

THE **TITIAN DETECTIVE STORY**

Deep in the vaults of the National Gallery is an enigmatic oil painting, once thought to be a valueless imitation. Could it be that this is the work of the peerless Renaissance master? HANNAH ROTHSCHILD, a trustee of the gallery, explores this intriguing work and the puzzle of Titian's mysterious women

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he National Gallery's antiquated lift creaks slowly down from the attic to the basement. Inside, a conservator wearing white gloves holds a picture covered in a protective polythene sheet. The elevator shudders to a halt in the basement. The painting, known as A Concert, measuring 100 by 126 centimetres, is carried carefully through double doors and laid face down on a large table. The polythene is removed and powerful lights are angled at the back of the canvas. The picture's restorer, Jill Dunkerton, steps forward. One of her team, taking a pair of pliers, gently begins to ease some 40 nails away from the stretcher. One false move, an ill-aimed tug, could tear the work and damage it irrevocably. Thankfully, the operation is a success; the canvas lies like a stiffened rag on the table.

The next and perhaps most dangerous phase begins, known as relining. Restorers, working millimetre by millimetre, scrape off the extra layers of canvas stuck by previous generations to the back of the original work. The purpose of attaching these layers was to strengthen this original support, but methods could be haphazard and often downright alarming: sometimes pots of molten wax were poured on the reverse of a canvas or panels; other backings were stuck down with flour paste or animal glue and sealed with scalding irons.

It took Dunkerton and her colleagues several long days to pick out the tiny particles of wax and dirt ingrained in the cloth. Removing the old backing is a risky operation, but doing nothing can be just as dangerous: with age, the canvases shrink and warp, distorting the surface of the picture.

Trustees of the gallery include the chairmen of Getty Images and Lloyds, the COO of the BBC, the CEO of Domino's Pizza, a clutch of polymaths, two entrepreneurs, an artist and myself. We meet regularly to consider paintings suitable for restoration. Though we are guided by expert advice at

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UNDERCOVER INVESTIGATION Left: 'A Concert', the painting owned by the National Gallery since 1824 and now under conservation. Above: an X-ray image of the canvas revealing artist's revisions. Previous pages: Titian's Venus of Urbino'

all times, the ultimate responsibility for the care of the collection, including decisions to restore paintings, rests with us on behalf

The first time the trustees saw A Concert, 11 months earlier, it was propped, frameless, on an easel in the gallery's conservation studios. Compared with other pictures on public display whose subject matters include war, love, rape, agony, ecstasy and religious fervour, this composition is strangely quiet, given its title: three men and a boy look at a piece of music while a woman stares listlessly into the middle distance. Dunkerton believed that lurking beneath discoloured varnish there is a really interesting painting - perhaps even a masterpiece. As restoration would extend the painting's life and possibly solve the riddle of its identity, the trustees gave permission to proceed with cleaning.

A few months later, in January 2012, we had a second look and there was a notable transformation. Dunkerton had cleaned a figure, the musician in red, and that area of the picture had come to life: the man's moustachioed face loomed out of the canvas; his plush velvet doublet shimmered; the white plume in his cap seemed to flutter in the breezeless room. Could it be that Jill Dunkerton's hunch was right, and we were looking at something genuinely good?

Dunkerton, a restorer with more than 30 years' experience, became interested in the picture seven years ago while preparing a loan report. 'The picture had been catalogued as a 17th-century copy, but I looked at it and thought, "This is a 16th-century picture," she recalls. Dunkerton adopted the picture, taking it out of the store-

> room and up to her studio where she did a small cleaning test, carefully removing layers of accumulated varnish. Her interest was piqued further when a group of scientists came to the gallery to conduct some experiments on the effect of movement and noise on canvases. To their astonishment, A Concert was inert to most sounds and voices, but vibrated whenever Dunkerton spoke. 'I can't explain it, no one can,' she says; but her belief in the work is contagious and touching. She becomes highly expressive talking about the picture, hopping slightly from one foot to another, shaking clouds of auburn-coloured hair. Nevertheless, Nicholas Penny, the director of the National Gallery and a great Renaissance scholar, urges caution: 'You can damage a picture by making too many claims for it, because you can set it up so high that it's very easy to knock it down.'

Every painting in the National Gallery has a logbook, detailing how it came to the collection and any subsequent examination or restoration. A Concert entered the National Gallery in 1824 as part of the founding

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collection purchased by Parliament from the executors of the great collector John Julius Angerstein's estate. It was catalogued as a by the essayist Charles Lamb as being 'more musical than music' work by Titian, but gradually came to be doubted, and was finally discredited in 1889 when it was sent off to storage, labelled as by 'an imitator'. Dunkerton believes this relegation was due mainly to its

If A Concert is reinstated as a genuine Titian, its value will leap from a few thousand to tens of millions of pounds. As the gallery already owns the picture, it won't benefit financially, but there is immense kudos in rediscovering a lost work. Penny sprang to public prominence in 1991 after identifying Raphael's lost masterpiece The Madonna of the Pinks, which had hung unrecognised since 1853 in a corridor in Alnwick Castle. Closer to home, the gallery's conservation department has proved, after scientific investigation and careful restoration, that other works, once thought to be pale imitations, are in fact originals by Velázquez, Gossart, Raphael and Verrocchio. Recently, in a joint venture between the National Galleries of London and Scotland, nearly £100 million was raised to save two great Titians for the nation; coming by another one 'free' would be a delicious and unexpected bonus.

The history of art is littered with paintings that have been 20 or so, was acknowledged as the pre-eminent painter in Venice.

demoted or, just as whimsically, promoted. Tastes and fashion in art change almost as frequently as hemlines. Technology can help date a picture, but final attribution rests with a handful of learned individuals. Until recently, only the Rembrandt Research Project could issue what was considered to be a definitive stamp of authenticity on paintings purported to be by the Dutch master. So far they have said 'yes' to 320, even though 1,300 supposed Rembrandts have been legally imported into the USA. Similarly, only the secretive Wildenstein Institute in Paris has the ultimate authority to ratify all works by Monet and several

other Impressionists. The moment art became desirable and transportable, fraudulent works were pro-

duced. The art market today generates some \$40 billion a year; the FBI estimates that \$6 billion is spent annually on 'fakes' of one kind or another. Renaissance fakes were already in circulation by the end of the 16th century - in other words, during Titian's lifetime.

Establishing the provenance is a vital step in proving a painting's authenticity. Important pictures leave a paper trail of receipts and documents as they pass through the hands of wealthy and powerful proprietors. Prior to 1627, A Concert was owned by the influential Gonzaga family (headed by the Dukes of Mantua), who were among Titian's most important and discerning patrons. Could the picture have passed directly from the artist's studio to the Gonzagas' palace at Mantua? Intriguingly, when the old layer of backing canvas is removed, it exposes another thrilling discovery: stamped onto the back of the original canvas is the cipher of Charles I. Cross-referencing Charles I and Titian in the Gallery's extensive library establishes that a painting of this size and subject once hung in the first antechamber at the Royal Palace of Whitehall, along with highly valued works by Correggio and Raphael. A Concert left the Royal Collection in a sale of Charles I's possessions following his execution in 1649, but the painting apparently disappears for parts of the late 17th and 18th centuries. One clue to its whereabouts could be a mysterious inven-

tory reference number, 23, scrawled on the back of the canvas. The

trail starts again in the 19th century, when the painting is praised and sells at auction for the then-colossal sum of £1,000.

At our next trustees' meeting, Penny showed us an X-radiograph of the painting, revealing an under-drawing or preliminary sketch. terrible condition: It looked so peculiar and heavily over-painted.' If this were a mere copy, he explained, there would be no need for revisions in the preparatory sketch. But in A Concert there are significant revisions as the artist deliberated where to place the woman's arm and the music master's hand. Penny also revealed that a pinprick of paint had been sent for analysis at the gallery's scientific department; experts matched it to other samples from Titian's work. Dunkerton considered that 'the curious layering and overlapping of paint and the type of movement of paint are the same as in many of his other works'. The evidence was mounting and so was our excitement.

> Titian is one of the few artists whose works' value and desirability have never diminished. Born Tiziano Vecellio in about 1490 in the Dolomites, he was sent to be an apprentice painter in Venice at the age of 10. Prodigiously talented, he worked for both Gentile and Giovanni Bellini, and with the death of Giorgione in 1510, Titian, aged

> > Highly ambitious, he wanted wider recognition. Competition was fierce; Renaissance Italy was home to the greatest concentration of artistic talent in history. Leonardo Da Vinciwas still active; in Rome, Michelangelo and Raphael were sparring in paint.

