



Every Picture Has a Story

Interview by Gill Crabbe, FNG Research

As the Sinebrychoff Art Museum embarks on a research project in preparation for an exhibition of paintings by the Tiepolos, Chief Curator Dr. Ira Westergård talks to Gill Crabbe about the importance of provenance research in art-historical practice

Provenance research is an increasingly important aspect of art-historical research within art museums, not just in terms of acquisitions but also in maintaining the quality of their collections and strengthening their loan activities, as well as contributing to the wider canon of academic knowledge. Good museum practice includes a concept of stewardship that extends to an active commitment to developing an ever deepening understanding of the objects in their care.

There are trends in art-history practice just as there are trends in how art itself is collected and displayed. Today the importance of provenance research is affected not only by an increasing interest in exploring the contextual history of art objects, but also by concerns since the late-20th century surrounding the legality of ownership and the expropriation of cultural property, as well as of course the processes of attribution and authentication of an artwork. In the past century in particular, many important works of art, especially Old Masters, have been dispersed in museums and private collections all around the world, so the trend for current art-historical exhibitions is also to reunite artworks that are considered to have been closely linked, in order to learn more about an artist's oeuvre.

So it is timely that the Sinebrychoff Art Museum is currently reviewing the provenance of two of its paintings in preparation for an exhibition focusing on the interest of collectors in the art of the Tiepolos in late-18th and 19th-century Northern Europe. 'We aim to clarify that the archival documents already known are correct and to see what more can be found,' explains Ira Westergård, Chief Curator at the Sinebrychoff Art Museum, who is heading up the provenance research project on its two Tiepolo paintings, *The Rape of the Sabine Women* by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696–1770) and *Greeks Entering Troy* by Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo (1727–1804). 'We want to go further and look into a wider range of archives. We also want to look into the provenance from the starting point of the works – that is a part of the provenance that has yielded very little documentation so far. One of the aims of this exhibition is to look at how these paintings from the 18th century travelled from the art market to collections and thence to public collections in Europe.'

An important aspect of provenance research is the part it plays in the attribution process. 'Attributions are an ongoing part of art-historical discussion,' says Westergård. 'It can strengthen an attribution if a painting has a clear and complete provenance, but with older



**Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, *The Rape of the Sabine Women*,
 c. 1718–19, oil on canvas, 43.5 x 74cm
 Finnish National Gallery / Sinebrychoff Art Museum
 Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Jouko Könönen**

paintings that is rarely the case. However, the fact that a painting can be documented as having belonged to a well-known collection does also strengthen its attribution.'

Provenance in itself though does not always prove an attribution, as today's ever more sophisticated methods of technical analysis have sometimes shown. 'Paintings centuries ago were bought and sold under all kinds of great masters' names,' says Westergård, 'yet today technical analysis methods might show they could not have been painted even in the century that the artist lived. Such paintings might well have been incorporated long ago into even famous collections.'

But while provenance alone does not necessarily always prove an attribution, Westergård points out that it plays an important part in a painting's history. 'It is important to know that a painting was once attributed to a master, even if that is later changed. We have several works of this kind in our collection, too. For example, we have a painting that entered the collection as a Rembrandt and today is thought to be by one of his earliest collaborators, Isaac de Jouderville, so it is still from a prominent related master from that period.'

Provenance research can reveal how a painting's historical attribution has reflected the changing fortunes of a particular artist's work at different times in history. 'For researchers who are interested in the art market and how tastes have changed it's important to know which masters were valued and why it was important to have work by a particular artist in a collection,' says Westergård.

This shift in taste is one area that the Tiepolo exhibition plans to focus on, as both father and son were highly regarded artists in Northern Europe in the late-18th and 19th centuries. 'For the exhibition we want to research further into why there was an interest in works by the Tiepolos here when the taste of many collectors elsewhere in Europe was shifting towards the French and English Rococo style. Yet works by Venetian artists were still

popular, for example, among the collectors in St Petersburg around the Imperial court in the 18th and 19th century.

‘Through provenance research we can find out about the way that artworks have travelled because many paintings by old masters have been dispersed around the world and we want to know why and how and when they have travelled from their original countries,’ Westergård explains. ‘It also tells you the story of collectors and collections so it’s part of documenting the story of collecting: why this work ended up on the art market; who bought it, what collection it was it incorporated into. It’s a history that doesn’t have so much to do with the artwork itself as with the history of collecting, and in art-historical research now there is much more interest in the history of collecting. Provenance research is about the life of the art object after it was created – everything that happened to it after that.’

