



AUTHENTICATION
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By Susan Grundy

Christie's pushed on with auctioning a relatively unseen work as authentic to Sir Peter Paul Rubens despite knowing certain aspects of their research was thumb sucked, and that at least one important art historian had previously trashed the work as "vile".

At Christie's summer evening sale, Thursday 7 July, a painting not seen in public for over one hundred years, and known only from black and white photographs, was hammered down for an eye-watering £45m. Attributed to the Flemish master Sir Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) it was once in the great palace of Blenheim, Oxfordshire, where it hung for around one hundred and fifty years (c.1740–c.1886). The painting was sold from this collection towards the end of the nineteenth century, and hasn't been exhibited again in public until now. It was consigned to auction by the descendants of Baron Maurice de Hirsch de Gereuth. Disgracefully, certain elements of the research presented to support the claim of authenticity are deceptive. Moreover, the painting is quite ghastly and has no redeeming qualities.

The work is a lascivious depiction of a delicate Biblical subject matter – the seduction of Lot by his two daughters to ensure the survival of the human race. Lot is portrayed as an ugly, unappealing, stocky, bald old man who shoves his

incredibly large and dirty feet into the viewer's face at eye level. One already naked daughter pours wine into his cup; alcohol intended to encourage the mortal sin of incest for the greater good of humanity. Although the composition exhibits a certain professional cohesion, there is nothing heroic about it.

The anatomy is poorly formed, and the colouring exaggerated and atypical. The Victorian art historian Gustav Waagen (1794–1868), who would have seen the painting hanging in Blenheim, was rightly strident in his criticism of it.

"The Lot and his Daughters is ... – remarkable for the vile taste in which it has been conceived and executed; not only are the characters and forms intolerably vulgar and repulsive, but the colouring is bad; there is much exaggeration in the bluish half-tones, in the red-reflected lights and in the painting of the flesh." (See endnote 1.)

Christie's "almost certain"

A similar composition was depicted in an interior scene dating from the 1620s (fig 1). Nevertheless, Christie's were a bit cautious about definitively claiming that the work as depicted in miniature above the fireplace of this interior scene was actually copied in the seventeenth century from the exact painting just now sold at auction. "[T]he description of it ... accords precisely with what is *presumably* this picture ..." Christie's say (my italics). Aside from the non sequitur this is complete wishful thinking. It would be more true to say "it presumably *isn't* this picture ...". There are so many discrepancies between the miniature painting within a painting and the Christie's Lot that it actually cannot have been the Rubens painting copied by Francken and de Vos around 1625.



Fig 1. Frans Francken II and Cornelis de Vos *Interior, called Rubens's Salon*(c.1625–30). Oil on canvas, 75 x 115 cm. Nationalmuseum, Sweden.



Detail: Rubens Lot and his daughters (c.1614); depicted above the fireplace in the Francken and de Vos interior.

Although we shouldn't expect photographic precision from the artists who painted this particular interior, nevertheless we should question how far they let artistic license lead them away from the original painting, in this instance the work attributed to Rubens placed above the fireplace. It should be taken into consideration that Rubens was still alive when this interior was executed. The artists would have been mindful of the potential for criticism of how they depicted his original work. Importantly, having realised the two representations are far from equal Christie's should surely have engaged with the differences? Notably, they didn't. A comparison of the miniature and the Christie's Lot actually reveals a number of uncomfortable anomalies and discrepancies.



The overall distant impression is that these two compositions are similar. Certainly one has formed from observation of the other. However, close comparison ends there. Even taking into consideration the added strips top and bottom of the Christie's Lot (confirmed by X-ray) the difference in proportion between the two works is quite evident. The painting depicted by Francken and de Vos is altogether more horizontal, longer, than the more

squarely rectangular Lot offered by Christie's. An extant engraving (fig. 2) of the Christie's Lot, executed sometime in the seventeenth century, also shows a painting more square. The possibility for more canvas to have existed to the right of the naked daughter is further denied by the engraving. The Christie's Lot and the engraving are very closely proportioned – 1.6:2.25 and 1.6:2.32. On the other hand the Francken and de Vos exhibits proportions of around 1.6:2.65, significantly longer. This confirms the square format was original to Christie's Lot, indicating the Rubens painting shown by Francken and de Vos is not proportionately the same painting as the Christie's Lot (fig 3).



Fig 2. Willem de Leeuw. Engraving after a painting attributed to Peter Paul Rubens. Date unknown, but probably c.1650–1660. 284 x 407 cm.



Fig 3. Christie's Lot 12, Sale 11973. Old Master and British Paintings Evening Sale, 7 July 2016. London, King Street.