In Charles V, Titian found his greatest champion. He painted the Holy Roman Emperor in armour and on horseback, capturing both the powerful public persona and an underlying humanity. Charles V was so delighted with his depiction that Titian was awarded the rank of Count Palatine and Knight of the Golden Spur. He remains the only artist to paint a pope (Paul III), an emperor (Charles V), a sultan (Suleiman the Magnificent) and a king (Philip II). Perhaps they understood that although their influ-

ence would wane, they would, thanks to Titian, be immortalised. What of the women in Titian's pictures? His work is characterised

by sensuous, voluptuous goddesses and nymphs, so unlike the androgynous, ethereal models preferred by many of his contemporaries. Venice, at that time, was a city of commerce and carnality. Sexual libertinism was taken for granted, and when the word 'Venice' was painted above a door in other European cities, it usually heralded a brothel. Titian was the first to paint naked women lying down and arguably is still unsurpassed in the erotic portrayal of onanism. Most of his models were prostitutes. One, Angela del Moro, who posed for the Venus of Urbino, was the second-highest-paid courtesan in Venice and was infamous for refusing to feign orgasms. A friend writing about Titian in 1522 commented: I suspect that the girls whom he often paints in different poses arouse his appetite, which he then satisfies more than delicate constitution permits; but he denies it.'

As artists often paint the same models, I turned amateur detective to see if anyone in A Concert appeared in Titian's other works. Soon my office floor was covered with open books and photocopies. I quickly found the woman with the faraway eyes in other paintings. In one, she holds up a flag; in another she proffers a bowl of fruit. My hunch is that if she'd been a queen, she'd have been named; if she were a whore, she'd have been naked. Perhaps CONTINUED ON PAGE 172

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'SIENNA', CONTINUED FROM PAGE 108 daughter, and has the support not only of her own extended family, but the close-knit Sturridge clan as well. (Tom's father, Charles Sturridge, is an acclaimed director, whose work includes the television adaptation of Brideshead Revisited; his mother is the actor Phoebe Nicholls, who played Cordelia Flyte in that series. Friends describe Tom as very much in the thespian family tradition. 'He remains absolutely committed to the craft of acting, rather than celebrity, is very principled, and loathes publicity,' observes one.) Whether or not as a consequence, Miller seems untainted by rancour against any individual in the phonehacking scandal - I don't have some awful vendetta against them. It's the animal, it's the nature of it, not specific people' - although she does admit that it was 'awkward' when she found herself sitting opposite Rupert Murdoch at the Met Ball in New York in 2010.

Instead, she is clearly focused on the profound experience of new motherhood, in the wake of a long, arduous labour, which ended with an emergency caesarean. Twas in such shock at the beginning,' she says. 'I couldn't believe it. It's still the most surreal thing, that you can create, that I grew this life inside my stomach, her eyeballs, everything - every little fibre. And I expected that she'd be this extension of me and I'd instantly understand who she was because she'd come from me, and then you realise that they are their own people entirely. Very connected to you, of course. But they're their own person... It's the best, the greatest thing in the world... I would do that day

a million times again. I would do that day, every day. I loved it.' Then she laughs, and shakes her head at herself. 'This is a very unprofessional interview,' she says, with disarming candour. But she is too honest not to nod when I ask if her sense of her body has changed since giving birth. 'My body's a completely different thing to me, it's not mine - all the attachment to its flaws or any aesthetic attachment is gone. You understand what breasts are for; and I have such enormous respect for my body because of what it can do.' The trauma of an unexpected caesarean has also taught her, she adds, 'to relinquish any attachment to anything being controlled and it's an amazing lesson'. (Her humour, needless to say, remains intact: 'My post-natal pictures are really not what I imagined they'd be - I thought long hair in the tub with flowers, and I look

like a greasy-haired sweaty tank.') Whatever else ensues from these experiences, their sheer intensity will, I suspect, make Sienna Miller an even more accomplished actor, with added depth to her work. She has already brought her intelligence and insight to the part of Tippi Hedren in The Girl a drama about the filming of The Birds, and the desire of the director, Alfred Hitchcock, to control a woman who refuses to be contained by his demands on her body, as well as her mind. And her latest part in Foxcatcher is as a wife and mother in her thirties, with two children; so gone are the ingénues that were her past stock in trade. When I remark that she has now come into her own as an