In preparation for the Sinebychoff Art Museum exhibition Westergård is working with several international experts on Venetian art from different art institutions, such as the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, which now owns the monumental finished painting of *The Rape of the Sabine Women* (1718–19) by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo. The oil sketch for this painting is now in the Sinebrychoff Art Museum.

Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo, *Greeks Entering Troy*, 1770s, oil on canvas, 41 x 55cm
Finnish National Gallery / Sinebrychoff Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen



Provenance starts from two points in time: going backwards from the current owner, and also from the other end, starting with when it was created. 'It was quite usual in the 18th century that when a finished work was sent over to the client they would get some of the sketches,' says Westergård. 'But then again sometimes if the sketch was very well executed it could be sold separately,' she adds. 'One aspect of our provenance research is looking at the possibility that our sketch had at some time travelled to Russia and had been in a Russian collection. At the end of the 19th century, it came to Finland from a Swedish collection, but at this point we don't know exactly when and how the painting came to Sweden.'

One aspect of the current interest in the history of collecting is the need to establish a legal chain of ownership and it is here that provenance research can face some challenging issues. One of the most difficult obstacles is when past owners were not concerned with documenting their ownership or archival traces of themselves. 'Really it is exceptional with an Old Master to have a complete chain of ownership,' Westergård points out. 'Usually that happens only when a work enters quickly after its creation into a royal collection for example, where it remains for generations. We know that Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* entered the French royal collection immediately after the artist died and it has never left, but that kind of case is really an exception.'

'If we look back to the 19th and 18th centuries and earlier, provenance was not always considered as very important when a painting changed hands. But with the general changes in the 20th century concerning legislation on private property, it is important to prove rightful legal ownership and also that the past owners were legal owners,' Westergård explains. Then there is the issue of cultural appropriation of artworks either from indigenous populations or through illegal seizures during wartime. 'In particular,' she adds, 'ethical guidelines for museums urge curators to carefully investigate any transactions taking place between the early 1930s and 1945 as vast numbers of art works were looted, confiscated or put into forced sales during the Nazi era in Europe.'

According to previous scholars the *Greeks Entering Troy* by Domenico Tiepolo is one of a series of three paintings he made on the subject of the Trojan horse – the other two being in the National Gallery in London. 'All three works were documented in literature on the art of the Tiepolos already in the early 20th century,' says Westergård, 'and an image of our painting *Greeks Entering Troy* was published in *Pantheon* magazine in 1930. It was with an antiques dealer in Paris, but then no more was known about its whereabouts, until it popped up in an auction in Helsinki in 1996 as a painting by an unknown Italian master.' The museum was quickly able to confirm the work as the Tiepolo. 'When the painting was bought we knew only of the previous owner in Helsinki, a private collector,' says Westergård, 'so our current review of the provenance research is also focusing on how the painting travelled from Paris to Helsinki.'

'Unfortunately, nobody has found any archives concerning the antiques dealer in Paris, but specialists at the French National Archives have tipped us about some new places to search for information, which have not previously been investigated. We do now know already a bit more about the painting before it came to Paris and plan to publish our results with the exhibition.'

Meanwhile the Sinebrychoff Art Museum is collaborating with colleagues in London's National Gallery to clarify further the history of all three paintings of the Trojan horse. In the early 19th century the paintings were brought to St Petersburg to be sold to Russian collectors. 'We hope to find information on how and when the paintings have transferred from St Petersburg to London and, ideally, even something on the history before the paintings arrived in Russia.'

Ultimately provenance research can bring the history of an artwork full circle, reuniting it with works it was originally commissioned with, in order to shed more light on the work and its history through further connoisseurship. 'Of course it would be of huge research interest to see the three Trojan horse paintings together in order to compare them,' says Westergård. 'We could examine the style and technique of the artist Domenico Tiepolo, but also things which lie under the surface or can be seen only on the back of the painting for example.'

It is clear that understanding the life that an artwork has lived since its inception involves a complex interplay of provenance research, technical analysis and connoisseurship. The Sinebrychoff Art Museum's initiative is an example of how this combination of skills is set to open up new perspectives on Tiepolo studies.