

CHAPTER 11

AQ1

The Painting and Its Histories: The Curious Incident of Rembrandt's Painting *Quintus Fabius Maximus*

Jelena Todorović

For centuries great works of art have inspired admiration, devotion, but also myths and legends often created around them. Some of those myths were provoked by the curious subjects of the artworks, while others were generated by the destinies of the works themselves. Paintings like Holbein's *Ambassadors*, Bronzino's *Allegory of Love* or Titian's *Allegory of Prudence* still intrigue and bewilder their beholders. A special place in popular mythology is often given to works of art that are lost or have perished under strange circumstances. Scholars are still searching for Leonardo's lost *Battle of Anghiari* and Vermer's *Concert*, while the history of both works is the subject of many hypotheses and rather fantastic stories. However, in some cases the true history of a work of art is far more intriguing than any myth could ever be.

The lost Rembrandt painting *Quintus Fabius Maximus* from the State Art Collection in the Royal Compound in Belgrade (SAC) has such a curious history. Its destiny is far greater than its myth, while its constructed past has never approached the wonders of its true history. Purchased for the SAC in 1933, this painting acquired its mythical status much later, after the Second World War. According to popular belief, in

J. Todorović (✉)
University of the Arts, Belgrade, Serbia
e-mail: jelena.a.todorovic@gmail.com

AQ2

J. TODORVIĆ

40 the 1950s President Tito gave it as a gift, directly from the State
 41 Collection, to Pepca Kardelj, the wife of a notable party official. The
 42 reason for this *curious state gift* was never discussed nor was the highly
 43 problematic issue of mishandling national heritage ever analyzed. Myths
 44 rarely require explanations. Through the decades *Pepca's Rembrandt*
 45 changed its subject matter, its place and its dimensions. There were
 46 some “eyewitnesses” that swore to its existence, while the majority only
 47 pondered the real value of the masterpiece. The true history of this
 48 painting is rather different.

49 Pepca Kardelj could not have had a chance to see Rembrandt's *Quintus*
 50 *Fabius Maximus*, and even lesser chance to possess it. Painted around
 51 1653/55, Rembrandt's *Quintus Fabius Maximus* (179 × 197 cm) depicts
 52 a famous scene from the Roman republican history. Although
 53 Rembrandt's authorship of this painting is still contested by scholars,
 54 until the Second World War *Quintus Fabius Maximus* was considered to
 55 be not just an undisputed Rembrandt but also one of his masterpieces.¹

56 The hypothesis of Rembrandt's authorship is strongly supported by a
 57 recent discovery of a small pen and ink sketch in the Berlin Museum print
 58 room (inv. No. 956/R), while the only image of the lost masterpiece is a
 59 black and white photograph from Bredius's notable monograph on
 60 Rembrandt from 1935.² Although quite blurred, this photograph gives
 61 a sense of that “great visual poem” that inspired art critics of the early
 62 twentieth century.

63 With its monumental setting, the painting represents the triumphal
 64 entry of *Quintus Fabius Maximus*, one of the main generals of the
 65 Second Punic War. The entry of *Quintus Fabius Maximus* into Rome is
 66 well described by Plutarch in his *Lives of Fabius Maximus*, where he
 67 compares Maximus to great Pericles and glorifies him as one of the main
 68 tacticians of Roman times. From Plutarch's work the painter chose the
 69 most rewarding scene: Maximus's triumphal entry into Rome.³

70 The entire grandiose image is composed around the central depiction
 71 of the triumphant figure on horseback, placed on the intersection of two
 72 powerful diagonals that define this painting. With his magnificence and
 73 solemnity, like the statue of Marcus Aurelius, the victorious general pre-
 74 sides over the entire scene as the key figure of the composition. He is
 75 surrounded by his soldiers, carrying the standards of the Roman legions,
 76 and exhilarated Romans gather to greet him. As often in the works of
 77 Rembrandt and his followers the light is used here to denote the main
 78 protagonists and endow them with a sense of otherworldliness. Although

