

Peter Paul Rubens, Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc and *Joan of Arc*

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Abstract: In 2011 a discovery was made at the Department of Prints and Drawings of the National Museum in Warsaw – a drawing hitherto described as a *Kneeling knight* by an anonymous seventeenth-century artist, turned out to be *Joan of Arc*, a sketch well-known to art historians studying the oeuvre of Peter Paul Rubens, although thought to be lost during the Second World War. The drawing, until now known only through the black and white photograph, could be thoroughly analysed for the first time. In the context of information thus obtained, the historical context of creating the sketch transpired as an equally important matter, including the hypothetical role that may have been played in its creation by Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc.

Keywords: Joan of Arc; Peter Paul Rubens; Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc; drawings; Early Modern art; Flemish art; National Museum in Warsaw



Fig. 1. Portrait of Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc. Engraving by Lucas (I) Vorsterman after Anthony van Dyck, 1630-1645. The British Museum. © Trustees of the British Museum

[...] Je vous remercie d'avoir remis le petit livre à M. Gevaerts et vous prie d'excuser la liberté que j'ai prise, car j'aurais pu l'adresser directement à M. Gevaerts et même sans l'avertir, afin de le pousser davantage à me répondre, et spécialement encore à me donner les vers qu'il m'a promis depuis si longtemps et qu'il a composés en l'honneur de notre héroïne (la Pucelle), dont les louanges restent paresseusement dans un cabinet d'étude, en attendant celles de M. Gevaerts, car sans lui, elles ne peuvent voir la lumière du jour, ce qu'elles auraient fait il y a plus de trois ans déjà (Rooses and Reulens 1898: 412).

The quote is taken from one of numerous letters sent by French humanist and scholar Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc (1580-1637) (fig. 1) to Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) (fig. 2). In it, we read, among others, that even famous men of letters sometimes failed to meet the deadline of commissioned texts... However, art historians see it rather as evidence that c. 1622 the Flemish master was aware of



Fig. 2. Portrait of Peter Paul Rubens. Engraving by Paulus (I) Pontius after Peter Paul Rubens, 1630. The British Museum. © Trustees of the British Museum

the initiative to commemorate Joan of Arc by publishing a volume of verse and poems in her honour. This is an important piece of information, as it sheds light on the circumstances of creating a drawing that had long been associated with Rubens and is one of the arguments in the long-standing debate on its attribution.

Four years ago, an astonishing discovery was made at the Department of Prints and Drawings of the National Museum in Warsaw. One of the drawings stored there, hitherto described as a *Kneeling knight* by an anonymous seventeenth-century artist, turned out to be well-known to the narrow circle of art historians studying the oeuvre of Peter Paul Rubens (fig. 3).¹ Before the Second World War, it was held at the Schlesisches Museum der bildenden Künste in

¹ The present text is an amended and extended fragment of a previous article (Borusowski 2014: 286-332) that featured an exhaustive description of the history behind the discovery as well as provenance, technological, comparative and attributional research and a detailed bibliography.



Fig. 3. Joan of Arc. Drawing by Peter Paul Rubens, c. 1622. Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie. © Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie

Wrocław (Breslau), where it was first attributed to Anthony van Dyck and then to Rubens, but was never published. In 1945, the work was moved to Warsaw – since then, researchers considered it to be lost, and opinions on the drawing were formulated based on a black-and-white photograph made in 1930.²

Rubens's authorship was first recognized by Erhard Göpel, who in 1932 presented the photograph of the sketch to Ludwig Burchard.³ Even though Burchard never had the chance to see the work itself, he regarded it as a genuine Rubens – a study for a painting currently held at the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh – and dated it c. 1620. Since then, the drawing has been discussed in the context of this canvas (for a long time thought to be made by the master himself). The drawing was first published by Justus Müller Hofstede (1965: 304-306), who (also on the basis of a photograph) attributed it to Rubens, dating it, however, to

² The photograph was entered in the inventory of the Schlesisches Museum der bildenden Künste under no. 23078.

³ See the documentation of the drawing held at the Rubenianum, Antwerp. Cf. McGrath 1997.

a slightly earlier period. In his opinion, the amount of detail, surprising in a study by Rubens for a painting, could mean that this was not the first, spontaneous sketch documenting the artist's invention, but a thought-out and refined *modello*, which could be presented to the client. It could also serve well as a design for a print – given the precision of many of the details, the sketch would not require additional comments for the engraver (Müller Hofstede 1965: 305).

