Response to “A Source-Critical Comment etc.”

Roger de Robelin
BA
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Alexander Roslin (1718–1793), The Artist and his Wife Marie Suzanne Giroust Portraying Henrik Wilhelm Peil, 1767. Oil on canvas, 131 x 98.5 cm. Donated by the Friends of the Nationalmuseum, Sophia Giesecke Fund, Axel Hirsch Fund and Mr Stefan Persson and Mrs Denise Persson. Nationalmuseum, NM 7141.

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It is entirely legitimate, in a scientific context, to propose one or more hypotheses. Ultimately, this is an opportunity to try new roads in order to achieve full certainty. In my essay “On the Provenance of Rembrandt’s The Conspiracy of the Batavians under Claudius Civilis”, I have noted a number of hitherto completely unknown indices that could open up for new interpretations of the unsolved issues concerning the painting’s provenance and history prior to 1780. A hypothesis can only be of scientific value if it can be supported by substantial evidence. I can only note that Professor Görel Cavalli-Björkman herself was once prepared, without any critical scrutiny of the sources, to accept the old and entirely unverified claim that the Nationalmuseum’s work by Rembrandt, The Kitchen Maid (NM 584) came from the collection of Roger de Piles, by way of Fonspertius’ collection and the Paris auction in 1747. Even in Art Bulletin of Nationalmuseum, Stockholm 1994, I demonstrated that the painting had a completely different provenance, namely Johan Gabriel Stenbock’s collection. The sources that I referred to for The Kitchen Maid, and on which I based my subsequent hypothesis on a possible provenance for Claudius Civilis, never mention Rembrandt directly by name. The difference between them is the chain of provenance. In the case of The Kitchen Maid, this chain is unbroken and thus easier to verify. As for The Conspiracy of the Batavians under Claudius Civilis, I have identified as a problem that the work may have been exported from Sweden, thus breaking the chain. This makes it far more difficult to immediately corroborate its provenance, but it does not mean that the evidence is weaker, in view of the overall context of Stenbock’s collection.

The established opinion regarding the early provenance of The Conspiracy of the Batavians under Claudius Civilis would have it that the painting remained in Rembrandt’s studio after his death in 1669 and that his student Aert de Gelder consequently also took possession of the master’s monumental painting. Görel Cavalli-Björkman has also embraced this theory, but without backing the hypothesis with any substantial evidence. In this sense, Cavalli-Björkman has not considered that the painting was probably included in the pledge that the artists left to his lender Harmen Becker. This opens up for a potentially rather different chain of provenance. In my view, the provenance is probably the same as for Stenbock’s The Kitchen Maid (NM 584). Portrait of an Old Man with a Stick (NM 581) and Portrait of an Old Woman (NM 582).

With the stringent standards of evidence that Cavalli-Björkman and Rossholm-Lagerlöf stipulate, most things could be questioned in view of the unreliability of inventory lists from the late-17th and early-18th centuries, which rarely or never name the artist but merely give a general description of the painting’s subject matter. If we doubt the subject description “A little Boy with a Birdsnest”, which was sold at an auction in Amsterdam in 1734, we may as well question the link to The Conspiracy of the Batavians under Claudius Civilis at the same auction. Because there is actually nothing that directly and unequivocally corroborates that this refers to our painting The Conspiracy of the Batavians under Claudius Civilis. We can, however, establish a connection between Cohl and Peill, but it is questionable whether even this would hold up to a more rigorous examination. The exact measurements are not stated, for instance. Moreover, the seller is anonymous. Nor is it known whether Nicolaas Cohl was the actual buyer or if he was merely serving as an agent, say, for his friend Claes Grill.

I never claimed to have provided the last word on this matter. On the contrary, my ambition was to open up new roads of enquiry into the provenance of this valuable painting. Other specialists are obviously free to explore this field of research. The examination of the contents of Stenbock’s archives in the National Archives (primarily the Bergshammar collection), for instance, is far from completed.

Notes: