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A Dubious Old Master Unnerves the Art World

By NINA SIEGAL OCT. 26, 2016



Sotheby's declared "Portrait of a Man," previously attributed to Frans Hals, a "modern forgery." Credit Sotheby's

AMSTERDAM — The painting convinced experts at the Louvre. Top French cultural officials declared it a national treasure. Dutch curators at the Mauritshuis and the Rijksmuseum joined the chorus of scholars who decided the enigmatic portrait of a man dressed in black was an undiscovered masterwork by Frans Hals.

To many, “Portrait of a Man” was that rare find, a truly great old master painting that had simply never surfaced. In 2011, Sotheby’s auction house in New York brokered a private sale to an art collector for about \$10 million.

This month, though, Sotheby’s declared the work a “modern forgery.” The portrait was linked to a lower-profile event back in March, when the French police seized a painting attributed to Lucas Cranach the Elder that had passed through the hands of the same collector who had sold the Hals. The auction house sent the “Hals” for an in-depth technical analysis that determined that it contained traces of 20th-century materials, which meant that “it could not have been painted in the 17th century.” Sotheby’s rescinded the sale and reimbursed the buyer.

If Sotheby’s was right, the question of who may have committed the forgery remains a mystery. Sotheby’s says an investigation is continuing but declines to discuss it further, as do the French authorities. But no matter who is responsible, the story of how this ostensibly fake Hals managed to pass muster with so many leading experts provides a chilling glimpse into the complex but ultimately subjective process of authenticating art.

There are those who still have doubts. Martin Bijl, a Dutch old masters restorer who has worked on about 30 Hals paintings in the past seven years, said that he had seen some of the data culled by Orion Analytical for Sotheby’s, and that he was not certain that the work was a forgery. “The ones who have researched it until now are good researchers, but they’re not familiar with the handwriting of Frans Hals, so to speak, so that’s an extra reason to be careful,” he said.



French police seized “Venus with a Veil,” attributed to Lucas Cranach the Elder, from an exhibition because of concerns about its authenticity. Credit LIECHTENSTEIN. The Princely Collections, Vaduz-Vienna

Are there other forgeries out there, perhaps from the same source? Several paintings deemed “new discoveries” that came through the hands of the same collector have been called into question. These include “David Contemplating the Head of Goliath,” attributed to Orazio Gentileschi, and a portrait of “Saint Jerome” attributed to the circle of the 16th-century Italian painter Parmigianino, which Sotheby’s sold in 2012 for \$842,500. It has been recalled and sent in for testing.

“It’s mushrooming into a big scandal,” said Bob Haboltd, an art dealer in Dutch old master paintings.

Some other art dealers are quick to play down the threat. The London-based old master dealer Johnny van Haften said, “I think it’s a very isolated incident, and it’s not as widespread as people think.”

Those in the field admit, however, that what is unsettling is how easily this work slipped through the system. New Hals works rarely surface, and this one was unknown — both reasons it should have received more scrutiny, scholars now say. It had never appeared in any scholarly literature about the artist’s oeuvre and had never been exhibited in the 350 years since the artist’s death in 1666.

Mr. Bijl, former chief restorer of the Rijksmuseum, said he could not remember an unknown Hals work showing up in at least the last 25 years. It should have raised suspicions, he said, but added, “Sometimes you find the provenance much later than a painting is found. We don’t know everything.”

The origins of the current narrative can be traced to 2008, when a collector named Giuliano Ruffini asked Christie’s in Paris to look at a painting he said he had purchased from a Spanish art dealer.

Mr. Ruffini had been told by an art expert that the work “might be a school of Hals or follower of Hals,” according to his lawyer, Philippe Scarzella. The auction house’s own specialists examined the work, he said, and felt strongly it was probably an original.

Christie’s applied for a license to export the painting to its London headquarters for further examination. Such licenses must be sanctioned by the Louvre and the French ministry of culture, and so the work was shared with curators at the Paris museum. Rather than allow the painting to be shipped out of France, the French state declared it a national treasure in 2008 and put a temporary export restriction on it. That same month, the Louvre decided to try to acquire it. A contract from October 2008, sent by Mr. Scarzella to The New York Times, clearly states the intended sale to the Louvre of “Portrait of a Man” by Frans Hals for 5 million euros and designates Christie’s as Mr. Ruffini’s representative.

Blaise Ducos, the chief curator of Dutch and Flemish paintings at the Louvre, was invited to look at the painting. The French Museums Restoration and Research Center collected X-ray, infrared and ultraviolet images of the work to try to determine its authenticity, but did not submit it for a pigment analysis, according to a spokesman for the center. The Louvre also shared it with other scholars, such as Quentin Buvelot, senior curator at the Mauritshuis in The Hague.