The lost drawing became a subject of renewed investigation in the course of preparing the thirteenth volume of *Corpus Rubenianum Ludwvig Burchard*, devoted to subjects from history (McGrath 1997 I: Figs. 217-219, McGrath 1997 II: Figs. 317-323). There, Elizabeth McGrath closely tied her analysis of the drawing with the Raleigh painting⁴ and the sketch held in the Print Room of Statens Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen (a copy of the central part only showing the figure of Joan).⁵ She was more inclined to treat the Warsaw drawing as a copy which seems to faithfully convey Rubens's initial idea of a painting.⁶ In her opinion, the amount of detail would be surprising for a compositional sketch, although she did not definitely reject Müller Hofstede's arguments. McGrath also provided an extensive description of the historical circumstances of the creation of the composition.

In 2004, Kristin Lohse Belkin referred to the drawing in the exhibition catalogue *A House of Art. Rubens as a Collector* (Lohse Belkin and Healy 2004: 140-142). Thinking it unlikely that the drawing was a preparatory sketch for the painting, she also regarded the Warsaw piece as a copy. She agreed with McGrath that it probably presents a rather exact version of the original composition – in her opinion of the Raleigh painting, before it was cut and overpainted.⁷

The most recent mention of the drawing appears in the catalogue of seventeenth century Dutch and Flemish paintings of the Raleigh museum (Weller 2009: 311-315). There, Dennis P. Weller likewise saw it as a copy depicting the likely appearance of the painting's original composition.⁸ He also suggested a new date of its creation: after 1640.

It should be emphasized here that researchers rightly approached the authorship of the sketch with due caution, as they could only base their research on the photograph. However, all of them were unanimous that Rubens was the author

⁴ McGrath retained the attribution to Rubens, suggesting that the painting could, for some unknown reason, have been left unfinished by the artist and repainted – most likely after his death – by another painter, in order to be put up for sale.

⁵ Unknown artist, after Peter Paul Rubens, *Joan of Arc*, before 1630, Print Room, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen.

⁶ An X-ray photograph of Raleigh painting revealed a painted-over fragment of a column, proving that the canvas had been cut on all sides and repainted.

⁷ Lohse Belkin claimed that the work was more likely begun by Rubens and finished (rather ineptly) after his death by an artist from his workshop.

⁸ Weller expressed an opinion in favour of a fully workshop nature of the work, albeit recognizing that it was painted in two stages.

at least of the composition presented in the drawing. In this matter, the artist could have modelled himself on the statue in Orléans with Joan and Charles VII kneeling before a Pietà. Léonard Gaultier's frontispiece to *Heroinae nobilissimae Ioannae Darc... historia* by Jean Hordal that features the above-mentioned sculptural group in its top part was probably crucial for the iconographic concept of the drawing (Hordal 1612).⁹ Not only is the figure of the kneeling Joan taken over, but also the symbolism of the personifications included below her: Fortitudo supporting the column and long-haired Virginitas holding a lily and a shield. Even though these figures are absent from the Warsaw drawing, the columns in the background and Joan's long hair, placed directly on the axis of the composition, seem consciously to evoke these qualities.

Finding the drawing in the NMW collection meant that it could be thoroughly analysed for the first time. In the context of information thus obtained, the historical context of creating the sketch transpired as an equally important matter, including the hypothetical role that may have been played in its creation by Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc.

The Warsaw drawing measures 18.4×18.5 cm, it is executed in pen, brown ink and black chalk on fine light cream paper. Already Müller Hofstede (1965: 305) noticed that it did not depict a rough, first idea, but was a fully-fledged and thought-out work that could be presented to the patron for approval (*videmus*). Scholars have later seen this meticulousness, rare in designs for paintings by Rubens, as an argument against the originality of the work, being more inclined to treat it as a copy. However, close analysis of the sketch brings some very interesting information. The fine, bright line in pen and ink is altered in many places, sometimes several times, using thicker and more resolute strokes. The places where black chalk was used are also clearly visible (the contour of Joan's face, her lips, eye and brow, the outline of the pedestal on which the crucifix is placed and the blade of the sword). A very fine chalk line can also be seen, delineating an oval shape slightly to the left of the feet, and then, continuing left towards the thighs. The trace is even more visible in an infrared reflectogram (Borusowski 2014: 303, fig. 11). It should be interpreted as the first idea for the position of Joan's feet and legs, that interestingly resembles the exact pose from Gaultier's frontispiece. Therefore, it seems that the artist who executed it departed from the available – perhaps commissioned – model.

