

## The Discovery and Acquisition of *Head of Saint Michael*

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I'm Jonathan Bober, curator of prints, drawings and also the European paintings at the Blanton Museum of Art, which is the art museum of the University of Texas at Austin. Veronese's *Head of an Angel* was acquired by the Blanton museum as part of the Suida-Manning Collection, which the museum acquired in late 1998. The Suida-Manning Collection was considered by most the last important collection of old-master paintings and drawings in private hands in the United States. And through a number of circumstances, actually, fascinating circumstances, the museum was able to acquire the entire collection, all 240 paintings and nearly 400 drawings a partial gift of the family and as a partial purchase. Veronese's *Head of an Angel* was one of three, is one of three Veroneses in the collection.

How Suida came by the *Head of the Angel*, we don't know, very unfortunately. We do know that Veronese corresponds to one of his principal scholarly interests, that is 16th century Venetian painting. We know that Suida possessed the painting by 1934, when his friend and colleague Giuseppe Fiocco published it and described it as already in Suida's possession. Suida himself published the fragment in 1938 and we discovered, among the so-called archival materials that

reached the museum along with the collection, that in a fire insurance policy of 1948, Suida lists Veronese *Head of an Angel*, as the work was titled when it came into the museum's collection. It remained titled until the momentous discovery, our identification of the *Head of an Angel* as the missing fourth fragment from the Petrobelli altarpiece.

Unfortunately, we know, or so far have discovered absolutely nothing about the passage of the Suida Manning, now identified *Head of Saint Michael* between the dismembering of the Petrobelli altarpiece in the late 18th century and that first publication in 1934. There had been attempts; there has been curiosity about a mention of a fourth fragment of the Petrobelli altarpiece, first in a catalogue of the Duke of Sutherland's collection at Stafford House, a catalogue published 1862, that refers to the two fragments from the Petrobelli altarpiece that were at Stafford House, that is the *Pietà*, now at Ottawa, and the fragment at Edinburgh. The mention refers to a fourth fragment at Castle Howard in Yorkshire, England. That 1862 mention of a fourth fragment from the Petrobelli altarpiece or a fragment said to be consistent in the Stafford House catalogue with the *Pietà*, or *Dead Christ with Angels*, now at Ottawa, and the Edinburgh fragment was

taken for granted. There was assumed to be such a fourth piece at Castle Howard until the more serious consideration of the altarpiece and its reconstruction by then directors of the National Gallery of Scotland, National Gallery of Canada in 1932/33. And after some inquiries at Castle Howard, uh, they concluded in correspondence that no such work existed or, if it had, it no longer did exist. Subsequent scholars, right through a 2004 publication by Peter Humphrey, assumed that the 1862 mention was simply mistaken. Xavier Salomon very diligently, as he's been in all aspects of researching the Petrobelli altarpiece, went to Castle Howard and checked inventories and records and found no mention in 18th / 19th century records of any such work going into Castle Howard or being sold by Castle Howard. He, too, ultimately concludes that the 1862 mention in the Stafford House catalogue is a mistake. I wonder, however in 19th century diligence about identification of work and connoisseurship were considerable, and it's hard for me to imagine that such a mention would have been simply mistaken. I think one element, we now can be satisfied was mistaken, that the fragment or a fourth piece was at Castle Howard. I have to wonder, however, if the recollection of the cataloguer was not mistaken and the fragment may not have been seen at another English country house or may not have been properly connected with the other three then known

fragments. While we cannot be sure, it is highly suggestive – that 1862 mention remains highly suggestive to me – that the fourth fragment, now identified as the Suida-Manning Head of Saint Michael, was somewhere to be seen in England at least in the 1860's, in the late 19th century.

The discovery of the Suida Manning fragment or, rather, its identification as the Head of Saint Michael from the Petrobelli altarpiece has, of course, several stages. From the restoration of Dulwich's fragment in the late 40's, early 50's it became clear, with the removal of overpaint from the left side of the painting, that there must have been a central figure in the Petrobelli altarpiece, and that that figure was Saint Michael. A bit of the green drapery fluttering toward upper left, and even a hand holding scales with a small figure, that is a human spirit in judgment, made clear that the central figure was a Saint Michael.