79 the photograph is black and white it still transposes the flickering reflec-
80 tions that must have been glowing on the armor and the helmet of
81 *Quintus Fabius Maximus*, glimmering on the parade fittings of his white
82 steed. On Rembrandt's palette used in this work, now a completely lost
83 quality of the painting, Camille Mauclair gives a particularly inspired
84 account in the magazine *Les Arts* in 1911:

85
86 A particularly grandiose aspect of this work is its palette, and the intensity of
87 colours on a painting that in reality is almost monochrome. Few red, blue
88 and gold accents are singled out on the seemingly uniform surface of ochre
89 and red sienna. It could be said that the entire work looks like the relief
90 made of burning earth, red and boiling, like the earth from the Roman
91 countryside. His brushstroke is strong, honest and fiery, like the souls of the
92 painted protagonists. The scene in the far background, of the group of
93 soldiers entering Rome, is depicted in a technique so free that was not
94 surpassed even in the most daring experiments of the impressionists. The
95 painting is vivid and captivates our imagination ascending the work on the
96 level of sublime poetry.⁴

97 The very origin of this painting as well as its initial function has not yet
98 been clarified, but it is supposed that it was commissioned for the Hall of
99 the City Council in Amsterdam. The choice of the subject matter that
100 glorifies republican virtues, the monumentality of the composition and the
101 grand dimensions of Rembrandt's painting support this assumption even
102 further.

103 In modern historiography *Quintus Fabius Maximus* is first mentioned
104 at the beginning of the nineteenth century as a masterpiece shown at an
105 exhibition in Amsterdam in 1808 (cat. no.57). The painting was exhibited
106 several times in the nineteenth century: in 1836 in *Gallery Far* in London,
107 and in 1898 as part of the collection of Lord Ashburnham in Shernfold
108 Park in Sussex. At the turn of the century it was presented in Leiden in
109 1906 and in the same year was viewed in London as a work in the
110 collection of the London banker James Newgrass. The exhibition in
111 Leiden was accompanied by one of the best texts ever written about
112 *Quintus Fabius Maximus*:

113
114 The key work in this exhibition is undoubtedly the monumental canvas
115 175x197 that was discovered last year in England in the collection of Lord
116 Ashburnham (now in the collection of Newgrass), *The Triumph of Roman*
117 *Consul*. Signed and dated in 1655 the painting enchantes with its complex

J. TODOROVIĆ

118 composition and presents an important document in the history of art as
 119 dating from the richest years in the oeuvre of this artist. All the details in this
 120 painting denote Rembrandt's great knowledge of classical antiquity, while
 121 the entire scene is not a mere illustration of the past, but possesses the
 122 intensity of life that only a rich imagination could create.⁵

123
 124 *Quintus Fabius Maximus* was soon transferred from the collection of
 125 James Newgrass to the Munich collector Charles Sedlmayer, only to be
 126 sold in 1911 to the famous antiquary and dealer Marczell von Nemes.⁶
 127 Von Nemes was a notable Central European collector of the time. He is
 128 considered to be the first collector of Spanish Baroque art and a man who
 129 defined the art market in Budapest in the first half of the twentieth
 130 century. Von Nemes liked to exhibit the works from his collection, so he
 131 loaned his Rembrandt to the great exhibitions throughout the 1920s. At
 132 the exhibition in Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam in 1926 (cat. no. 454)
 133 Rembrandt had the place of honor, while only two years later it was
 134 presented in the Old Pinakothek in Munich, and in 1929 both at the
 135 *Exhibition of Dutch Art 1450–1900* and the show in the Royal Academy in
 136 London (cat.no.92). In 1930, Marczell von Nemes even sent his
 137 Rembrandt overseas to the exhibition in the Art Institute in Detroit
 138 devoted to Rembrandt's masterpieces (cat.no.55).⁷

