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Painting in Antwerp
and London:
Rubens and Van Dyck

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The Rubens Studio and the *Drunken Silenus supported by Satyrs*

LARRY KEITH

SINCE its acquisition in 1871, the National Gallery's *Drunken Silenus supported by Satyrs* (NG 853; Plate 1) has prompted considerable discussion of both its authorship and its relationship to the production of the Rubens studio. A number of theories have been advanced in support of a wide range of attributions, including the suggestions that it is an essentially autograph Rubens, a collaboration of Van Dyck, Snijders and others following a design by Rubens, or a largely anonymous studio collaboration.¹ The recent restoration of the picture in the Conservation Department has allowed the opportunity to consider the questions surrounding its authorship and execution afresh in the context of a collaborative technical investigation with the Scientific Department.²

The organisation and functioning of the Rubens studio have always been key issues in the consideration of his output, and have remained so from the artist's own time throughout the subsequent history of Rubens scholarship.³ Enough contemporary documentation exists, including documentation on individual paintings (much of which has come from Rubens's own correspondence) as well as more general descriptive evidence, to construct a reasonably broad outline of his studio's workings. There has, however, always been a certain tension between Rubens scholars who favour an extraordinarily prolific genius, and those who have seen a highly systematic and streamlined factory-like production of paintings. An exact definition will probably always be somewhat elusive, not least because of the fundamentally different idea of authorship, more focused on the invention or conception of an image and therefore less precise about its actual execution, found in much seventeenth-century painting.⁴

Nonetheless it seems clear that Rubens set about creating a large studio with many assistants, no doubt in some degree influenced by examples he had seen in his Italian travels, as he established his practice in Antwerp in 1609. Although his position as a painter

at the court of the Spanish Netherlands exempted him from the normal practice of registering his assistants with the Guild of Saint Luke, some idea of the scale of his operation is indicated by the fact that by 1611 he wrote of the necessity of refusing more than one hundred applications from hopeful students.⁵

The assistants in the studio ranged from relatively unformed students to semi-independent collaborators employed as specialist painters of specific compositional elements such as animals, landscape, or still-life elements, while at least one artist, Anthony van Dyck, eventually enjoyed even more independent authority for the supervision of specific projects.⁶ In general, however, Rubens's assistants were more commonly engaged in providing copies and replicas of finished paintings, or in the enlargement or preliminary laying-in of compositions previously executed by Rubens in drawings or more worked-up oil sketches – preparatory work which was corrected or finished in varying degrees by Rubens himself in the final full-scale painting. This sort of division of labour was practised quite openly by the studio, and afforded Rubens a great amount of flexibility; the extent of his participation on any one project often depended on the importance or cost of the commission. In his famous letter of 28 April 1618 to Sir Dudley Carleton, the English connoisseur and ambassador to The Hague, Rubens outlined the different degrees of his participation on a given painting, and by extension the commensurate range of price. He also gave Carleton more specific examples of collaborative effort, describing in the same letter his *Prometheus Bound* of 1618 (Fig. 2), now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, as a wholly autograph work with the exception of the eagle, which was painted by Frans Snijders, and a scene of leopards, nymphs and satyrs as being entirely by his hand 'except a most beautiful landscape, done by a master skilful in that department'. But of *Achilles discovered among the Daughters of Lycomedes* (Fig. 3), he says that it was painted by his assistant and retouched by



Plate 1 Peter Paul Rubens, *Drunken Silenus supported by Satyrs* (NG 853), c.1620. Canvas, 133.5 × 197 cm.



Fig. 1 *Drunken Silenus supported by Satyrs* (NG 853). Composite X-radiograph.



Fig. 2 Peter Paul Rubens, *Prometheus Bound*, 1618. Canvas, 242.6 × 209.5 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art (w 1950-3-3).