Taking into account how certain parts differ from the initial idea, allegedly conveyed in detail in the Warsaw drawing, it is difficult to believe that the latter

⁹ For the story of the Orléans sculpture and the iconographic relationship between the sculpture and the print see McGrath (1997 II: 319-320, Notes 18 and 19). Woodcut depicting the condition of the sculpture before it was destroyed by Calvinists in 1562 and reconstructed in 1571, Cf. Valentiner 1957, fig. 1.

merely copies the painting in the North Carolina Museum of Art before it was re-worked (cf. Borusowski 2014: 322-323). The analysis of the drawing from the Print Room of Statens Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen delivers another important premise in this matter. It comes from the set of several hundred works referred to as Rubens's *cantoor* – accumulated by and for the most part also attributed to his pupil, Willem Panneels (c. 1600-34). He left Rubens's studio in 1630 and, as is currently supposed, took the aforementioned drawings with him. The Copenhagen drawing presents the state of Joan's figure before that year and, therefore, depicts a fragment of the composition many years before Rubens's death and the overpainting of the unfinished work by an artist from his workshop. Interestingly, it features almost the same details as the painting does, which means that those overpaintings were limited.¹⁰ The Warsaw drawing differs from both the Copenhagen drawing and the Raleigh painting. Being so specific in its details and showing more than the work supposedly copied, it may not be a copy at all. On the contrary – changes introduced in the course of creating the drawing indicate its originality. The obvious conclusion is that it is a concept for a painting and shows not the condition before it was repainted but its desired appearance, which was never achieved. The question is – could the author be Rubens?

The history and social context of the Warsaw drawing provide an important premise concerning its authorship. One of the most important personalities that appear in this narrative is Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc. Although he was educated as a lawyer, his interests were greatly more diverse and – apart from history – encompassed natural sciences. It is to Peiresc that the first observations of the Orion Nebula are attributed. The abundant correspondence he exchanged with eminent representatives of science and culture from the whole of Europe made him one of the most important representatives of the Republic of Letters. One of his greatest passions was collecting and scholarly describing antique cameos. It was this passion that brought Peiresc and Rubens together, forming the basis of their long-standing friendship. The Flemish painter was also interested in cameos and gathered a quite impressive collection thereof; he also availed himself of every opportunity to see pieces held by other collectors. Pierre Gassendi rightly referred to him as “a most experienced connoisseur of all antiquities, but first of all cameos” (Gassendi [1641]: 298, cited after Neverov 1979: 424). In 1621, Peiresc wrote to the artist, asking him to lend him the drawing after *Gemma Augustea*, an image he could use for his own research.¹¹ Soon afterwards, the pair began to plan a publication that would contain some thirty images of antique cameos (i.a. from the painter's collection); the designs for prints were to be made by Rubens, the explanatory text – by Peiresc (for the planned

¹⁰ The most important ones considered the head of the heroine and the expression on her face.

¹¹ Sankt Annen-Museum, Lübeck.

publication and associated drawings see: Neverov 1979; Jaffé 1997; Van der Meulen 1997; Logan and Plomp 2005). The book was never published, although a few sketches for this project survive (as well as several prints). At least two of them were probably executed in early 1622, during the artist's stay in Paris. The first depicts a cameo with Claudius and Agrippina,¹² the other is after *Gemma Tiberiana*, which Peiresc discovered in the Sainte-Chapelle treasury in Paris in 1620.¹³ An interesting and not altogether unlikely supposition is that both sketches of cameos were made in Peiresc's presence, who (as the rediscoverer of *Gemma Tiberiana*) might have wanted to analyse them with Rubens on the spot.

Peiresc was also involved in an entirely different publication. In 1613 Charles du Lys (c. 1560 – before 1632) published a group of proposed inscriptions that were to appear on the monument of Joan of Arc in Orléans (Du Lys 1613). In preparation of the second edition, subsequent verses were obtained with the assistance of the French scholar. Thanks to his broad contacts, the project could count on the participation of representatives of the intellectual elite of early seventeenth-century Europe, including Nicolas Rigault, Nicolas Bergier, François Maynard, Étienne Pasquier, François de Malherbe, Marie le Jars de Gournay, Hugo Grotius and Rubens's close friend, Jan Gaspar Gevaerts (Gevartius), as well as Louis XIII and Marie de' Medici. As already mentioned, Peiresc wrote to Rubens several times about the inscriptions – in 1622, he asked him to exert some pressure on Gevartius, who had begun work on his poem on Joan probably back in 1617, but had failed to deliver it.¹⁴ In the end, the work was published in 1628 and apart from inscription proposals, it also contained poems glorifying the Maid of Orléans (Du Lys 1628).

