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Pietro Paolo Rubens

(Sieegen 1577 – Anversa 1640)

La Regina Tomiri fa immergere la testa di Ciro in un bacile di sangue

Olio su tela, 212 x 335 cm

1618-1620 ca.

Collezione privata

Bibliografia: G. M. Pilo, *Aspetti e problemi della pittura europea del Seicento, II. "Satia te sanguine quem sempre sitisti": Petrus Paulus Rubens pinxit*, in "Arte Documento", 8, 1994, pp. 191-206.

The large canvas depicts an episode handed down by Herodotus that tells of the end of the war between Queen Tomiri, ruler of the nomadic population of the Massageti, of Persian origin but settled in Central Asia. The expansionist aims of Cyrus the Great, emperor of the Persians, led that army to fight with the Massageti and after bloody battles the invaders lost the war and in the last battle the emperor himself lost his life.

Queen Tomiri had Cyrus' head brought to her and had it immersed in a basin filled with blood (sources differ on the nature of this, whether human or rather a goat). Other versions of the story say that the queen used the skull as a wine cup throughout her life.

Beyond the story told by Herodotus, such a truculent subject should be explained for a painting of this size and, it will be seen, coming from a very important commission.

The Queen, in fact, was also taken as a model in the Middle Ages as a punishment against pride, to emphasise the strength of her people against the violence and arrogance of Cyrus. It is in this light, then, that the painting in question acquires a moral value of the highest profile.

The most recent, important restoration carried out by the technicians of the Istituto Superiore Centrale per il Restauro in Rome has greatly improved the legibility of the work and its comprehension on a technical level as well. Before cleaning, in fact, the restorers were able to observe that the canvas on which the painting was painted consists of two large fragments of fabric sewn together in the center. The same stitching is also visible to the naked eye longitudinally across the entire width of the painting. At the base, on the other hand, there are five more fragments of canvas inserted in that position in modern times probably to

accommodate the painting in a different frame from the original one. During the diagnostic investigations preparatory to the restoration, it was realised that four of the five added fragments were actually part of the original canvas, cut and reassembled in a different area of the support. Obviously, in all this work, the canvas was repainted in several parts and polished with a covering varnish to obviate the reading of these additions. It is hoped that one day a new, more courageous restoration will be able to put the fragments back in their original position so that the painting can also regain its ancient dimensions.

Apart from this, the paint film is, all in all, well preserved and the repainting was limited to the joint of the canvas in the center, the left shoulder of the kneeling man with Cyrus' head, and in some parts of the faces of Tomiri and the handmaiden beside him, due not so much to damage of the film, but to a desire for uniformity of pigment and vision of the canvas.

As is normal for paintings of this age and size, abrasions were clearly visible in some parts, but did not affect the quality or legibility of the painting.

The painting was published by Giuseppe Maria Pilo in an exhaustive article in "Arte Documento", in which the scholar rightly pointed out that there is a sketch of this painting, an oil on paper glued on canvas preserved in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg. Proof of the originality of the composition is also provided by an engraving, dated 1630 and signed by Paul Du Pont. At the bottom of the burin print, it also reads Petrus Paulus Rubens pinxit.

The painting in question is, in fact, attributed by a long list of art historians to Peter Paul Rubens, precisely on the strength of the engraving and above all because of the high quality of the painting. The problem, however, arises as there is another version of the work in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston that can boast a very prestigious provenance.

The painting in America, in fact, belonged to Christina of Sweden and then to Cardinal Decio Azzolino of Fermo who, however, obviously resided in Rome. From that collection it passed to the Duke Odescalchi in Bracciano and then to Philip II of France and then to the Duke of Orleans again until 1793. From there it took the route to England until its purchase by the Boston Museum in 1941.

The version in that museum, however, has always been attributed to Rubens and his workshop, and the intervention of Anthon Van Dyck, by far the most talented pupil of the Antwerp painter, has been very often seen. In fact, the glazed tone of the work and certain passages, such as the portraits of the young men on the left, seem to have come straight out of Van Dyck's hand, and it must also be said that the young man with the head of Cyrus in the center of the composition has a slightly lower quality than the rest of the painting.

Meritoriously, on the museum's web page, all the photos of the reflectography of the work have been published and one can see how the preparatory drawing is not very visible and the brushstrokes are spread with extraordinary confidence, as if the painting was, in fact, invented in another place and that is nothing more than the final drafting.

Research into Rubens' production in recent years has shown that it was precisely in the 1920s, when the primitive study of this painting, rightly related to the *Adoration of the Magi* in Antwerp, which has the same scenic composition, that discussions on the total authorship of such a large work as this one is almost impossible and somewhat pointless.

Rubens had no real workshop of his own but his students were housed in a sort of large academy where all work could be shared with other colleagues and where the master had more or less the role of general director. The recent exhibition in Genoa (*Rubens in Genoa*, exhibition catalogue (Genoa 2022-2023) edited by N. Buttner, A. Orlando, Milan 2022) curated by Nils Buttner (Chairman of the *Corpus Rubenianum*) and Anna Orlando, showed how Rubens was in charge of the invention of the painting and that he only finished the works after the workshop, or rather, the so-called bottega, had done most of the work. Replicas, therefore, are very often autographed in the same state but with possible variants. Symptomatic is the case of Duke Rudolf's Charity formerly in the Spencer Churchill collection, which has a twin with some notable variations in the landscape on display at the Prado Museum in Madrid. The latter was commissioned for Philip IV of Spain, while the other was in the collection of Marquis Lleganes as early as 1640. Both are considered autographs and more or less important helpers have been recognised in both.

The case presented here, as I see it, is exactly the same. The Boston painting has some very beautiful parts such as Queen Tomiri and the soldier on the far right of the canvas that seem to me impossible that they were not painted by Rubens, while other areas, such as the portraits described above, the woman theatrically looking out to see the macabre scene from behind the Queen and even the whole red robe of the man in the foreground, seem to be by another hand that I would indeed like to identify with Van Dyck, but which perhaps, for now, is best left anonymous.

The private collection canvas discussed here, on the other hand, has a higher quality hold than the American version and a somewhat different painting style. The overall tone is darker, if you like, but this is partly due to the lining work, which has eaten away at the highlights and darkened the grounds. The strokes of light that move the Queen's robe and especially the red

highlights on the skin can be recognised almost everywhere in Rubens' production and most probably derive from the painter's study of one of the greatest artists of the generation preceding his own, Federico Barocci, who between Rome and Genoa left absolute masterpieces that the Flemish painter would certainly have seen and appreciated.

The fringing paint on the faces in the background of the group of bystanders compares well with the works at the turn of Rubens' second and third decade, and I think it is interesting, for the women's faces, to evoke the stupendous *Susanna and the Old Men* in the Palazzo Reale in Turin, which dates between 1618 and 1620.

The brown tone of the sky is a deliberate effect and is evidently a variant on the Boston canvas, as it is perfectly noticeable how Rubens wanted to depict the scene at sunset with a flash of red light in the background. The white lead highlights that populate the ladies' hair are one of the highest passages in the entire painting and can almost be read as a declaration of autography.

Other details, however, are a little weaker, such as the Queen's hands, which have shadows darkened by time and perhaps by the glue of the lining, as well as the portrait in the background between the handmaids of Tomiri, which appears a little stiffer. It is obvious that the intervention of the workshop is to be expected here too, in some details, in a painting that is, however, for the most part autograph.

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