“Several well-known art historians had already seen the painting and had expressed their enthusiasm about its appearance, and Blaise and I shared that enthusiasm,” Mr. Buvelot wrote in an email to The New York Times. This

work is “executed with so much refinement and skill that many connoisseurs believed it was painted by the master himself,” he added.

After the sales contract was drawn up, however, Christie’s began to have “doubts on provenance and attribution,” according to Belinda Bowring, a spokeswoman. She declined to discuss the specific concerns and who raised them. The auction house asked Mr. Ruffini to guarantee the attribution. In response, he sent a letter noting that he was “in no way” responsible “for the attribution and authenticity of the work,” which he said were in the hands of the experts. “He didn’t want to guarantee anything,” Mr. Scarzella said. “It’s not his job, you know.”

Meanwhile, Mr. Ducos invited a number of prominent Dutch and French businessmen, as well as several Hals experts, to look at the painting in private. Mr. Haboltd attended one such event, which took place at the Dutch ambassador’s residence in Paris. “I didn’t doubt it at the time,” Mr. Haboltd said. “Of course, I wasn’t looking with buyer’s eyes. It had already been vetted by the Louvre. I looked at it congratulating the dealer, but I didn’t try to analyze it to see if I was dealing with a fake.”

In the end, the Louvre did not purchase the painting, but it is unclear why. Mr. Haboltd said it was because the museum could not raise the funds; the Louvre said in a statement only that “at the end of the procedure (April 2011) examining the whole context, the Louvre didn’t acquire this painting.”

The painting’s lack of documentation did not necessarily concern Mr. Buvelot, who co-authored a paper on the painting with Mr. Ducos in *The Burlington Magazine* in 2014, calling it “a very important addition to Hals’s oeuvre.”

“It is not an uncommon phenomenon that old master paintings are not listed in the existing literature,” he said by email. “One should not forget that the first serious oeuvre catalogs were only made in the 19th century.”

After the temporary export ban was lifted, the London-based art dealer Mark Weiss purchased it from Mr. Ruffini for a reported \$3 million in 2010. In a statement emailed to *The New York Times*, Mr. Weiss said he believes the painting is authentic because so many established experts have held that view. “The only dissenting voice,” he wrote, “was that of the other acknowledged Hals scholar, Claus Grimm, who thought it was by Hals’s son Peter.”

Mr. Grimm confirmed this, adding: “I felt that the author of the painting was an imitator, but had no clear suggestion for an alternative attribution. I did not believe it as a recent fake since I never came across such a close imitation.”

The following year, Sotheby’s arranged a private treaty sale for “about \$10 million,” Sotheby’s said. The buyer, the collector Richard Hedreen of Seattle, declined to comment. As for the earlier Christie’s qualms about the work, Lauren Gioia, a spokeswoman for Sotheby’s, wrote in an email: “We cannot

confirm whether this is factually accurate as we were not involved at the time. We were, obviously, not aware of it.”

All seemed well until March of this year, when the French police seized the painting “Venus With a Veil,” attributed to Lucas Cranach the Elder belonging to the collection of the Prince of Liechtenstein, from an exhibition in Aix-en-Provence because of concerns about its authenticity. The seizure caused a stir in the art community: The painting was linked to the collection of Mr. Ruffini.

That was when Sotheby’s decided to look into its Hals, since it came from the same seemingly tainted source. Mr. Hedreen sent the painting back for re-examination.

Orion Analytical examined the work, and its analysis was peer reviewed by another leading conservation scientist. Sotheby’s concluded in a statement, “Unfortunately, that analysis established that the work was undoubtedly a forgery.”

Mr. Weiss still doubts, he said, that the “Hals” is a forgery, because he has not had the chance to undertake corroborative investigations, which he believes should be done given the enormous impact a forgery finding could have on the art market and historical research.

Either way, this year the police raided Mr. Ruffini’s estate near Parma, Italy. The French police seized two paintings in addition to the one attributed to Cranach, according to Mr. Scarzella: a copy of a carnival scene, perhaps attributed to Brueghel, and a head of a Christ by A. Solario.

No charges have been filed against Mr. Ruffini, Mr. Scarzella said. “The French police hoped to find a hidden forgery workshop, and didn’t find anything,” he said in an email to The New York Times.

Moreover, he added, “Mr. Ruffini has no reason to think that these paintings could be fakes. He entrusted professionals, experts, art dealers and museums to study and determine their attributions. Most of whom were sure and enthusiastic. He is not responsible for their change of opinion.”