narrative about the painting, including by acknowledging the longstanding debate about its authenticity.

3) The Gallery undertakes to use some of the sophisticated, easy-to-use and inexpensive scientific instruments that are now available to examine the painting and learn more about its composition and physical structure. We note that the painting was removed from display for over a week last month, and we hope the opportunity was taken to conduct such tests.

4) The Gallery works with us to produce materials that explore and invite public engagement on the *Samson and Delilah's* fascinating and multifaceted story, for dissemination through its website and social media channels.

We would of course be delighted to provide more supporting information, or to answer your questions. Meanwhile we thank you for giving this your attention, and look forward to your reply and to action being taken on this important matter.

8 June, 2022

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