139 At the beginning of the 1930s, when Nemes was already at the close of
 140 his career, he decided to sell almost his entire Old Masters collection at a
 141 grand auction in Munich organized by the auction house of Mensing en
 142 Zoon (16 November 1931).⁸ The importance given to Rembrandt's
 143 *Quintus Fabius Maximus* in the 1930s is most visible in the four pages
 144 of the auction catalogue devoted to its detailed analysis and filled with
 145 substantial quotes from the most important contemporary sources. In the
 146 introductory essay to the auction catalogue, written by one of the most
 147 eminent scholars of the time, Friedlander speaks of *Quintus Fabius*
 148 *Maximus* as one of the great works not just of Nemes's collection but of
 149 Rembrandt's *oeuvre* itself. At this auction the painting was acquired by one
 150 of the most important dealers of the age – Joseph Duveen.

151 Often called “the king of the antiquarians,” Duveen is still considered
 152 to be one of the greatest art dealers of the twentieth century. From the last
 153 decades of the nineteenth century when Duveen took over the leadership
 154 of the family company he turned it into an international corporation with
 155 headquarters in London, New York and Paris. He purchased some of the
 156 most important collections of his time, such as those of Rudolph Kahn and

THE PAINTING AND ITS HISTORIES: THE CURIOUS...

157 Samuel Benson, and fashioned the taste of many European and American
158 collectors. Thus, the old master collections that were created in the 1920s
159 were often called “the Duveen collections.” Among his clients were some
160 of the leading collectors of the period: J.P. Morgan, Henry Frick, Samuel
161 Kress, but also Prince Paul Karadjordjevic, who was one of the creators of
162 the SAC in Belgrade.⁹ Until the end of Joseph’s life Prince Paul remained
163 not only his devoted client but also his true and close friend. A great art
164 connoisseur with a discerning eye and refined taste, Prince Paul would use
165 his knowledge and connections to shape the identity of the European
166 collection of SAC.¹⁰ In a letter to Prince Paul from October 1933,
167 Duveen acknowledged sending *Quintus Fabius Maximus* to Belgrade for
168 a month for the final approval and the King’s decision before purchase.¹¹

169 Unfortunately the details of this acquisition were lost, but already in
170 Bredius’s monograph on Rembrandt the painting is credited as a work in
171 the collection of King Alexander of Yugoslavia.¹² It is also the last
172 recorded mention of Rembrandt’s painting before the Second World
173 War. During the time of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia this painting was
174 never exhibited.

175 After the war there is no record of the Rembrandt, and this is when its
176 mythical history commences. None of the inventories of the Commission
177 for Government buildings of Federal National Republic of Yugoslavia
178 (FNRY) from 1946 record Rembrandt’s painting among the works kept
179 in the White or in the Royal palace of the Royal Compound in Belgrade.¹³
180 Moreover, *Quintus Fabius Maximus* is not present in the lists compiled by
181 the Cabinet of the President of the Republic immediately after its founda-
182 tion in 1952 (that list all the art works in the state collections on the
183 territory of Yugoslavia). The absence of *Quintus Fabius Maximus* from the
184 meticulous government records does not imply an improper state gift but
185 rather denotes its true history. At the time when these records were made,
186 first in 1946 and later in 1952, this painting could not be found; it had
187 already been lost, forever.

