

The so-called Leiden History Piece: What the picture tells us.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Virtually all interpretations of the so-called Leiden History Piece have their starting point from, and are based on some text from the Bible or from classical literature, that the author usually stumbled upon by chance, and in which a few men appear before a ruler. In fact none of these interpretations takes its point of departure from the picture itself.

The wise lessons of Erwin Panofsky, who taught us that, before we start interpreting a representation, we should make a thorough analysis of all that we see in it, these wise lessons, ladies and gentlemen, are forgotten.

Alas, because it is undoubtedly the picture itself from which we may in fact gather the most relevant information. Who, like most authors on the History Piece, at all costs wants to explain the representation as deriving from some passage from the literature, and therewith without any ado accepts that we see a company of musketeers depicted at the right side of the scene, a detail that of course does not at all fit within the context of a biblical or classical theme, these authors do not take Rembrandt, and in this case also his patron, seriously. They obviously see Rembrandt as a sort of 17th-century Karel Appel, in that he would just mess around a little, iconographically speaking.

The so-called History Piece, ladies and gentlemen, was certainly not made for the free market. It was without any doubt a private commission, in all probability from the man that is portrayed somewhat to the right of the centre. He is clad in contemporary costume, looks straight out of the picture, and does not pay any attention to what happens around him. He is no part of the events that are taking place.

Let us imagine how the picture may have come into being.

The patron visits Rembrandt in his workshop and says: So my boy, I have heard you are doing pretty well lately. Could you make me a picture, about this size, and please depict a ruler on it, and some soldiers that appear before him, and that swear allegiance to him. Oh, and before I forget, put me in the scene too. So boy, lots of success, and please bring the picture along when it's ready.

Could this be what has happened? No, of course not!

In the case of an important commission like this, we must take it for granted that Rembrandt and his patron discussed every detail of the representation, and the young master certainly did his very best to render everything in the way his patron wanted it to have. And we should really take this seriously, ladies and gentlemen.

If, for example, we look at the general standing to the far left of the scene, we see that this man is dressed to the fingertips in very rich early 17th-century costume, that was especially in vogue in the south of Germany, with open-worked mantle, a sash, beautiful knee-bands and a plumed hat. If we take Rembrandt seriously, we should ask ourselves *why* he dressed the general this way, and *why* his patron wanted it this way. Certainly not because it should be made clear that the scene takes place in biblical times or in times of ancient history, I would say!

And, another example, if Rembrandt paints a ruler with a bowed crown, we have to ask ourselves what meaning this could have. And if we then do some profound iconographic research, we will discover that the hundreds of figures with such a bowed crown that occur in 16th- and early 17th-century Dutch and German prints in fact always depict the German emperor, or more correctly, the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire.

And if Rembrandt depicts the symbol of the Order of the Golden Fleece on a column, we should acknowledge that he did not do that just for fun, but that he wanted to tell us something with that. And we should realize that also Rembrandt and his patron stood in, and made use of, existing iconographic visual traditions. Traditions that would make it sure that Rembrandt's more or less educated contemporaries would immediately recognize the ruler as the German emperor, and the animal-like thing on the column as the symbol of the Order of the Golden Fleece. And of course these contemporaries also knew that the German emperor, and in the early 17th century that was Ferdinand II, was the grandmaster of this knight's order.

Ladies and gentlemen, described in a few sentences, my analysis of the representation is as follows. Rembrandt's patron at some point visited the imperial court of Ferdinand II in Vienna. At this occasion he witnessed an event in which Ferdinand II pardons some soldiers that had been taken prisoner, provided that they in turn swear allegiance to him. From historical sources it is known that Ferdinand II did this more often.

That the scene indeed has to do with the aftermath of some warfare is also clear from the heap of weapons captured on the battle field, including a musket or arquebus. This heap, of course at the feet of the general, whom we may presumably identify as Albrecht von Wallenstein., the emperor's most important military man, and known as quite a dandy.

By the way, it is clear from their clothes that the three men before the emperor are normal soldiers, and most likely not the protagonists of some literary story. Any attribute that usually identifies a literary figure, is lacking. And incidentally, their clothing is entirely fitting in the period of the Thirty Years War.

Thus, as I see it, the picture is a very personal memorial document, and in all probability we will never ever find a further source of the representation, unless we are able to identify the patron. And this patron is certainly not, I just mention it in passing, this patron is certainly not Petrus Sciverius. The patron, not necessarily from Leiden, will doubtlessly have given the picture a place of honour in his house. So he could show his visitors that he had been at the court of Ferdinand II and could tell them about the great magnanimity of the emperor.

By taking the picture itself as a starting point, and by performing some thorough iconographic research, ladies and gentlemen, we arrive at entirely different conclusions than all these authors that, led by some literary passage, have to wriggle themselves in all kinds of semi-truths to get their right. They all run after some idea like a sort of Don Quichottes, bending and breaking every argument until it fits within their interpretation. Thereby accepting countless anachronisms, which are then usually simply ignored, or waved away with the argument that anachronisms occur more often in Dutch 17th century painting. Thereby forgetting that the History Painting would then in fact be one huge anachronism.

There is the author, for example, who interprets the painting as the Injustice of Piso, a scene that takes place in a military camp. And thus, without much ado, this author makes us believe that the History Piece shows a military camp. Who sees this? Please tell me! What a nonsense! But the editors of Oud Holland obviously believed him.

And now recently, an author goes as far to, as if by magic, turning Rembrandt's Stoning of Saint Stephen into a scene from the Old Testament story of Joseph. And this, I'm sorry to say, certainly not based on any iconographic knowledge, and with as only objective to find an extra argument to interpret the Leiden History Piece as a Joseph scene as well. Ladies and gentlemen, where will this end? This is no scholarship anymore, this is adjacent to deliberate deceit, albeit started by self-deceit.

I know it is a great temptation, once one has found some idea, and one is eager to publish it. But please, dear colleagues, please return to the lessons of Panofsky, and therewith in the first place back to what a representation *itself* tells us.

Thank you very much.