THE NATIONAL GALLERY

PRESS RELEASE

Samson and Delilah by Rubens

Samson and Delilah has long been unanimously accepted by all the leading Rubens scholars as a major painting by Peter Paul Rubens. 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 1608. At this point in his career Rubens was brashly concerned to show his acquaintance with the most recent trends of Italian art, and his work of this period have a tough modernity influenced by the Italian Caravaggio, very different from the soft flesh tones of his more familiar later works.

As with all great artists, Rubens's style changed and developed throughout his long career. The key question is: at what point in his career was this picture made? It is known that a painting of this subject was commissioned by Rubens's patron Rockox in 1608/9. Neil MacGregor, Director of the National Gallery says 'The picture in the National Gallery is exactly what one would expect Rubens to have painted at that moment, just returned from Rome'. In terms of figure drawing, colour, composition and paint handling the *Samson and Delilah* is directly comparable to works of the same date elsewhere: in Antwerp, *The Raising of the Cross;* in St Petersburg, *Cimon and Pero* and in Madrid, *Susanna and the Elders*. This was a brief phase in Rubens's development and works from this period have always been seen to be different from the rest of his output. It is therefore not surprising that 18th- and 19th-century inventories attributed the *Samson and Delilah* to a Rubens follower: the *Cimon and Pero* in the Hermitage in St Petersburg now also held to be one of Rubens's masterpieces, was in the 1860s removed from public view, on the grounds that it could not be by Rubens. Today, no-one doubts its authenticity.

In 1977 *Samson and Delilah* was shown in the great Rubens retrospective exhibition in Antwerp, along with works from all stages of the artist's career. It was unanimously accepted and admired as one of the artist's great early achievements. Shortly after the National Gallery acquired the picture it organised an exhibition in 1983 putting together a great deal of relevant material about the painting, including the preparatory drawing and the later engraving, so that the public could consider the new acquisition in all its aspects. A short catalogue was also published. Once again the picture was acclaimed as a great Rubens both by the general public and by art experts.

Every technical test carried out to date has yielded results consistent with the date of about 1609 and the attribution to Rubens. The world's leading expert on dendrochronology, Dr Peter Klein of the University of Hamburg, recently undertook an analysis of the Baltic oak boards on which it is painted; the results show that the trees were felled around 1600, and that this is entirely consistent with a painting of around 1609. The recent allegation that the panel was planed down in 1981, either by Christie's or the National Gallery, and a modern piece of blockboard attached has been shown to be false. Tests by a timber expert, Paul Sharphouse of the T.R.A.D.A Technology Limited have confirmed that the blockboard predates 1960, most likely originating in the 1930s.

None of those individuals who have doubted the painting's attribution to Rubens has published any scholarly work on the artist. Recently, at a colloquium at the National Gallery to mark the exhibition *Rubens's Landscapes* a large number of distinguished scholars who have devoted their careers to the study of Rubens unanimously agreed that the painting was one of the artist's masterpieces. They included Professor Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann (Institute of Fine Arts, New York University); Dr. Walter Liedtke (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York); Dr. Frans Baudouin, Professor Carl van de Velde, Dr. Hans Vlieghe and Dr. Arnout Balis (Rubenianum, Antwerp); Dr Paul Huvenne (Rubenshuis, Antwerp); Professor Dr. Justus Muller-Hofstede and Professor Hans-Joachim Raupp (University of Bonn); Dr. Konrad Renger (Alte Pinakothek, Munich); Professor Michael Jaffe (former Director, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge); Dr. Elizabeth McGrath (Warburg Institute, University of London); Professor Christopher White (Director, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford).

Debates of this sort require patient consideration of different sorts of evidence. The best format is for this evidence to be presented at some length for public discussion - and the National Gallery will be arranging such a lecture and debate over the next few months.

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