Fig. 3 Peter Paul Rubens, *Achilles discovered among the Daughters of Lycomedes*, c.1616-18. Canvas, 246 × 261 cm. Madrid, Prado Museum (no. 127).

himself.⁷ Dr Otto Sperling, visiting the studio around 1620, gave a more general description of what presumably was also a common practice, the execution of a commission with a significantly smaller degree of participation by Rubens in the painting process:

We saw a vast room without windows, but lighted by a large opening in the ceiling. There were gathered a good number of young painters who worked on different pieces of which Rubens had given them a chalk drawing touched here and there with colours. The young men had to completely execute these paintings, which were then finished off with line and colour by Rubens himself.⁸

This description accords well with the tradition behind the accounts given by Bellori, de Piles and Sandrart, all of which were written in the late seventeenth century and all of which describe a systematic use of assistants for copying and underpainting in the Rubens studio.⁹

The various attributions given to the National Gallery *Drunken Silenus* effectively cover the range of possibilities for Rubens's own participation in the painting as described by himself and his contemporaries; scholars have quite sensibly followed the documented categories as guides for the evaluation of relatively undocumented works like the National Gallery picture. This evaluation was formerly based almost entirely on traditional art-historical concepts of stylistic affinities as determined by the connoisseurship of the viewer, but in recent decades more technical information has played a larger part in the formation of an attribution.¹⁰ The recent examination of the *Silenus*, which has made use of analytical techniques not available for earlier studies, has provided additional relevant, if not conclusive, information, and itself raises interesting questions concerning the still-evolving relationship between more objective data and aesthetic judgement.

The picture was painted over a double ground, comprising a grey oil-paint layer of lead white and lampblack over a lower layer of chalk in oil (Plate 2).¹¹ The grey tone provided by the ground was used extensively in the final painting, either completely covered or thinly veiled; it provides the basic colour for Silenus' beard and sideburns, and is only slightly worked over in the fur trim of the cloak over Silenus' legs (Plates 3 and 5). Perhaps less deliberately, it is also visible between numerous painted contours, for example between the young bacchante's right armpit

and the head of the adjacent satyr. This type of feature could conceivably support the argument that the picture remains unfinished, but it would also be wholly in keeping with the piecemeal and sometimes collaborative execution common in Rubens's studio.

Examination of the X-radiograph of the picture certainly strengthens the impression of a highly organised and systematised painting method (Fig. 1). For so elaborate a multi-figure composition, there are no major pentimenti of any consequence; a readjustment of the contour of Silenus' left shoulder and some minor alterations in the hanging foliage around his head are the only notable changes. Apart from a drawing now in Chantilly, of a *Drunken Silenus* (or *Hercules*) (Fig. 4), which anticipates the general pose of the principal figure, there are no other known preparatory works for the National Gallery picture. The nature of its execution, however, with its fluently interlocking figures, open contours, and extensive final use of the ground colour, points clearly to the existence of a fully evolved compositional study by Rubens which was used as the pattern for the execution of the full-size painting, whoever the painter or painters might have been. No preliminary drawing is visible with the naked eye, and while many different materials might have been used to sketch in the composition, including charcoal, chalk, or brushed drawing in a variety of pigments and media, whatever may remain is no longer detectable with X-radiographic or infra-red techniques.¹²

Before evaluating the painting technique of the upper layers it is first necessary to describe a few potentially confusing changes in the condition of some of the materials. For example, while a purplish-coloured red lake pigment used extensively in Silenus' flesh, and readily visible along the arm and elbow of the satyr behind him, remains strongly coloured, another red lake has faded almost entirely from several areas of the picture (Plate 4).¹³ Seemingly more brownish-red in tone, this colour was used extensively in the eye sockets of both satyrs and the old bacchante, as well as in other more shadowed areas of their faces and flesh, and its disappearance has left a chalky, blanched colour that disrupts and in some cases inverts the intended tonal modelling. This effect is particularly marked where the pigment has been used alongside other originally similar colours, whether organic or inorganic pigments, which have remained largely unchanged. Also, the rather amorphous and unmodelled appearance of the old bacchante's dress is probably largely due to the instability of its major component pigment, indigo,

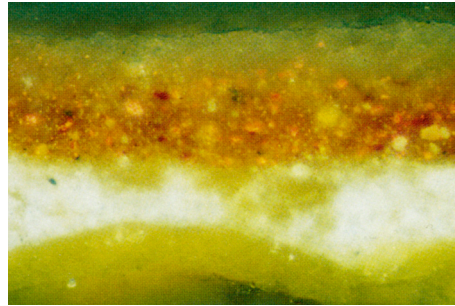


Plate 2 *Drunken Silenus*. Cross-section detail from the line of shadow above the young satyr's wrist consisting of red lake pigment mixed with vermilion and a little red earth and black. There is severe fading in the lake pigment, most evident in the upper part of the paint layer. The double ground comprising a lower layer of chalk in oil and an upper layer of lead white with a little lampblack is visible beneath the paint layer. Original magnification 320x; actual magnification 195x.