A whole foot missing

A number of contradictions within the composition further strongly support the supposition that these are not the same paintings. In the Christie's Lot the naked daughter is positioned higher, more perched on her velvet cloth, as if using it as a cushion. Her left leg is further away from Lot's left leg. Her whole right foot is missing, and has disappeared, we must assume, under the cloth. In the Christie's Lot this naked daughter's torso is shown much longer. The length and shape is bizarrely distorted. Her leg is depicted differently – too short on the femur for the length of the calf. She is upright and more rigid than the figure in the Francken and de Vos. What is evidently lacking, too, is the

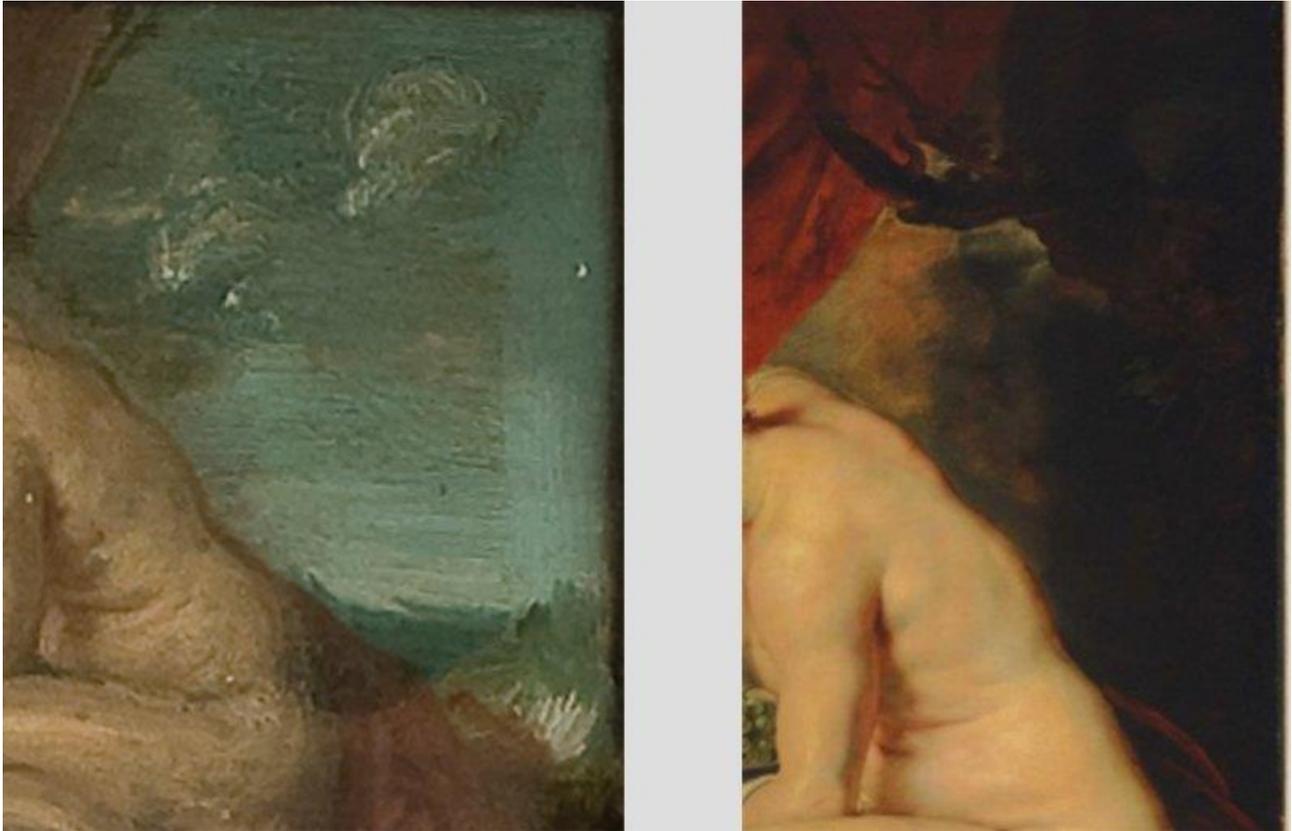
lively depiction of a forward sway as shown in the Francken and de Vos version. In the Francken and de Vos version the plate of food this figure is holding is further from her bicep. In the Christie's Lot she caresses the plate, clutching it more into her body. There is a certain delicacy and sweetness in the way the subject matter has been approached in the Francken and de Vos version, most especially in the depiction of this naked figure.



Comparison of the naked daughters shows a larger yet well-proportioned lady in the Francken and de Vos, swaying in and naturalistically depicted, her feet close to her fathers, both feet showing. The plate is fully exposed in the Francken and de Vos, while in the Christie's Lot the daughter hugs the plate into her chest.

In the Christie's Lot the father is more forward, almost tumbling into the action, whereas in the Francken and de Vos version the father is depicted more relaxed backwards, drunkenly leaning only slightly in as if to receive his next

bibation. In the Christie's Lot the father's back is also depicted longer, too long. Indeed in general the depiction of anatomy in the Christie's Lot has gone seriously awry. The rock has also been moved up in position in the Christie's Lot compared with the Francken and de Vos version.



Comparison of background showing blue sky in one, and fiery night sky in the other. Also note the tree trunk in the Christie's Lot, repeated in the engraving.

