The Carel Fabritius Exhibition in The Hague:
A Personal View*

My monograph on Carel Fabritius – which was also my much-delayed doctoral thesis – appeared in 1981 and five years later I published the discovery of the painting *Mercury, Argus and Io*, which is now in Los Angeles (see p. 76, fig. 1). Since then – apart from cataloguing the two National Gallery paintings in the National Gallery Dutch catalogue in 1991 – I have not contributed to the study of Fabritius and so it was with great pleasure that I accepted the invitation to give a personal view of the Fabritius exhibition and its accompanying catalogue.

The exhibition, which I had the opportunity to study with great care during the symposium in The Hague, was a great achievement. If only it had taken place before I published my book on the artist, that book could have said so much more. I congratulate Frits Duparc and his colleagues on a superb exhibition and an excellent catalogue.

In writing a monograph on Fabritius in 1981 my key tasks, as I saw them then, were to review the documents which had largely been published for the first time by Obreen, Bredius and Wijnman and see if there were any more to be found, and to pare down the myriad of attributions to Carel Fabritius to a reliable core which would then permit others to work from a secure base on which to add new attributions.

Reviewing the documents with the benefit of one graduate course in palaeography ten years earlier in Oxford involved getting a great deal of help from archivists in Delft, Purmerend and Amsterdam. I was treated with immense kindness and patience – especially because I was not then a research student who was able to sit in the archives for months on end but a working curator at the National Gallery who was rarely able to spend more than a week or so at this task on any one occasion. I did manage a few corrections to Wijnman and I published the documents in full for the first time. I added six new documents, although in every case they were brought to my attention by generous colleagues, as I acknowledged in the documents section. This work seems to have stood up quite well. In the documents reprinted in the catalogue there are some improvements in my transcriptions – although not so many that a new edition of the documents was thought worth appending to the catalogue – but no new documents. The documentary story of Carel’s life remains, therefore, the same.

The paring-down process meant that my 1981 catalogue had eight accepted works, three attributed works and twenty-five rejected attributions. It was essentially a process of removing from Fabritius’s work paintings by Barent Fabritius and other followers and pupils of Rembrandt, as well as copies and imitations. One of my eight has since been doubted: the *Man in a Helmet* in Groningen (fig. 1). These doubts were
first raised by Lyckle de Vries in the year that my book appeared and are also shared by authors of the exhibition catalogue in which it is included as 'formerly attributed to Carel Fabritius.' I can see some weaknesses in drawing, a certain crudeness – but it still seems to me a powerful and original painting and I am reluctant to exclude it.

More significantly, perhaps, two paintings I rejected have recently been given back to Carel Fabritius. Walter Liedtke has argued for a reconsideration of The Beheading of John the Baptist in the Rijksmuseum (see p. 111, fig. I). I am inclined to continue to exclude this painting but I think it would have been very valuable to include it in the exhibition in the Mauritshuis, as was done (ex-catalogue) in the second venue of the show in Schwerin. (Sadly I was unable to see the exhibition in Schwerin and so I must leave it to others to comment on the juxtaposition.)

The other reattribution is the Portrait of a Young Man, presumably a Self-Portrait, from the Alte Pinakothek in Munich (see p. 87, fig. 18). This picture has long hovered between Carel and Barent: Neil MacLaren (in the 1960 catalogue of Dutch paintings in the National Gallery, London) called it 'Self-Portrait of Carel or a portrait of Carel by Barent.' The condition of the painting has undoubtedly been affected.