

# Man in Armour

Arnout Balis

This is a very impressive and – at the same time – tantalizing painting. It is painted on oak panel, some 123 x 98 cm. In it we are confronted by a forceful man, an emblem of preparedness: look at his eyes and stance. He is clad in steel. In a way, this is a study in reflections. Steel becomes almost palpable thanks to the way it reflects a cold light. But this intensity and aloofness might have been too chilling to endure, so it has been alleviated by more emotionally engaging activity on the right: two pages, still in their teens and eager, are assisting the hero in putting on his armour (sometimes the action is identified as quite the opposite: the helmet has just been taken off and the breast armour is being unfastened). With affection his left hand is resting on the shoulder of the youngest boy. All this is shown on the right-hand side of the painting. On the left, with a forceful gesture (armoured hand on the

baton), seriousness is easily re-established.

Usually the subject is identified as a portrait (sometimes more specifically as that of Charles V or the Duke of Alba) – once it was suggested that St George was here represented, but more likely a generic character was intended, expressive of general ideas regarding the role of the ‘hero’. In a way this is, then, an allegory, be it one without the accoutrements of symbolic elements we find in other Rubensian depictions of the theme. As is often the case with Rubens, what may look simple at the first glance may contain hidden depths.

There already exists some pertinent literature on this painting, and it so happens that three of the most distinguished Rubens specialists of a former generation (one of them still alive and active) have given us their thoughts on it: Julius Held, Michael Jaffé and Justus Müller Hofstede. Each time new views were presented, and new aspects were commented upon. This is the way scholarship can advance. And most recently, the comments in the recent Christie’s sale catalogue have contributed.

There we are given not only a survey of recent scholarship but also the fruit of painstaking new investigations. And it is a beautifully written piece. This is a feature to be applauded: more and more sale catalogues can count as scholarly literature. Here we are offered detailed comments upon the possible provenance of the painting, a survey of opinions as expressed in the literature, technical details, possible sources of inspiration for the artist, the indications of the use of possible ‘study heads’, and (this for the first time) a competent description of the particular armour here depicted (it appears to date from the first half of the 16th century). We can only be thankful for these additions to the literature.

Have we then, by now, reached a comfortable scholarly position? The matters we are confronted with are complicated in several respects, and some comments might allow us to highlight a few of the more urgent debates in Rubens scholarship (such as the importance of prestigious provenances or Rubens’s system of having replicas made) and the diagnostic techniques to cope with such problems.



Peter Paul Rubens, *A Commander being armed for Battle*. Sold at Christie’s (London) on 6 July 2010, for €11 million



Willem van Haecht, *The ‘Kunstkamer’ of Cornelis van der Geest* (detail). Rubens House, Antwerp

Two almost identical versions of this composition exist: next to the one from Althorp (Lord Spencer) and offered for sale by Christie’s (London) on 6 July, there is a panel of approximately the same size in the Detroit Institute of Arts (it surfaced as late as the 1950s and was acquired by the museum in 1979). This of course poses the problem of attribution. The existence of these two look-alikes might also confuse the matter of the early provenance of these paintings, to which I turn first.

We know of two early sightings of this Rubens composition: first in the collection of Cornelis van der Geest (1577–1638), one of Rubens’s personal Antwerp friends, and again in a renowned 18th-century collection: that of

Philippe, Duke of Orléans (1674–1723). Julius Held (1982) went into some detail working out both provenances. For the first case we have only visual evidence (the depiction of this composition as part of the art gallery of Van der Geest, the painting by Willem van Haecht in the Antwerp Rubens House), for the second one we have documentary as well as visual evidence (a drawing). As could be expected, what with the now existing databases on early whereabouts of paintings, the recent Christie's catalogue offers even more details, especially concerning the Orléans provenance (from 1707 onwards), which could with some plausibility be traced back to an earlier English collection (the Melfort family). Also the later whereabouts of the Orléans painting could be traced till the year 1798, again in an English collection. The compilers of the Christie's sale catalogue felt entitled to connect this 1798 painting with the one we find in Althorp shortly afterward (1802). But since conclusive evidence is still lacking (the other version might at the same time also have been at large), a question mark was added. By the same token, the Van der Geest provenance was also claimed for the Althorp painting (there also with the cautious question mark). They state that Held also had argued for that double provenance for the Althorp painting, which is decidedly wrong: Held was of the opinion that it was the Detroit painting that had previously figured in the Van der Geest and Orléans collections ('probably', because Held too made use of the question mark). And Held had a pertinent argument: one distinguishing difference between the two versions is that the youth holding up the helmet (upper right) has in the Detroit painting an extra lock of hair or curl on his cheek, missing in the Althorp painting, but clearly discernible in both the visual documents I have been referring to for the Van der Geest and the Orléans collections.