188 Shortly after the German bombing of Belgrade in April of 1941 the
189 Government of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and King Peter II
190 Karadjordjevic visited the monastery Ostrog in Montenegro before
191 finally fleeing the country. In this monastery they hid a large quantity
192 of state treasures, among them *a painting by Rembrandt rolled as a*
193 *carpet*.¹⁴ The Archive of Yugoslavia in Belgrade keeps a detailed
194 account of the Abbot of Ostrog, Leontije Mitrović, who described in
195 great detail the hiding of the State treasures in Ostrog on 13 April

J. TODOROVIĆ

196 1941, as well as the subsequent arrival of German troops to the
 197 monastery on the 26th of April. Under the threat of death the
 198 German army seized all the treasures, including Rembrandt's *Quintus*
 199 *Fabius Maximus*. Beside gold, money and works of art, German troops
 200 looted other treasures from under the monastery vaults – a great
 201 quantity of famous Montenegrin prosciutto, several dozen rounds of
 202 Njeguš cheese and more than 200 bottles of good wine.¹⁵ Then the
 203 convoy, according to Abbot Mitrović, took all the goods, including the
 204 artworks to Munich. For a long time after this tragic April of 1941
 205 there has been no mention of Rembrandt's *Quintus Fabius Maximus*.
 206 This lack of information and the unresolved circumstances of the
 207 painting's disappearance made a perfect setting for the birth of a
 208 popular myth.

209 In reality the painting was meticulously searched for, especially after the
 210 war, and it is possible to reconstruct its real history through the archival
 211 documentation of the *Monuments Fine Arts and Archives (MFA&A)*
 212 *Division*.¹⁶ This special unit of the Allied troops was founded in 1943 in
 213 order to protect and preserve the art treasures in occupied Europe, and it
 214 should be noted that the great amount of Europe's cultural heritage was
 215 saved by this unit. After the end of the war the main role of the MFA&A
 216 division was the quest for lost works of art and their return to their rightful
 217 owners throughout Europe. If one considers the scale of looting of pre-
 218 cious cultural heritage that the German army undertook during the war it
 219 is clear why this specialized division was active until 1952. However,
 220 regardless of its devotion, expertise and thorough research, some works
 221 were never found, while a number of owners were never identified.

222 Research in the classified archives of the MFA&A *Division* reveals the
 223 true story of Rembrandt's lost masterpiece. It is first mentioned in the
 224 request for the restitution of Rembrandt's painting that Major Pawson
 225 sent on behalf of the Chancellery of the King of Yugoslavia in Exile on 22
 226 October 1945, less than a year after the Armistice.¹⁷

227 It is also quite unusual that together with this request Major Pawson (a
 228 liaison officer for the Chancellery) sent yet another request where he listed
 229 three rather unusual items: golden wreaths from the tomb of King
 230 Alexander in Belgrade, several oil paintings from the collection of King
 231 Alexander, and two or three Serbian military banners from the First World
 232 War.¹⁸

233 In other words, the request for the repatriation included unidentified
 234 artworks as well as an undefined number of military standards. Despite

THE PAINTING AND ITS HISTORIES: THE CURIOUS...

235 such inaccuracy the Headquarters of the Division replied to the
236 Chancellery as soon as December of 1945, stating that none of those
237 items, including Rembrandt's painting, were found in Neuschwanstein
238 or in any great German depository in the region of Hessen.¹⁹

239 The quest for Rembrandt's painting continued on several fronts. In the
240 following year, on 9 September 1946, the exiled king Peter II repeated his
241 claim for the restitution of *Quintus Fabius Maximus* to Richard Howard,
242 the head of the MFA&A division in Berlin. Several days later Howard
243 ordered all units of the Division to collect as much data as possible about
244 this lost artwork.

245
246 Intelligence officer would be greatly facilitated if the claimant could give the
247 name of the German officer in whose possession the Rembrandt painting
248 was last reported, or any other pertinent facts concerning same. It is sug-
249 gested that photographs, documents, published reference, statements of
250 history of ownership and detailed description including subject, identifying
251 marks, material and measurements be furnished.²⁰

252 On that same day, in another letter, Howard gave detailed instructions to
253 the base in Karlsruhe that the quest for the Rembrandt ought to be
254 continued through official channels: the claimant (the exiled King Peter
255 II) had to direct all his requests to the only institution with which
256 MFA&A can communicate officially – the Institute for Reparations of
257 the FNRY Government in Belgrade:

