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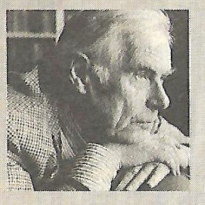

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Cover image courtesy of the National Gallery

One of the world's most valuable paintings hangs in the National Gallery. But Samson and Delilah, widely assumed to be by Rubens, is not by him but is a copy, argues WALDEMAR JANUSZCZAK. Who then did paint it?

THE ENGRAVING

Now in the British Museum, this engraving is probably the most trustworthy representation of the original Rubens painting. It was made by Jacob Matham in about 1613 and is dedicated to Nicolaas Rockox, who commissioned the painting from Rubens c 1609. In this reversed version, Samson's complete foot (his left, corresponding to his right in the painted versions) can be clearly seen and there are three soldiers in the doorway, where five appear in the National Gallery painting

A Rubens

Whisper, whisper, whisper . . . Copy, copy, copy . . . There comes a moment in the history of any rumour about a painting when pushing your fingers into your ears and hoping it goes away stops working. That moment has, I suggest, been reached by one of the National Gallery's prize possessions.

A few weeks from now you will be watching the gallery's director standing in front of a dark, flickering, dramatic depiction of Samson and Delilah, supposedly by Rubens, and you will hear him opining on the BBC: "This is a fiction . . ." Is the director of the National Gallery finally admitting to the nation that there are doubts about the authenticity of this puzzling, ambitious, famously expensive picture? Of course not. Neil MacGregor, the best National Gallery director of my lifetime — scholar, motivator, organiser, television presenter, wordsmith — is merely involved in an excellent small-screen examination of the art in his charge, in the aptly named new series, Making Masterpieces. "In this programme," he will declare at the outset, without a hint of irony, "I want to look at the illusion of reality that oil paints made possible . . ."

Samson and Delilah shows the plangent Biblical moment when a Philistine cuts off Samson's strength-endowing hair. Samson does not notice. He has collapsed in Delilah's lap in a magnificent post-coital slump. We know exactly what the two of them have been doing. In Making Masterpieces, an excited MacGregor rightly applauds the painting's "glow of lust". There is a sweaty sexiness to it that is notably different from the pink porkiness of other Rubensian love scenes. Dominated by a glistening expanse of Samson's naked back, this is a painting that appeals to your fingernails. There is something tangibly modern about its upfrontness. When it was acquired by the gallery on July 11, 1980, at auction at Christie's, nobody, to my knowledge, questioned its authenticity. Most of us were too busy trying to come to terms with its price tag.

Samson and Delilah cost the nation £2.5m. In these days of the £50m picture, a mere £2.5m may not sound like much, but in 1980 it was a colossal sum for the National Gallery to find. At the time of the purchase, the Samson was the second most expensive painting of all time. There was drama, too, about the way the gallery rushed its new acquisition to Trafalgar Square and — in an unprecedented gesture of excitement — put it on show the same afternoon. I went to see it shortly afterwards. I was struck, as I have been struck every time I have viewed it since, which is often, by its sheer unusualness. It seems not to belong with the other Rubenses in the room. Go and see it, and you will surely notice that the Samson feels different.

Soon after its purchase, the whispers began. Samson's arm was too long, too ape-like to be the handiwork of Rubens. His body-builder's back was too hard, and muscular. The rest of his body was too short. Where is his left leg? Disbelief was also expressed about the painting's garish colour-scheme. The purple curtain. The crimson dress. There was something unsettling about the space occupied by the central lovers and the supporting cast of procuresses and Philistines. All of them appeared indecently near the front.

Earlier this year, the doubts burst noisily into print in an article by the notorious national gallery-basher and director of ArtWatch UK, Michael Daley. Normally, Daley seems to me to be talking rot, but this time he made some sense. Shortly afterwards, I was contacted by a Polish art historian called Kasia Pisarek, who told me she had been working on her own examination of the Rubens's authenticity. Pisarek had graduated from the Sorbonne in the 1980s, but had given up full-time art history to raise a family. The National Gallery will not have heard of her, and neither had I. The intriguing bundle of papers she finally agreed to let me examine represented mountains of research into the lustily glowing and unusual "Rubens".