adult, she looks pleased, and says: 'It's lovely, I feel like a woman.' The fire is still in her - as she gestures to the files of evidence from her previous battles, she says it makes her 'blood boil' - but it is a fire that will also propel her forwards. If it is tempting to draw the analogy between the ferocity of the paparazzi with the clawing avian onslaught of The Birds, then Miller has proved more able to defend herself than the victims in the original Daphne du Maurier story that was the basis for Hitchcock's film adaptation. Which suggests that one should never underestimate Sienna Miller, as she forges the next episode of her life. Like the rest of us, she may not be able to control what the world throws at her, the twists of fate or disappointments; but she will never acquiesce to bullying, nor go down without a fight.

THE TITIAN DETECTIVE STORY', CONTINUED FROM PAGE 129 this woman was a spouse or a child? Titian had an untidy private life, fathering children by at least three women. His 'wives' were assumed to be women of easy virtue or housekeepers. It is thought that Cecilia, his first wife, was the model for the buxom, scantily clad Flora now in the Uffizi Gallery. As artists tend to paint their daughters clothed, I suspected the girl in A Concert was one of his offspring. My first candidate was his eldest daughter Lavinia, who appeared in the painting Ecce Homo aged 13. A few years later, in 1549, Titian begged a patron for swift payment so that he could provide a handsome dowry for his daughter. The last time Titian painted Lavinia, she was swathed in the fine clothes and jewels bought to secure a decent husband. (Unfortunately, Cornelio Sarcinelli, although well-born, proved to be an absolute rotter; after the marriage, Titian rarely saw his daughter or grandchildren but, on the painter's death, the errant son-in-law staked a claim to Titian's estate.)

However, when I cross-referenced the dates and paintings more closely, it became clear that the model was probably Titian's younger illegitimate daughter Emilia, whom he described as 'the absolute patroness of his soul' and 'most precious thing he could send away'. She was married off with half the dowry of her elder sister but lived nearby, remaining close to her father. Dunkerton believes that this familiar figure is further proof of the picture's authenticity; although it is not impossible that a clever imitator could have used the daughter's likeness as a ruse. (Following Titian's death in 1576, his assistants were known to complete unfinished works or create their own pastiches, selling them on as genuine works.)

What makes a painting great is an entirely subjective judgement that ebbs and flows across centuries and cultures. Kenneth Clark, former director of the National Gallery and the connoisseur's connoisseur, defined the two key characteristics of a masterpiece as 'a confluence of memories and emotions forming a single idea' and 'a power of recreating traditional forms so that they become expressive of the artist's own epoch and yet keep a relationship with the past'. My own definition is more emotional, less academic: I want a painting to deliver a knockout, visceral, visual punch. For example, standing before the National Gallery's three great Diana pictures, I am simultaneously thrilled, humbled, empowered, transported and emotionally drained. I find Diana's fury, Callisto's shame and Actaeon's terror palpable, while Titian's Venus of Urbino oozes sensual frisson. A Concert is a more subdued picture, yet as the cleaning has progressed, and the painting emerged from its ancient gloom, my initial scepticism has been challenged. There are very good arguments for the painting being genuine, including its provenance, the under-drawing, the persuasive scientific analysis and Dunkerton's passionate conviction.

The final decision rests with a group of Titian experts who will gather from all corners of the world to consider the evidence. Together, they have to reach a consensus and decide whether this painting is indeed a Titian, but a victim of fashion and poor condition, or a fake, or even some kind of hybrid. Whatever their verdict, A Concert's chequered past teaches us as much about the history of taste and collecting as many recognised masterpieces: here is a painting that for nearly 500 years has been admired, desired and owned by kings, rulers, slave traders and connoisseurs. When, in a few months, the picture is back on public display, today's visitor can - like the Dukes of Mantua, King Charles I and other illustrious predecessors - decide whether A Concert is 'more musical than music' or if, in the final analysis, it delivers only an unequal performance. Meanwhile, Titian's silent, mysterious women remain as compelling as ever in a magnificent body of work.

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