

The Cranach case



Hearsay, poor assumptions, inconsistent reasoning, suggestions, gut-feel opinions

Plugged from the web, an example of poor journalism

Start quote;

Here are the key *TAN* points:

- The Cranach is the subject of a court case that has been going on since 2014.
- The case is being brought by an unnamed French dealer against those who sold the Cranach to Colnaghi. Those who sold the Cranach say they bought it for €510,000.* A French dealer says he consigned the painting to these 'middlemen' as a 'work by an anonymous artist', and is now suing them for breach of trust.
- The French dealer's lawyer, Philippe Scarzella, says that the French police investigation which resulted in the seizure of the Cranach also includes 6 other works, including a Gentileschi of *David with the Head of Goliath*, a Hals *Portrait of a Man*, and a Velasquez *Portrait of Cardinal Borgia*. I have never seen or heard of the Velasquez until now. The Hals and the Gentileschi were sold, it is claimed, to the London dealer Mark Weiss.
- The French dealer says he was the source of all of these pictures, including the Cranach, from the collection of a 'French businessman, André Borie'.
- Scarzella says that the French criminal investigation, and the claims of fakery, are smears directed at his client.
- Finally, we learn that the seized Cranach has been sent to the National French Museum's laboratory for further tests. This is the same lab, reports *TAN*, that has already declared the Hals to be authentic.

Here are some immediate thoughts and conclusions from all of the above:

- First, we might assume that the National French Museum's laboratory is unlikely to declare the Cranach a fake. If the Hals has already passed muster, then you might say that bodes well for a Cranach from the same source.
- Second, the apparent 'Belgian' provenance that has been attached to the Cranach is presumably incorrect. I don't know why that should have been made up, when the collection of a French businessman is just as good. Someone has a case to answer here.
- Third, €510,000 is an unusually large amount of money for a painting by "an unknown artist". I don't understand why a dealer would sell a painting which looks like a Cranach, and is signed, as a work by an unknown artist. Surely they'd want to find out if it was indeed 'right', and worth more?
- Fourth, we still don't know where these allegations of fakery come from. The 'dealer' denies they are from him. The financier who allegedly sold the painting to Colnaghi has denied any connection with the French police investigation. Why would the alleged 'middlemen', who are being sued by 'the dealer' claim the Cranach is a fake, since by doing so they would presumably have to hand back the substantial profit they made on the deal or deals?
- Fifth, why would 'the dealer', having successfully sold a number of works from the Borie collection (including the Hals and the Gentileschi) then apparently try and dispose of the Cranach via unnamed middlemen for a non-Cranach price?
- Finally, it would be odd for anyone who knowingly handled fakes to bring a lawsuit about the paintings - one would imagine they would want to lie low, and be happy with what they'd made so far. So it must be unlikely that 'the dealer' had any concerns about fakery.

All of which, on balance, would suggest that we still have very little strong evidence to allow us to say that these pictures are fake.

It seems to me that the key to this whole affair is to find out more about André Borie. Who was this mystery collector with the cache of previously unknown, small-scale masterpieces by some of the biggest names in art history? Josephine Bindé's article in [Telereama](#) tells us that this is the André Borie who helped construct the Mont Blanc tunnel. Borie was a senior French civil engineer and worked on a number of grand projects for the French government. He was awarded the Legion d'Honneur. According to the *Telereama* article, the 'dealer' inherited the Cranach from Borie's daughter in 1973. The Gentileschi, on the other hand, was apparently bought in 1995, but had previously (confusingly) been in the Borie collection before that.

It should be possible to establish with certainty whether Borie was indeed a collector. I can find no evidence so far to show that he was - nothing in any French museum database for example. Normally, enthusiastic collectors leave a trail of some kind in the museum world, with loans to exhibitions for example, or footnotes in catalogues. For M. Borie, *rien*. (He is not to be confused with the US collector, [Adolph Borie](#).) Not that this means anything. Perhaps he inherited them himself, and they were just chattels. Or my French Googling isn't up to much, which is quite possible. Under French law, as far as I understand it, there is something called a 'proces verbal' which lists someone's possessions after their death, and

this is usually publicly available. If these pictures turn up on M. Borie's records, then it's case closed, and we can all move on. I feel sure that something like this will yet settle the matter.

My searches have revealed one new fact, at least, and that is that André Borie is listed in the provenance of another newly discovered work, this time a *Head of Christ* by Correggio. This picture, from the limited photos I have seen online, looks to be really quite convincing, and relates to another Correggio [Head of Christ](#) at the Getty Museum in LA. As with other works from the Borie collection, we have no firmly established provenance for the Correggio from before his ownership. After his death, the picture was passed by inheritance to an heir who apparently sold the picture at Christie's in Geneva. The picture has been exhibited as a Correggio in the Galleria Nazionale in Parma in 2008, declared authentic by a host of experts, and has been published in an article in *The Burlington Magazine* (April 2009, p.261), who are usually extremely hard to please. It is painted in oil on panel and measures 40 x 34 cm. This information has been taken from an [exhibition catalogue](#) of the 'Maison d'Art' in Monaco, which was held in association with Clovis Whitfield. No date is given for the Christie's Geneva sale, and indeed it may not have been sold as a Correggio.

The addition of the Borie Correggio must make it less likely that we're dealing with a cache of fakes here. Isn't it still hard to believe that someone could make such convincing fakes in the style of so many artists, and over so many periods? However, I ought to note that the Correggio has already been the subject of its own 'fake' controversy, back in 2008, before anything of the other Borie pictures was known about. At the time of the Parma exhibition, an Italian art historian and politician (now there's a career path to aspire to) called Vittorio Sgarbi declared that the painting was fake, and loudly so. His view made it into several [newspapers](#). He also named some likely culprits behind the painting, including an Italian artist called Lino Frongia, whom he has described on [this website](#) as 'the greatest "Old Master" painter alive'. All of which is most intriguing, but doesn't get us very far. From what I can gather in the Italian press, further technical analysis of the panel on which the Correggio is painted showed that it was from the right period.

Finally, in an article published today by *L'Express*, it is claimed that the Cranach is mentioned in a novel published last year all about an art forger of genius. The writer of that book, Jules-Francois Ferrillon, says that the inclusion of an image of the Liechtenstein Cranach in [this 2015 video trailer](#) for his book was no accident. Fact or fiction? When someone has a book to sell, you can never be sure – end quote.

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