Is Founder of Modern Anatomy Subject of Mysterious Portrait?

For more than 400 years, the only known portrait of Andreas Vesalius, the 16th-century anatomist who helped lay the foundations of modern biology, has been a small woodcut from his famous book, *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* (1543). This past summer, however, a rival appeared. Put up for sale by an art historian living in New Zealand, the striking, life-sized oil portrait was offered to Martin Cummings, the director of the National Library of Medicine (NLM). Cummings was intrigued. Not only was the portrait said to have been painted from life by a Renaissance master, Tintoretto, but it was going for a mere $100,000.

Yet Cummings in the end turned down the deal. Despite its allure, the painting proved to be troublesome and more than a bit mysterious. Its surface had been damaged in a misguided attempt to clean it with some solvent. And after some asking around, the painting was found to be far from a sure thing. There were doubts it was a Tintoretto, there were doubts about its ownership, and in the end there were even doubts that it portrayed Vesalius.

It all began on Monday 26 June when Cummings received at his offices in Bethesda, Maryland, a letter from a Richard Teller Hirsch in Auckland, New Zealand. Hirsch said the painting had come to his attention 12 years before, and he had spent much time since then working to establish its authenticity—working successfully, he said. He also said he would manage the sale of the portrait for the owner, who lived in the United States. Cummings was understandably interested. The NLM owns a rare first edition of the *Fabrica*, the most famous of Vesalius's works. It was prepared while he, an M.D., was lecturer in surgery at Padua, Italy. Unlike other anatomists of his day, who often relied on the hands of servants, Vesalius did his own dissections. The results, carefully described and illustrated, made medical history by exploding many myths of ancient anatomists. In addition, he standardized anatomical terms, using the newly interpreted Greek terms with those of the middle ages. Modern anatomical nomenclature is directly descended from that adopted by Vesalius. Yet little is known of how he looked and lived. A contemporary portrait of Vesalius would thus be a striking find for NLM's collection of 31 oil portraits and some 70,000 prints and photographs of import for the history of medicine.

Yet the whole situation surrounding the sale was strange. The story, as pieced together by *Science* from several sources, including a telephone interview with Hirsch in New Zealand, goes like this. While director of the Allentown, Pennsylvania, Art Museum in 1966, Hirsch met a "veterinarian" who boasted of having picked up a Titian for pennies at an auction. A do-it-yourselfer, the vet had, unfortunately, damaged the painting by trying to remove the dark varnish with strong solvents.

Skeptical of its value at first, Hirsch took the painting into his possession for further study. In 1967 he traveled to Europe on a grant and visited 67 museums, had lab tests performed, and conferred with experts in Renaissance art evaluation. He then returned to the United States, and after years of correspondence and research was finally convinced not only that the painting actually was of Vesalius but that it was done by Tintoretto as well. The owner, who, according to Hirsch, "only wanted to turn a fast buck," said sell it to the highest bidder, preferably for about $1 million. Hirsch, who somehow had considerable say at this point, said no, it should go into a public collection where it would be appreciated and should, because of the damage, sell for only $100,000 (of which Hirsch would get 25 percent, an authentication fee).

In June, when Hirsch first contacted Cummings, he quoted a price of "$100,000 plus." In addition to that, of course, Cummings would have to sink between $2,000 and $50,000 into restoring the portrait. It didn't seem like a bad deal to Cummings, especially as evidence in favor of its authenticity was thick. In June, Hirsch mailed Cummings a tightly written, eight-page summary of his 12 years of authentication studies, much of which Cummings checked up on. The painting, for instance, has *Andreas Vesalius* written in Roman letters in the upper right-hand corner of the portrait. According to Hirsch, spectrographic studies at the Courtauld Institute at the University of London showed that pigments in the body of the picture were identical to those of the inscription, both dating from the mid-16th century. The canvas material itself, examined by the laboratories of the Louvre, seemed to be from the same period and in no way different from that type of Venetian canvas favored by Titian and his circle (of which Tintoretto was a member). And since the angle of the sitter in the painting differs from that of the woodcut, it must, Hirsch said, have been done from life.

Most convincing, perhaps, was a series of x-ray photographs that Hirsch sent, revealing an underlying composition whose horizon is at 90 degrees to that of the portrait. Filling most of it is a heavily draped male figure, boldly done in broad, assured strokes and having what appears to be a halo around his head. Several small turbaned figures are sitting on rocks at various distances, all looking off the canvas. To Hirsch, this underpainting is part of a larger work, cut away to provide a canvas appropriate for a portrait. Hirsch thinks it is a *Baptism of Christ* that could only have been done by Tintoretto. In his eight-page summary, Hirsch weaves these and other facts into a fabric of probable events: "Given 1540–1542 as the overwhelmingly probable dates for this painting, Tintoretto would have been 22 to 24 years old at the time, and Vesalius between 26 and 28. Both of them young enough to have seized upon some chance occasion to agree upon a sitting by the brilliant young medical celebrity from Padua, engaged on creating what would stand for centuries as a milestone in artistic anatomy. The abruptness of the opportunity seems to be suggested by the failure of the artist to work on a fresh canvas or to locate one on the spur of the moment in his proverbially dark studio. Some discarded oil sketch comes to hand; no matter that it is too tall when placed on its side, too small right side up. It is slashed in two: the moment is not to be lost to catch the features of a fellow genius, soon—in August—to quit Venice and Padua. This is the record of an encounter, lacking the paraphernalia of a formal portrait of a personage wishing to have his eminence recorded."

By this point, Cummings was itching to see the actual portrait. Hirsch told him that although the owner had it in a "bank vault in Pennsylvania," it would be delivered by an anonymous third party. "Although I am not of a suspicious nature," Hirsch wrote Cummings, "I place very small reliance on the owners' eventual control over his cupidity." In Sep-

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tember, the portrait arrived in Bethesda for examination, and Cummings put it through its paces. A panel of six persons compared the portrait to several 16th-century woodcuts, only one of which depicted Vesalius. All but one person on the panel matched the woodcut of Vesalius with the painting of Vesalius. Cummings called in experts. The curator of Italian painting from a national gallery (who declined to be named) examined both picture and x-rays. He told *Science* that it was most likely a Tintoretto. "Despite the damage it remains a very handsome portrait," he said. "It has kind of a romantic air to it, but that is a quality of Tintoretto's portraits. The composition underneath also looked very much to be that of Tintoretto's style, in so far as one can say that from an x-ray."

But not everyone agrees. Hirsch in his eight-page document quotes an expert from the Courtauld Institute of the University of London (who also declined to be named) as having said, upon seeing the portrait, "you may have here the ruin of a great Tintoretto." But there was, *Science* has found out, a continued correspondence between Hirsch and the expert which resulted in this remark in a letter of 13 December 1973: "I have recently been looking at a large number of portraits by Tintoretto, and I now think it very unlikely that he could be the author. He does not, it seems to me, paint so thinly. I can only suggest that it is by a Venetian artist of his period." This expert, moreover, claims that the Courtauld Institute did not go on to do spectrographic studies of the pigments as Hirsch claims in his eight-page study. Added the expert, "There may be some genuine misunderstanding here." Thus there is no guarantee that the inscription was not applied at a later date. He also feels that the portrait would not necessarily have been done from life, and that, based on his dating the painting around 1560 to 1570, it is most likely to be a copy of another work.

Without further examinations of the painting, the debate over its authenticity may be at a standstill. And where is the painting now? After its brief stay in Bethesda, the painting was picked up by the mysterious third party and taken, Hirsch told *Science*, "to a bank vault in Washington, D.C."

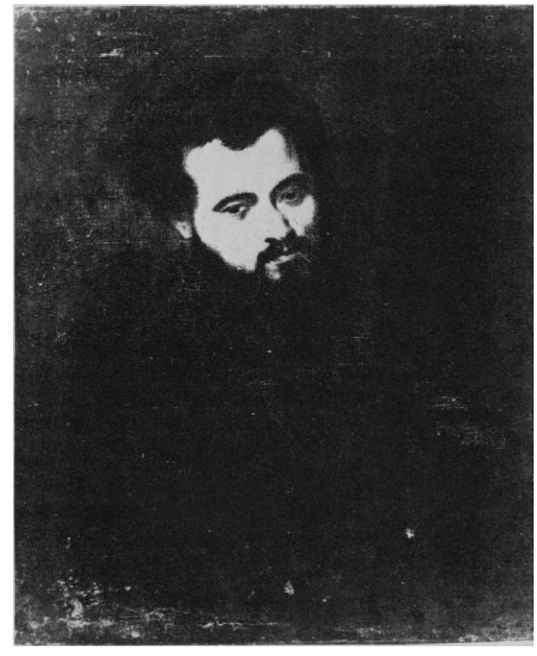
The story gets stranger still. Why did Hirsch approach Cummings in the first place? Cummings understood that the NLM was the first and only institution to be offered the painting, and that it was chosen because it would be the appropriate place for the painting to get public exposure. But *Science*, in a call to New Zealand, found out that Hirsch in fact had already offered it to at least one other institution, the Vesalius Institute in Basel, Switzerland (where Vesalius had the first edition of the *Fabrica* printed). He apparently asked for $1 million, got a curt reply, went down to $100,000 and was again rebuffed. "I've written around to a whole lot of institutions and academies," Hirsch told *Science*, "and they've all said they would dearly love to have it but they don't have the funds."

Who is Richard Teller Hirsch? *Who's Who in American Art* says he was born 12 September 1914 in Denver, Colorado. Most of his study and training were in France, at the Louvre and other institutes. Before working at the Allentown Art Museum he worked in Florida, first as the art critic of the Palm Beach *Times* and then as the director of the Pensacola Art Center. A call to the present director of the Allentown Art Museum, who it turns out knows Hirsch and his work, elicited only words of praise. "Very professional, high standards of excellence." When he first went to New Zealand in 1972, Hirsch became the director of the Auckland City Art Museum. But Hirsch, 64, now claims no connection to the professional art world. He is, in his own words, "self employed."

To Cummings, the whole debate over the attribution to Tintoretto, the coy maneuvering by Hirsch, and even the real ownership of the painting are, in some respects, irrelevent issues. The portrait, whether done from life or copied, whether painted by Tintoretto or by some other artist in Titian's circle, is still a remarkable historical document. It is probably Vesalius one way or another. Lucy Keister, of the history of medicine division at the NLM, who wrote a paper reviewing the evidence, summed it up: "Whether or not the portrait is by Tintoretto is not to me as important as that it is a superb portrait by a first rate artist, perhaps originally a study for a larger composition, and that the subject does look a lot like our friend Vesalius, dreaming about his book."

For more than a month after he decided that NLM couldn't afford the painting, Cummings quietly looked around for private donors, asking if they might foot the bill for the portrait and its reconditioning. He couldn't find any takers. Now all he has are a couple of postcard-sized pictures. "It is still a magnificant portrait of a handsome, brooding figure," he said the other day, his hand clutching a small color photograph of the painting. "Whoever damaged the thing ought to be shot."

—WILLIAM J. BROAD



The painting, its surface marred by solvents, is said to have been painted from life by Tintoretto, a Renaissance master.

Taken from Fabrica, *this woodcut of Vesalius at the age of 28 is the only known authentic portrait. The artist is unknown.*