Plate 3 *Drunken Silenus*. Detail showing the use of exposed ground to provide the basic tone for the fur trim of Silenus' cloak.



Plate 4 *Drunken Silenus*. Detail showing faded red lakes, visible as chalky grey streaks along the contours of the arm of Silenus' supporting satyr.



Plate 5 *Drunken Silenus*. Detail showing the use of the exposed grey ground to give the basic colour in the sideburns and beard; the jagged right contour of the upper ear, which appears to have been covered over with grey paint of the sideburn, is actually placed alongside ground layer left in reserve to provide the basic colour of the hair.

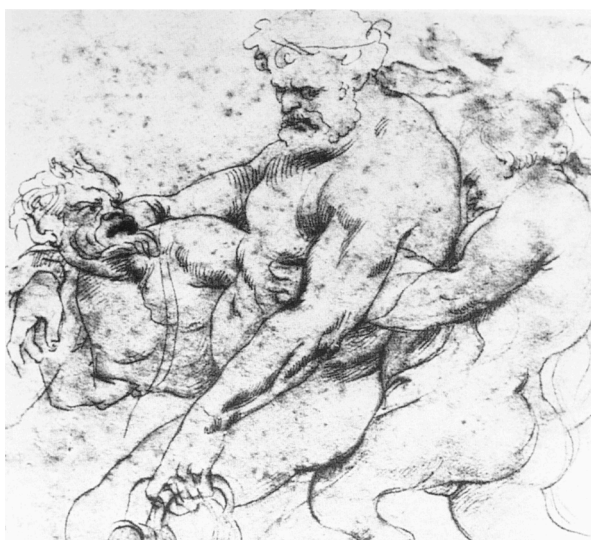


Fig. 4 Peter Paul Rubens, *Drunken Silenus (or Hercules)*. Chalk reinforced with ink on paper. Detail from a sheet of drawings. 27 x 30 cm. Chantilly, Musée Condé.

which has faded markedly where it was used thinly, and where it was built up more thickly seems to have suffered a darkening of the medium, and subsequent browning of the paint layer.

Apart from these changes the picture remains in good condition for its age, and contains many passages of high and unaltered quality. And, while certainly not on the same level as a largely autograph Rubens, such as the roughly contemporary *Prometheus*, the *Drunken Silenus* demonstrates a striking virtuosity in the overall manipulation of paint to achieve maximum effect from minimum effort, revealing a considerable degree of experience and technical skill. But the confident juxtaposition of Silenus' highly worked-up ear and cheeks with the barely altered grey ground of one side of his

moustache and beard is difficult to reconcile with the clumsy execution of the more poorly painted areas, such as the grapes at the upper right or the billowing parts of the young bacchante's sleeve,¹⁴ a discrepancy clearly resulting from a collaboration between painters of different skills (Plate 5).

Other aspects of the execution also suggest a collaborative endeavour. The stem of the bunch of grapes held by Silenus is painted around the finished hand, and on close inspection can be seen to run slightly over its upper contour even as it is intended to be perceived as behind it, and therefore within his grasp (Plate 6). While conceivably a slight slip of the brush by the painter, it is more easily explained as the result of a still-life specialist adding a key iconographic element after the resolution of the figure; it is also interesting to note that the central grapes are of significantly higher quality than the crude, space-filling bunches at the upper right, which must have been the work of an inferior assistant. Also, while most of the dimpled rolls of fat in Silenus' flesh are carefully modelled, as can be seen around the elbow, similar features in the wrist are very summarily indicated with quite different unmodulated brown strokes in what it is tempting to explain as a correction or editing of the earlier execution by a different hand. More evidence of collaboration can be found in the fact that while most of the flesh painting of the principal figures is painted with a distinctive method of discernible parallel, hatched brushstrokes, only one part of the vegetation shows a similar technique – the fruit of the upper central pentimento mentioned earlier, which is also the only main vegetal element painted on top of the finished sky paint. This too makes sense as the late decision of the principal painter, perhaps unhappy with the effect of the negative space above Silenus or wishing to disguise an awkward transition between the night and dawn sky, himself altering the vegetation after the specialist still-life painter had finished the initial assignment.