Shortly afterward, the Edinburgh fragment was cleaned and wing, spear, even claws of the trodden devil, of Satan, beneath Saint Michael, came clear on the right hand side of Edinburgh's fragment. We knew that there was a Saint Michael at the centre of the Petrobelli altarpiece. Moreover, the great Venetian scholar, Detlev von Hadeln, in a manuscript monograph on Veronese, left incomplete at his death in 1935, had already

put together the three fragments of the Petrobelli altarpiece or identified the three then known fragments as coming from the Petrobelli altarpiece, based upon his identification of, his reading of, one of those wonderful local publications, with which Italy is so rich, of the artistic treasures of the town of Lendinara, published by a Pietro Brandolese in 1795. In Brandolese's description, of the most significant artistic treasures of the tiny town of Lendinara, he does describe the altarpiece on the Petrobelli family, in the Petrobelli family altar, and there describes in detail the Petrobelli altarpiece including a description of Saint Michael at the centre of the altar. That description in von Hadeln's monograph was published in 1978. From that point forth, one knew or one had also a verbal description of Saint Michael at the centre of the altarpiece.

But the true discovery or identification of the Suida Manning, Head of an Angel owes entirely to Xavier Salomon, curator at Dulwich, who, while researching or while already planning his exhibition of the Petrobelli altarpiece visited Austin in August 2006 and saw at least two of the three Suida-Manning Veroneses on view, the Annunciation and the fragment. About a year later, advancing work on the exhibition, Xavier wrote me and I printed out the email to be able to share. This is end of November 2007, and Xavier writes me, significant in the

second paragraph: "I'm writing about something which could potentially be rather important. I think I have worked out what your so-called Head of an Angel by Veronese is, and what it was part of. If I am right, this is something potentially big. And there is Xavier's first, to me at least, confession of his thinking, his putting together, his having seen the Suida-Manning head, here on exhibit, and his reconstruction of the altarpiece, his knowledge that a Saint Michael stood at the centre. Xavier asked me to check actual dimensions of the head of the angel, character of canvas, any other comments about the fragment, physically. I shared those with him. He matched those up with the dimensions, the materials, essentially, Veronese's style at the moment of the Petrobelli altarpiece, and came to the still provisional conclusion, but practical certainty that the Saint Michael was that missing link or that fourth critical fragment from the dead centre of the altarpiece. The absolute confirmation of the discovery came last May 2008, when I accompanied the fragment to Ottawa, and where Stephen Gritt, within an hour of my arrival had brought it to painting conservation, X-rayed it and shared with me immediately a portion of the head on the left that was always assumed to be the original painting but a slight interval corresponding to a seam in the painting. He showed me that in fact the weave of that part of the canvas changed by

90 degrees, and overpainted was a section of column that corresponds to one of the columns in another part of the Petrobelli altarpiece. In fact, he could show me exactly where that fragment attached on the left to square out, to true or centre, the angel in its frame, where that fragment, that extra strip of canvas had come from. That provided the absolute proof that our Head of an Angel did once occupy the centre of the Petrobelli altarpiece.

## Fragmentation in Art

Fragmentation is extremely common in the history of western art. It is common because of the vicissitudes of history, of war, of natural disaster, and also, of course, avidness of market. Come the 19th, even early 20th century, when innumerable polyptychs or damaged single unit works were dismembered, mutilated and sold onto the market. That is for really for mercenary economic gain. I would venture that most cases of fragmentation in the history of western art, however, involve multiple unit works and have some form of documentation of their appearance. The least common and, of course, the most difficult cases to reconstruct, are those of a single field, a single panel, a single canvas, where there is minimal or no description of the original appearance. And, of course, the Petrobelli altarpiece comes very close to that

extreme case, that is to say, its reconstruction of its appearance, is something very unusual in itself and in the history of cases of fragmentation and reconstitution.

Of course, fragmentation creates extraordinary challenges to the understanding, the interpretation of the work of art that has undergone that kind of radical transformation, reconfiguration in cases beyond, obviously, recognisability. First, foremost, really most obviously, the composition, the original composition of the work is by definition compromised, and it may be radically compromised. In the case of the Petrobelli altarpiece, of course, we could not imagine from the Edinburgh or Dulwich fragments alone what the entire work would have looked like. What is lost in that critical formal aspects like space, modulation of colour, things of which Veronese was an extraordinary master, could only vaguely have been inferred from any part that was known before the reconstruction of the work. But of course, it's not just the formal disorganization and disintegration of the work, the subject matter and function are very easily or likely lost. In the case of the Petrobelli altarpiece, the early identification and then enduring identification of the fragment at Dulwich was of a bishop and a priest. Well, that's reasonable in certain senses, imaginative but, of course, completely

betrays the reality of the subject. The fact that the Dulwich or Edinburgh fragment or, of course, that Ottawa's Dead Christ with Angels were parts of an altarpiece, is not that is a public function, a public presence and function, could not have been completely understood. Nothing really of the, let's say, sociopolitical, the social circumstances of the work can be known clearly or understood when there has been such radical fragmentation.

Then there are the further problems posed by fragmentation to interpreting chronology, historical importance. Simple example: the Suida-Manning Head of an Angel was assumed by all to be a very late work, mid-1580's, whereas we now know, of course, mid 1560's, a good 20 years earlier. Assessing historical importance is in a way the most difficult challenge posed by fragmentation of a work. Who would have assumed from that Head of an angel, or even from the very beautiful Dulwich, Edinburgh, and Ottawa fragments that this work was one of Veronese's masterpieces, one of the great projects, greatest in size, greatest in formal ambition, of the height of his maturity. Fragmentation makes that kind of comprehensive understanding of the original coherence and sense of the work extremely difficult, if not impossible.

One of the most interesting remaining or outstanding questions about the Petrobelli altarpiece is why should the Suida-Manning fragment be just the head? Or, why would even the most unscrupulous dealer in a Venice of the late 18th century have cut merely the head of Saint Michael from the canvas, and not preserved more of the figure, the full figure standing there at the middle? The simplest explanation would be that there was damage to that central part of the canvas below the head; one can imagine, as occurs frequently with altarpieces, a taper that had been placed at some point too near the canvas and had scorched it, damage that might not have troubled parishioners in a church and on a scale of a 20-foot altarpiece, but might have been disconcerting to a potential acquirer of a fragment to stand in a country home or anywhere else. To me the more interesting possibility, I think the better explanation really is this: precisely the calculation of the dealer, or those persons responsible for cutting up the canvas. Those persons were evidently extremely sensitive to the proportions of the two fragments at Edinburgh and at Dulwich. Dulwich's fragment, Saint Jerome gestures upward, while Girolamo Petrobelli is more in a crouched stance. And that fragment is cut to higher proportions, leaving a nice interval around the hands of Saint Jerome and Girolamo Petrobelli. The same is true of the Edinburgh fragment, where a Saint Anthony

is bending over Antonio Petrobelli, is of lower absolute height, the proportions of the two figures more squat and in fact than the fragment at Edinburgh is cut to slightly wider proportions. Further evidence, of course, that squaring off, centering off the head of Saint Michael in its frame, by the addition of another strip of canvas. Whoever cut up the canvas was extremely sensitive to composition, conventional proportions, and saleability as independent works, of those fragments. If one respected those proportions for the two pieces at Edinburgh and Dulwich, it would have left; it did leave much too narrow a figure of Saint Michael at the centre of the composition. I think the explanation may be no more complicated than that, that the dealer or again those responsible for carving up the altarpiece wanted the two more readily saleable elements featuring, of course, portraits of patron saints, very appealing to the taste of the time. In making their proportions as attractive as possible, they compromised the width of the Saint Michael and made the preservation of his bust to very handsome proportions the best alternative. And that, I think, is the best explanation.

## Conclusion

In summary how often does one get to add a highly significant work to the corpus of one of the great painters of the 16th century, one

of the great painters of western art? How does it affect our understanding of his production and, especially, in the case of the Petrobelli altarpiece, his modality, his sensitivity to the modification of his own style, his own interests at the time according to the environment and destination of the work? We understand through its reconstruction, even more than we did previously, of Veronese's modality at height of his activity. And finally, I think, the great pleasure, the great satisfaction at a project like this, a satisfaction for all of us who've participated and anyone who will see the exhibition is that a reconstruction of this importance goes against entropy. Entropy that is the inevitable degradation of all matter toward a uniform state, and it's something that, of course, occurs physically at all times all places always as mountains weather into pebbles. But, of course, it occurs ever more rapidly in our age as all knowledge is reduced mercilessly to an infinitely broad, an ocean of mere data of information. And so, to reconstitute, to bring together four pieces to restore the original sense of this masterwork, to give greater sense to the activity of one of the great masters, is a blow for civilization, a blow for cognition, and I take great pleasure in that and I hope visitors to the exhibition will as well.