Now, how important is this? It is of course nice to be able to claim respectable provenances for a painting, but if anything, the ownership of a painting can offer a psychological argument, but hardly compelling evidence where authorship is concerned. One can of course argue that a patron such as Cornelis van der Geest is likely to have owned only 'original' paintings from the brush of his friend Rubens; but what if the desired composition was unavailable: would he then not have had to be content with a replica? Pushing the matter a little bit further and speculating about Rubens's psychology as a businessman: must the artist even have divulged the status of a replica to a prospective buyer, however close a friend he might have been? All this is no more than speculation. In any case: Julius Held did not think that the likeness of Van der Geest's ownership of the Detroit painting was decisive in deciding on the

authenticity of one or the other of the versions, since he himself clearly preferred the Althorp painting. There was, for him, the evidence of the eye.

It is worth quoting Held at some length since he clearly defined what might still be the role of connoisseurship when it comes to forming an opinion as regards authenticity: 'In the last analysis, it is the work of art itself that furnishes the decisive evidence about its historical classification. It is only a careful and unprejudiced examination of both paintings with the aim of finding out which of them is "the better" – in other words, more worthy of Rubens's brush – that can lead to a decision as to which is the original. Yet [Held adds], as the differences of opinion show, even this approach does not guarantee unanimity.' Here we are confronted with one of the most frequently asked questions, that about the 'authenticity'. How can we install more certainty in that art-historical problem zone? Or: how can we define where the limits lie of what can be called 'certain' and what is somewhat less?

From the moment, in the late 1950s, when it was clear that there were two almost identical paintings to consider as possible candidates, there have been differences of opinion, and even some uneasiness amongst Rubens scholars, in so far as there were thoughts about a possible third painting, now lost. At first only 'the eye' seemed to come into play; but shortly afterwards the eye was aided by technical photography. It is clear that the ideal situation would be to have the two contending paintings side by side for inspection, but this proved hard to realize (it was nevertheless briefly the case, at least once). Some authors apparently accepted both versions (Müller Hofstede), others stood up for either the Detroit painting (M. Jaffé) or the Althorp one (Held, who went into some detail formulating his observations; Jaffé decided that the Althorp panel was a studio work, only retouched by the master). It is not always clear whether further authors had themselves had as close a familiarity with both the paintings as was the case with Held, Jaffé and Müller Hofstede.

Technical investigations were made (using X-radiographs and infra-red images) to see how far they could be enlightening as regards the authenticity. There is no doubt that both versions date from Rubens's time and show a painting technique which matches that of Rubens and his atelier (e.g. the use of a streaky *imprimatura*, visible in infra-red images of both paintings). What one is hoping for, is the presence of major corrections or *pentimenti*, which would form a strong argument for the priority of one or the other version. No such decisive *pentimenti* seem to be evident, but attention has been called to some smaller features that might be significant. Since I have not studied these technical photographs I am in no

position to decide the extent to which they may be helpful.

Little by little Held's view that the Althorp painting is the original seems to have gained ground. Many of those who have had the occasion to study the painting from close by (including the author of these lines) have recognized Rubens's particular way of handling the paint and brush throughout.

Some may also have had the occasion to study the Detroit painting afresh, and come to conclusions about its status. Others (such as myself) have had only photographs at their disposal and would find it more difficult to define its precise character. Maybe we should await further observations of other participants in the debate before closing the file. But for the time being, it would appear that 'connoisseurship' (in the present case based not only on the 'autopsy' of the painting itself, but also on technical multispectral images that contribute to a more precise technical analysis) comes up in favour of the Althorp painting.

It may be useful, in the end, to broaden the scope of the discussion, by concentrating on what can be considered as a normal practice in Rubens's studio, namely that of duplicating a successful composition. We know from letters that the artist could in some cases bestow special care on such replicas, promising to retouch them by his own hand. Could he even at times have himself made a second version? On the other hand, he may sometimes even in 'first versions' have relied on the collaboration of other hands in his studio. This entails that we should be very cautious with terms such as 'original', 'authenticity', 'authorship', etc. It is clear that these intricacies will have to remain part and parcel of every serious study of Rubens's art.

In November 2010 Benefactors and Donors of the Rubenianum Fund will be cordially invited to the book launch of the next volume of the *Corpus Rubenianum* – Jeremy Wood's *Copies and adaptations from Renaissance and later artists: Italian artists. II. Titian and North Italian art*. The launch will be hosted by the most appropriate of institutions – the Museo Nacional del Prado – and will be followed by a reception and a private viewing of the special display of the museum's extensive holdings of works by Rubens. The event will take place on a Friday evening. During the weekend participants will be offered an exclusive cultural programme in Madrid. More information on the exact dates and programme is to follow.