- 258
259
- 260 5. Present United States policy concerning looted cultural objects which
261 were moved into Germany from outside its boundaries provides that
262 such objects will be restituted to the government of the territory from
263 which they were removed by the enemy.
 - 264 6. It is therefore suggested that you advise the claimant that his inquiries
265 be directed to the Yugoslav Government for the Institute for
266 Reparations, Milosa Velikog 12, Belgrade, Phone no. 29-124. The
267 Yugoslav Restitution mission, U.S. zone Germany is also competent
268 authority on Yugoslav restitution claims for that zone.²¹

269 From that moment the search for the lost Rembrandt painting was con-
270 ducted jointly by the Institution for Reparations in Belgrade and the
271 MFA&A Division in Berlin. Owing to the good collaboration of the two
272 institutions, only five days after Howard's letter Major Brejc, the head of
273 the Yugoslav Reparations Mission in Berlin, sent two photographs of

J. TODOROVIĆ

274 *Quintus Fabius Maximus* from the famous monograph by Bredius as well
 275 as details on the dimensions and provenance of the painting to the head-
 276 quarters of MFA&A. Almost two years of searching in dilapidated ware-
 277 houses and hidden mines throughout Germany passed with no results.
 278 The details of the lost painting were distributed across the entire territory
 279 of the U.S. Military Government for Germany. In the beginning of 1948,
 280 the Yugoslav Institute for Reparations repeated its official request for
 281 *Quintus Fabius Maximus*. Time passed and many artworks were returned
 282 to Yugoslavia, but not the Rembrandt. The final conclusion came only on
 283 4 August 1958:

285 SUBJECT: Application for Restitution of Yugoslav property File no.226
 286 TO Restitution control branch
 287 Property Division
 288 Office of Military Government for Germany APO 405 U.S. Army
 289 Attn: Yugoslav Restitution Mission

- 290
- 291 1. Reference is made to application for the restitution of Yugoslav
 292 property, file no. 226 (Rembrandt), dated 17th of March 1948
 - 293 2. Investigation made by MFA&A authorities in Bavaria revealed that
 294 claimed painting was destroyed by bombing. Statements to this effect
 295 were delivered by former holder of the painting Dr. Alfred
 296 Guggenberger and his sister Erna Guggenberger respectively.
 - 297 3. Case closed.

298 Richard F. Howard Deputy Chief For Cultural Restitution (MFA&A)²²
 299

300 *Case closed* – A simple statement put an end to the long quest for the
 301 famous masterpiece. Rembrandt's *Quintus Fabius Maximus* could never
 302 be retrieved. It was lost in the allied bombing of Augsburg at the begin-
 303 ning of 1944. Too late for restitution, too late for Tito's generous gift, too
 304 late for Pepca Kardelj. It is time for some new myths to be created.
 305

306 NOTES

- 307
- 308 1. In the greatest database of Dutch art, RKD, this painting is presented as the
 309 work of a follower of Rembrandt. It also states that the painting was lost after
 310 the Second World War, but it does not give any details. See RKD Follower of
 311 Rembrandt, Quintus Fabius Maximus, no.204157, www.rkd.nl
 - 312 2. Bredius, A. *Rembrandt-Schildrijen*, Utrecht, 1935, cat.no. 477.

THE PAINTING AND ITS HISTORIES: THE CURIOUS...

