Is the Rijksmuseum’s first ‘Rembrandt’ a Fabritius?

Some Notes on The Beheading of John the Baptist

One of the admirable aspects of the Fabritius exhibition in the Mauritshuis was the inclusion of a few works whose attribution was open to question and even one painting categorized as ‘formerly attributed to Carel Fabritius’. Discussed elsewhere in this issue, the results of these confrontations were in some cases spectacular and in all cases very educational. Perhaps because of the organizer’s firm conviction that the painting is not by Fabritius, and perhaps because its attribution to Rembrandt’s greatest pupil is nowadays championed by only one, albeit eminent scholar, the Rijksmuseum’s Beheading of John the Baptist (fig. 1) was not included in the exhibition in The Hague. Fortunately, however, it was included in the show at Schwerin, and prior to the change of venue there was a brief opportunity for a few scholars to view and discuss the Beheading in the Mauritshuis surrounded by the other paintings. The results of this confrontation are discussed below, but first some background information needs to be examined, in part because the historiography of the painting is quite interesting, in part because it sheds new light on the attribution to Fabritius and provides information on the original composition of the painting, but also, frankly, because some of the facts have gotten rather muddled in the recent literature.

The Beheading of John the Baptist was purchased as the Rijksmuseum’s first Rembrandt by the museum’s forerunner, the Nationale Konst-Gallerij located in Huis ten Bosch, in 1801. The museum’s director, the art dealer Cornelis Sebille Roos (1754-1820) acquired the painting at the posthumous sale of Pierre Fouquet, junior (1729-1800) as a Rembrandt. By the time of its purchase by the museum, the Beheading had evidently been tampered with. Restoration of the painting in 1897 revealed that John the Baptist’s corpse had been painted out. A reproduction print (fig. 2) by Lambert Antoine Claessens probably executed between 1797 and 1808 when he was working in Amsterdam, does not include the corpse and there is no mention of it in the description of the painting in Fouquet’s sale catalogue, nor in the 1809 catalogue of the museum’s collection. One wonders whether Fouquet, the most important painting and print dealer in the Netherlands during the second half of the eighteenth century, had the corpse painted out in order to make the picture somewhat less gruesome, and therefore more saleable. Roos’s remarks when the museum was considering purchasing the painting are, perhaps, telling in this context. He commented that the picture ‘might sell for little money, because its subject is not very appealing for a private collection, but very suitable for the Museum.’ Fouquet may also have been responsible for a more serious, non-reversible, alteration to the painting. Two copies exist that show that the Rijksmuseum painting has been cut down at the bottom and on the left side. As can be seen in the copy in Auxerre (fig. 3), the Baptist’s corpse originally hung over a balustrade or executioner’s bench and the stump of his neck covered by a cloth was visible. Technical examination
Anonymous Rembrandt follower, *The Beheading of John the Baptist*, oil on canvas, 149 x 121 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

of the painting in the Rijksmuseum revealed that while deep cusping is present at the top and right side of the canvas, none is present at the bottom and only shallow cusping on the left side. Presumably, the painting was cut down at the same time the Baptist’s corpse was painted out in order to avoid having a gaping void at the bottom. The dimensions given in the Fouquet sale catalogue correspond more or less with the painting’s present dimensions, indicating that this operation had already taken place by 1801.

Fouquet’s sale is the first certain provenance for the Beheading. Fouquet, who had good connections with dealers in France, may have acquired the painting in Paris in the 1780s. A *Beheading of John the Baptist*, attributed to Rembrandt, and showing the executioner presenting the Baptist’s head to Salomé in a composition of seven figures was twice at auction in Paris in the late eighteenth century, first in 1782 and again in 1787. Although the dimensions given in the catalogues do not correspond exactly with those of the Rijksmuseum painting, the upright format and the description are remarkably similar.

One of the arguments used by a number of scholars who have favoured an attribution of the Rijksmuseum’s *Beheading* to Carel Fabritius has been the mention of a