Considering the subject of the painting from the North Carolina Museum of Art and the supposed time of its creation, it is not surprising that McGrath (1997), and then Lohse Belkin (2004) and Weller (2009) after her, suggested that its origin could be associated with the initiative undertaken by du Lys and that it could have been executed for a French client (such as du Lys or the authorities of Orléans, if not for Peiresc himself). Even though the long-standing correspondence between Rubens and the French scholar began in late 1619, the painting could have been created later, in connection with the painter's trip to Paris in 1622, when both of them met for the first time. The Warsaw drawing – as an alleged design for a painting – could have been executed during the discussion on the possible commission. It was presumably meant to convey the appearance of the Orléans sculpture, which explains this particular pose of Joan referring to

¹² Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett.

¹³ Museum Plantin-Moretus, Antwerp.

¹⁴ Unfortunately, the published letters do not include Rubens's reply. Gevartius delivered his poem c. 1622-1623 (McGrath 1997 II: 320 and note 28).

the monument (McGrath 1997). This could also explain the detailed representation of the heroine (based on a specific prototype) in comparison with the more sketchy background. The point of departure was a figure much closer to that in Gaultier's print (as proved by the traces of the initial sketch in black chalk). Only later did Rubens depart from the original position of the body, but without introducing any significant changes. While the similarity between Joan's figure and the sculpture from Orléans could have been prescribed by the terms of the commission, the idea of showing her in an unidentified palace interior, kneeling in front of a crucifix against a curtain, columns, balustrade and the sky was an original element. If we accept such course of events, Rubens would have returned to Antwerp with the sketch that served as a *modello* to the artist (or artists) from his studio. To fulfil its role, it could not have been simply a first, general concept of the work (*crabbellinge*) – normally it would have been an intermediate oil-sketch. But in this case it seems possible that the Warsaw drawing, detailed as it is, would have been able to perform this function, supplemented by verbal instructions about colouring. The commission, however, was ultimately not finalized and the unfinished painting remained in Rubens's workshop for years to come.

There is also another possibility regarding the function of the drawing and the circumstances of its creation. Even though Müller Hofstede suggested that it might have been a design for a print (Müller Hofstede 1965: 305), this notion has hitherto not been taken into account. He thought that the detail of the Warsaw composition turned it into an ideal template, conveying individual elements of the curtain, armour and face with appropriate detail. Indeed, the elements of the composition he mentioned would have been easily interpreted by the engraver. This way the drawing would be directly connected with the initiative of du Lys and Peiresc and the publication they planned. Rubens's participation in du Lys's project of honouring the Maid of Orléans need not have been limited to his intervention with his friend Gevartius – it could have also included preparing the illustration, although the lack of precision in the background and visible changes in many parts of the sketch might seem to contradict this hypothesis. The different manner of execution of known designs for prints, which are more 'finished' and 'painterly' than other drawings by Rubens, also speaks against such an eventuality. There, wash is used much more often than hatching, since it was better equipped to inform the engraver about the distribution of light and shade in the future print. It should also be added that the Warsaw drawing bears no marks of transferral of the composition onto a different surface. However, there is one known example of a proper design preceded by an initial, more superficial sketch (Judson and Van de Velde 1977 I: 214-215, Judson and Van de Velde 1977 II: Figs. 159, 160), while in many cases engravers used the painter's design to prepare their own drawings, which then became the model directly

traced onto the plate (Judson and Van de Velde 1977 I: 27-28). In my opinion, the 'extraordinary' circumstances surrounding the origin of the sketch proposed here could explain both the atypical appearance of the drawing – whether as a first draft for a painting (i.e., too detailed), or as a design for a print (i.e., too imprecise). The Warsaw drawing could have later become a point of departure for further development. However, the *Recueil...* features no composition even remotely similar to the one by Rubens. Although it includes an image of the heroine, she is depicted in a completely different manner: in half-figure, with a sword in her hand, wearing a dress and a hat (Du Lys 1628: 11). Could it then be possible that the work under discussion is an unrealized design for a print which came to be used as a design for a painting?

It is not unlikely that the function of the Warsaw drawing might be more ambiguous than has been thought until now. Either way, the circumstances of its creation, in my opinion, speak against the authorship of any artist other than Rubens himself. It is difficult to imagine that he entrusted someone else with the intellectually challenging design in a situation when it was so deeply associated with the circle of his closest friends, among them Peiresc. The results of the recent examination prove that it is a genuine work of art that (in spite of certain doubts) can be attributed to Rubens.

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