- 313 3. Plutarch, *Life of Fabius Maximus*, vol.III, London, 1916.
- 314 4. Mauclair, Camille, *Rembrandt*, Les Arts, 1911, 225.
- 315 5. Schmidt Degener F., Rembrandt, in *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, October, 1906,
- 316 XXXVI, 268.
- 317 6. RKD entry for *Follower of Rembrandt, Quintus Fabius Maximus*,
- 318 no.204157, www.rkd.nl accessed 5.9.2015.
- 319 7. See auction catalogue *Sammlung Marczel von Nemes*, Mensing en Zoon,
- 320 Munich 1931.
- 321 8. *Sammlung Marzell von Nemes*, Mensing en Zoon, Munich, 1931, 44–48.
- 322 9. Maryl Secrest, *Duveen A Life in Art*, Random House, London, 2004.
- 323 10. For more information on the role of Prince Paul in the creation of the State
- 324 Art Collection of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia see Jelena Todorovic, The
- 325 Pursuit of Tradition . . . , in *Catalogue of the State Art Collection in the Royal*
- 326 *Compound in Belgrade – European Art*, vol. I, Platoncum, 2014, 14–41.
- 327 11. Getty Research Institute, *Duveen Brothers Records*, 1925–1940, box 497,
- 328 roll 352.
- 329 12. Bredius, A. *Rembrandt-Schildrijen*, Utrecht, 1935, cat.no. 477.
- 330 13. Archive of Yugoslavia, fund 804 the database of the Commission for
- 331 Government Buildings.
- 332 14. Archive of Yugoslavia, Reparations Commission of FNRY, fund 54,
- 333 319–483.
- 334 15. *Ibid.*
- 335 16. The Archive of the *Monuments Fine Arts and Archives Division* is kept in the
- 336 US National Archives. www.archives.gov
- 337 17. MFA&A, 22.10.1945/226 1571289.
- 338 18. MFA&A, 22.10.1945/2/226 1571289.
- 339 19. MFA&A 16.12.1945/226 1571289.
- 340 20. MFA&A 21.9.1946/226 15711289.
- 341 21. MFA&A 21.9.1946/2/226 15711289.
- 342 22. MFA&A 4.8.1948/226/953.

342 **Jelena Todorović** (PhD) received her BA in the History of Art (1993–1998) at
 343 the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade. Afterwards she continued her graduate and
 344 postgraduate studies at University College London (UCL – 1998–2004) where
 345 she also worked, first as a teaching assistant and later as a part-time lecturer. In
 346 2005 she transferred to the University of the Arts in Belgrade where she presently
 347 teaches in the Faculty of Fine Arts as an Associate Professor. She is a visiting
 348 lecturer at UCL London and holds visiting professorships at the University of
 349 Technical Sciences in Novi Sad, Serbia and the Università degli Studi di Trieste in
 350 Italy. In the previous four years she has also been working as an external advisor for
 351 the Civici Musei di Storia ed Arte in Trieste. For the past eight years she has been

J. TODOROVIĆ

352 in charge of the State Art Collection of the Royal Compound in Belgrade and head
353 of the project for the Ministry of Culture and Information of Serbia. Although an
354 art historian by training, her interests have been directed toward early modern
355 cultural history, including the broad areas of festival culture, art and propaganda,
356 the concepts of time and transience, and the understanding of liminal spaces in the
357 visual arts. One of the important subjects of her research and also the topic of her
358 dissertation is the spectacles of state and, more widely, the festival culture and
359 performance space of early modern Europe.

360
361
362
363
364
365
366
367
368
369
370
371
372
373
374
375
376
377
378
379
380
381
382
383
384
385
386
387
388
389
390

uncorrected proof

Chapter 11

Number	Query
AQ1	We have followed US spelling and no series comma throughout the chapter as per consistency.
AQ2	Please check the affiliation of author “Todorović” for correctness.
AQ3	We have shortened the running head text as “The Painting and Its Histories: The Curious . . . ” Please check and confirm if it is fine or not.

uncorrected proof

Chapter 11

Number	Query
AQ1	We have followed US spelling and no series comma throughout the chapter as per consistency.
AQ2	Please check the affiliation of author “Todorović” for correctness.
AQ3	We have shortened the running head text as “The Painting and Its Histories: The Curious . . . ” Please check and confirm if it is fine or not.

uncorrected proof