MANET OR NOT?

Historical background

"A portrait of a young girl" presents a case study that has served as a pilot for Recenart project. The painting has been through multi-disciplinary studies, including thorough art-historical form analysis, attribution and provenance research, conservator’s study and technological and scientific analysis to verify the attribution to Edouard Manet.

In Kuopio Art Museum, Finland, there is a painting signed by the name Edouard Manet. The provenance of this work of art is intriguing.

There are wax seals on the reverse of the painting which proved out to be the seals of an Austrian-Czech Prince, Josef Franz Hieronymus Colloredo-Mansfeld (1813-1895). The Colloredo-Mansfeld -family owned an art collection of several thousands of objects before the World War II. The War, however, was crucial to the family, all of their property, both in Czechoslovakia and Austria, was expropriated by the Nazis. The reason for the confiscation of this was the Declaration of the Czech Nobility, which the members of the family signed in 1938. The Declaration proclaimed allegiance to the communist party ascended to power in Czechoslovakia. Most probably also the Colloredo-Mansfelds' art works were sheltered in the protectorate of Czechoslovakia. Most probably also the Colloredo-Mansfelds' art works were sheltered in the protectorate during the war by the Nazis, because it was considered as a safe storing place for works of art at the time.

The situation changed after the war, however, when the communist party ascended to power in Czechoslovakia. The Colloredo-Mansfelds, whose entire property was expropriated by the Nazis during the World War II, were not successful in collaborating with the Nazis. As a result, their property was expropriated again in 1947-1948.

In the 1950’s there was a plenty of fine art, including Nazi-looted objects, stolen from collecting points, available in low price in Czechoslovakia as a result of political and social changes. The black market flourished and the works of art changed owners at a rapid rate. Stolen objects ended up in public art trade as well.

In the 1950’s a Finnish diplomat Urho Toivola served as an ambassador of Finland in the Communist Czechoslovakia. At that time he bought the Portrait of a young girl and several other paintings for his collection.

Attribution

The painting is signed by the name Manet on the lower left corner which is typical for his signatures. The signature is engraved in the moist paint by lettering. The manner Manet signed his paintings varies a lot. Engraving of signature is not unfamiliar to him.

In the middle of 1870’s the artist started to paint in impressionist manner and he liked to work in the garden using alla prima technique. Usually he did not make primary drawings in works of this period. The IR and X-ray pictures prove that there are no primary drawings in the Portrait of the young girl, either. It seems likely that the work of art was acquired to the Colloredo-Mansfeld collection straight from the artist’s studio. There are no labels nor inscriptions referring to exhibitions or sales on the reverse of the painting.

The monogram seals on the reverse of the painting prove that the painting has belonged to Prince Josef Franz Hieronymus Colloredo-Mansfeld personally. He lived in the 19th century and was, therefore, a contemporary of Manet. It is known that Prince Colloredo-Mansfeld often visited Paris. He was interested in his contemporary artists and was a patron of some artists, hosted their visits in his castles, and collected actively art. Since Prince Colloredo-Mansfeld passed away in 1895 he must have acquired the painting before it. The Colloredo-Mansfeld art collection hasn’t been exhibited to public and it is known that the family never sold any of the paintings of the collection.

Connoisseur’s opinion

In 2000 the expert’s opinion was asked from two authorities. They were shown pictures of the painting. The other one didn’t take a stand on the authenticity and the other one considered the painting as a forgery since she hadn’t heard of the Colloredo-Mansfeld collection before, nor had she seen the painting earlier. The connoisseur’s opinion was not very convincing. Therefore, technical and scientific studies were recently carried out to verify the authentication of the portrait.

Pigment analysis

Examination of the surface of the painting with a stereo microscope revealed that there were a few small spots where the paint had flaked off. From these spots small samples were removed with the help of a tungsten needle and mounted on double-sided carbon tape attached to an aluminum stub. They were then examined and analysed as such without coating in a scanning electron microscope fitted with an energy dispersive X-ray spectrometer.