First, Pisarek dealt exhaustively with the painting's provenance. It was dodgy. Although there was no doubt that the wealthy and worthy Nicolaas Rockox of Antwerp had commissioned a Samson and Delilah from Rubens to hang above the fireplace of his great salon in about 1609, there was real doubt that the same painting was hanging today in London. The National Gallery was being exceedingly optimistic when it made the provenance of its expensive new acquisition sound exceedingly straightforward in an exhibition devoted to it in 1983. The last definite mention of Rubens's Samson was in an inventory of Rockox's estate drawn up at his death in 1640. After that, its journey into the modern world is entirely conjectural.

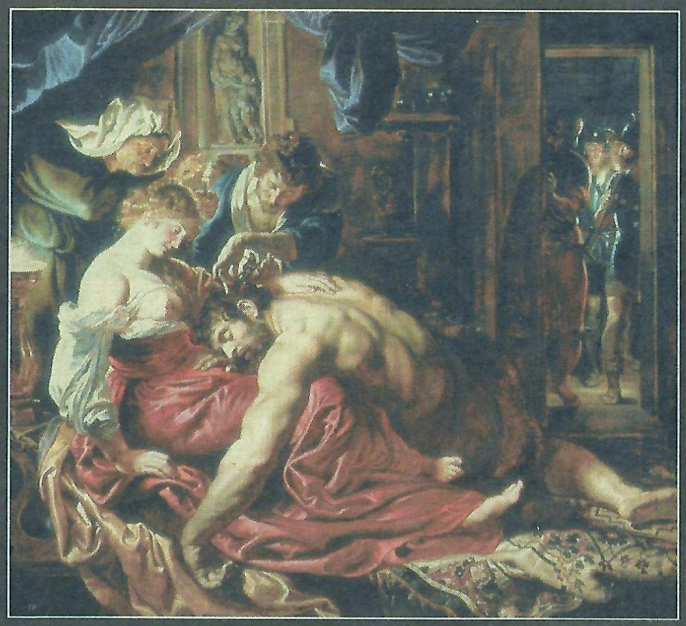
In about 1700, the Princess of Liechtenstein acquired a painting from Antwerp, also a Samson and Delilah, which was later catalogued as "Samson and Delilah, by Jan van Hoecke". This particular painting was worried over from the beginning. It was never called a Rubens, and remained in the Liechtenstein collection until 1881, when it was sold. Fifty years later, a Samson and Delilah of the same dimensions as the Liechtenstein picture reappeared on the Paris art market, initially identified as a Honthurst. It was soon bought, as a Rubens, by a German tobacco magnate, and remained in his family until the record-breaking Christie's 1980 sale.

Nothing is known about the rediscovery of the Honthurst/Rubens in 1929, although Pisarek points out a notable sequence of coincidences. The year 1929 was also the one in which Johannes II, the famously scholarly Prince of Liechtenstein who had authorised the sale of the unwanted Van Hoecke Samson in 1881, died. An oil sketch for Samson also turned up in the 1930s, in "an antique shop in York". That is now in Cincinnati. Also exhibited for the first time in 1933 was a drawing, seemingly a preparatory one for the same composition. These days, art historians like to trace a direct development from this drawing to the Cincinnati sketch to the final painting, ignoring the coincidences that after 300 years of disappearance all three turned up more or less at once.

Pisarek shows me a photograph of the

THE OIL SKETCH

This preparatory work for the final painting turned up in the 1930s in 'an antique shop in York' and is now in the Cincinnati Art Museum. Its discovery happily coincided with the emergence of the finished work on the art market. Similar to the National Gallery painting, Samson's right foot is vague and incomplete. The sketch appears to have been trimmed. In a photograph of it taken before 1966, the foot is clearly complete. Again, there are only three soldiers in the doorway



THE RUBENS PAINTING?

This is the work bought by the National Gallery in 1980 as Rubens's Samson and Delilah commissioned by Nicolaas Rockox. There are puzzling questions about it, some aesthetic: why are the colours so garishly untypical of the artist? Some technical: why is it mounted on blockboard manufactured some time between 1910 and 1960? And why are there now five soldiers in the doorway? Could one of them be a self-portrait of the real painter of the picture?

or a costly copy?