What fire?

There is a significant difference in the way the background is depicted. In the Christie's Lot a fire burning in the distance is represented against darkness, an allusion to the flames of Sodom and Gomorrah. In the Francken and de Vos version the sky is differently depicted as daylight blue, with only plumes of smoke reminding the viewer of the burnt cities.

In their literature, and in video, Christie's try to make something of this depiction of flames in their Lot. They draw attention to how the artist, in their opinion, must have intended to recall the roaring fire that would be always beneath this so-called "chimneypiece" (the description used in the estate inventory of its apparent first owner). As Christie's has used the Francken and de Vos painting as supporting evidence for their claims to an impeccable four-hundred year provenance, this is a gross contradiction as there *are no flames* in the Rubens painting as shown in the Francken and de Vos interior. In fact, in the Francken and de Vos painting the fireplace is depicted cold in any case. Apropos fire it should also be noted that the tone and colouring of the two paintings, that is, the Rubens depicted in the Francken and de Vos and the Christie's Lot, are quite different as well. As has already been mentioned, and as noted particularly by Waagen, the Christie's Lot is altogether very red, particularly in the reflected reds. The only indication of some reflected red in the Francken and de Vos version is a glow on Lot's feet and on the naked daughter's feet (his right her left particularly), also his ear, but altogether the colours are noticeably more muted. Therefore, it could be there was an intended reference to a real fire in the grate below where the painting was to hang. Nevertheless, the Rubens depicted in the Francken and de Vos is altogether a cooler painting. Pointedly, the jarring and exaggerated colouring in the Christie's Lot cannot be a conservation phenomenon as Waagen, in 1840, commented on it.

Do these differences mean anything?

Are these differences indicative or meaningful? Certainly, on a fundamental level, if we believe there was some attempt by the painters of the interior to remain faithful to the original they were copying from, then yes, these differences *are* clearly indicative that the Rubens painting of *Lot and his*

daughters depicted by Francken and de Vos is not the same painting of *Lot and his daughters* as offered by Christie's. Significantly, the painting shown in Francken and de Vos is also not the same painting as engraved by Willem de Leeuw (born c.1610 said to have flourished 1660). The engraving closely follows the Christie's *Lot* and has a terminus post quem of c.1670. This indicates also the terminus post quem of the Christie's *Lot*. Nevertheless, decades might have separated the possible inception of the engraving (at least after 1630, but more credibly 1650–60) and the dated execution of the Rubens painting above the fireplace as depicted in the Francken and de Vos (c.1614) – twenty to thirty years, or more, in which anything could have happened. It is clear that Christie's *Lot and his daughters* is the painting given to the Duke of Marlborough and displayed in Blenheim Palace from c.1740 onwards. It is the one seen by Waagen, for example. However, the differences between the Francken and de Vos record and the actual painting on offer (and matching engraving) strongly contradict a significant part of the researched provenance as presented by the auction house. If the Francken and de Vos is a depiction of Courtois's interior, as Christie's claim, then the Christie's *Lot* is not the Rubens he owned. Therefore the Courtois Rubens could not have been the same one given to John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough, by Joseph I, Holy Roman Emperor, in turn appropriated from Maximilian II Emanuel of Bavaria.

A lost Rubens

The version above the fireplace in the interior scene must be considered as lost, but nothing has been said about this in Christie's literature, nor has any reference been made to the unlikely possibility that Rubens produced two versions. Certainly, an x-ray published by Christie's of their *Lot* confirms that no differing composition is "hidden" underneath the current one offered. The National Museum in Sweden labels the Francken and de Vos as Rubens's interior in any case, not as Courtois's. However, the family depicted cannot be

identified with Rubens's family, and no inventories have been found to support that Rubens kept a version of *Lot and his daughters*. It can therefore be supposed that this is a depiction of Courtois's interior as he bequeathed a *Lot and his daughters* by Rubens. It could be a copy of the original Rubens was made after Courtois senior died. The engraver was likely still alive when Courtois died in 1668. However, any such copy cannot have been the one depicted by Francken and de Vos.

Correct cataloguing

Taking these contradictions most properly into consideration the painting sold by Christie's was without the requisite and rigorously interpreted documentary evidence. Further, based on visual inspection the piece hasn't become suddenly more pleasing than when Gustav Waagen trashed it nearly two hundred years ago. As a studio copy, or studio version, a guillotine would slash through the number of zeros on the hammered price. An elegant, but considered studio work of Rubens, *Antiochus and Stratonice*, went for £170,500 at the same auction. I'm not convinced the Christie's Lot should even be considered a studio version, however, as that would imply Rubens approved of it. As *Follower of Sir Peter Paul Rubens* a few more zeros would come off – £45,000 is about the right price.

Endnotes

1. Waagen, G. 1840. *Peter Paul Rubens: his life and genius*. Translated from German by Robert R. Noel, esq. London: Saunders & Otley: p. 81–2.