Cincinnati sketch taken before 1966, in which the whole of Samson's leg is visible on the right. By the time it was sold to Cincinnati Art Museum, this leg had mysteriously been trimmed. The leg is an important point of reference. The National Gallery's Samson does not have a complete right leg, either. Yet in the two most trustworthy representations of the original Rubens painting — an engraving made by Jacob Matham in about 1613, dedicated specifically to Rockox; and a view of Rockox's great salon painted circa 1635 by Frans Francken, which shows the Rubens *in situ* — the prostrate Samson has a whole leg.

This leg-spotting is no mere art-historical anoraking. Pinsarek insists, and I agree with her, that the full composition, with leg, depicted by Francken and Matham, appears much more convincingly Rubensian. It sets the painting in a proper Rubensian distance, and does not force it to the front of the picture plane with the harsh directness of the present image. Looking at the tiny Francken view of Samson hanging above Rockox's fireplace, you feel immediately that this is how the great Rubens must have looked.

So who painted the impressive, dramatic, sweaty un-Rubensian picture now glistening in the National Gallery? That is a question that might have been easier to answer were it not for the extraordinary saga of the blockboard that now forms most of the painting's back. That's right. Blockboard. At some point this century, somebody appears to have planed down the original oak panel Samson was painted on to a thickness of 3mm, and then glued what was left to the blockboard, creating a kind of Rubensian veneer. There have even been wild-eyed suggestions that the National Gallery itself did the job after it bought the painting.

AKG Photo

In Francken's painting c 1635, Samson has a whole leg in the Rubens over the fireplace

I put this to the gallery's chief conservator, Martin Wyld, who quips cheerfully that he was rather proud of having been accused; planing a 17th-century oak panel to wafer thinness, and attaching it perfectly to blockboard while leaving its surface in pristine condition, is an exceptional feat of restoration. Nobody would or should do it today. Whoever did it earlier did a masterful job. Why did they do it at all? If the painting is in exceptionally good condition, why was there any need to hazard the transfer to blockboard? A question neither the chief conservator nor MacGregor can answer. All I get from them both is the National Gallery equivalent of: it wasn't us, guv.

The backs of paintings can contain a wealth of information about their provenance. The photographs I am shown of the current blockboard back reveal a couple of exhibition labels that belong to recent years. They tell you very little. The poor National Gallery, accused crazily of perpetrating the deed, has been forced to follow up the dating tests it recently mounted on the thin remains of the original panel — which settled roughly on 1590 and 1640 — with more tests on the piece of blockboard. These prove that it is, er, a piece of blockboard, dating somewhere between 1910 and 1960. Thus, a serious affair has descended to the level of farce.

The National Gallery did not tamper with the origins of the disputed Samson, but somebody has. And the gallery has left itself open to accusations of sloppiness by making some uncharacteristic boobs in its initial conservation reports. I am shown these authoritative-looking documents and, on the first page, the information that the Samson is painted on a panel made of five planks has been crossed out and changed to seven planks. In the published technical report we are told there are six planks. A conservation report that cannot count the number of bits of wood the gallery's most expensive painting was done on hardly inspires confidence.

The fuss over the blockboard is a red herring. The painting above remains in excellent condition. What I would like to see, and what the gallery surely needs to mount now, is a thorough examination of the painting's history and status. Let us see some comparisons with the surviving sketches, the Francken interior, the Matham engraving. Let us find out more about Jan van Hoecke, pupil of Rubens, and an extremely shadowy artistic presence. Why was the Liechtenstein inventory so sure the Samson was by him? Rubens's flesh-crazed pupil, Jacob Jordaens, strikes me as the most likely of the remaining candidates.

The suggestion that the Samson is an out-and-out fake, painted with appropriate materials on a mocked-up 17th-century veneer, is easy for a fresh technical examination to dismiss. Kasia Pisarek has a wacky theory, which I will pass on. Another of the differences between the Rubens composition as recorded in all existing sources, and the National Gallery's version, is that there are three soldiers in the doorways of all the others and five in ours. Could one of these additional witnesses, the one not dressed as a soldier, who stares out at us Caravaggio-style, be a self-portrait? Rubens's most celebrated pupils, van Dyck and Jordaens, frequently appeared lightly disguised in their own art.

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. □

Making Masterpieces starts Oct 20 on BBC2