While the picture itself suggests the participation of one principal artist working with the assistance or collaboration of at least two other painters, comparison with other works by Rubens and his associates is also necessary in the search for attribution. The chief inspiration for the National Gallery picture, albeit iconographic and not formal, is the version of the subject now in the Alte Pinakothek, Munich, of 1617/18–26, which is universally described as an autograph Rubens (Fig. 5). One writer has proposed that the Ovidian subject



Plate 6 (top left) *Drunken Silenus*. Detail of Silenus' left hand showing the stem of grapes painted over it.

Fig. 5 (top right) Peter Paul Rubens, *The Drunken Silenus*, 1617/18–26. Panel, 205 × 211 cm. Munich, Alte Pinakothek (no. 319).

Fig. 6 (above) Anthony van Dyck, *Samson and Delilah*, 1618–20. Canvas, 149 × 229.5 cm. Dulwich Picture Gallery (no. 127).

Fig. 7 (left) Anthony van Dyck, *Drunken Silenus with Faun and Bacchante*, 1618–20. Canvas, 133.5 × 109.5 cm. Brussels, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique (no. 217).



Fig. 8 Anthony van Dyck, *Drunken Silenus*, 1620–1. Canvas, 107 × 91.5 cm. Dresden, Gemäldegalerie (no.1017).

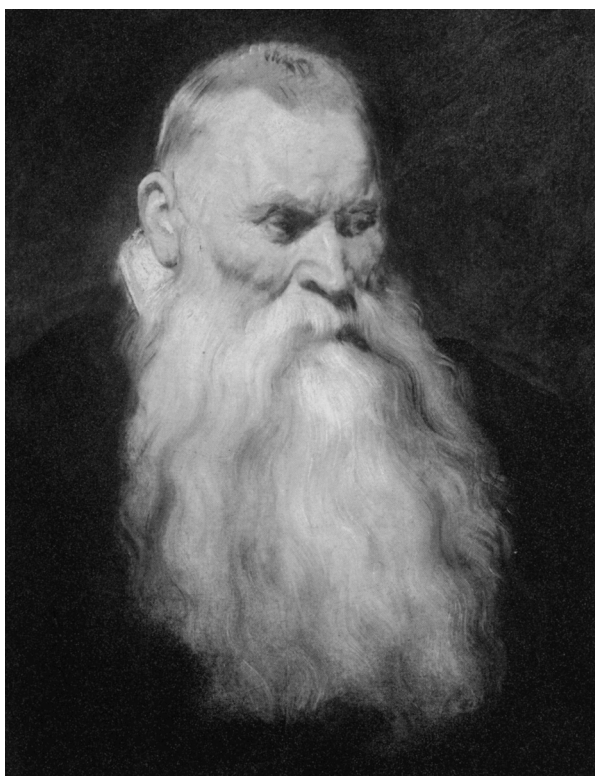


Fig. 9 Anthony van Dyck, *Study Head of an Old Man with a White Beard*, 1617–20. Panel, 66 × 51.5 cm. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art (no. 22.221).

matter had a deep and highly personal significance for Rubens,¹⁵ although all that can be conclusively demonstrated is that he gave great attention to the panel, expanding the original half-length format in a series of stages to arrive at the final composition in a manner similar to that of his ‘*Watering Place*’ (NG 4815) or *Sunset Landscape with a Shepherd and his Flock* (NG 2924) or the Prado *Three Graces*.¹⁶ Like *Het Steen*, the Munich *Drunken Silenus* was in the artist’s possession at his death.¹⁷ Significantly for an understanding of the London picture, the Munich painting and its preparatory material were of major importance for the artist whom Rubens himself described as his best follower (*il miglior mio discepolo*), Anthony van Dyck.¹⁸

The exact date of Van Dyck’s entry into the Rubens studio is uncertain,¹⁹ but the two first met in 1613 when Van Dyck was fourteen years old. By 1618, having worked for some time in the studio, Van Dyck was established as an independent master, although he maintained close collaboration with Rubens until his departure for Italy in October 1621.²⁰ He was entrusted with an unusually high degree of responsibility, as is shown in a contract of 1620 in which he was given the main supervisory role for the execution of a series of thirty-nine paintings based on Rubens’s designs for the ceiling of the Jesuit Church in Antwerp.²¹

Apart from his documented participation in various forms of collaborative effort within Rubens’s studio, Van Dyck was also given the principal role in a number of commissions that were later extensively retouched by Rubens, such as the Prado *Achilles discovered among the Daughters of Lycomedes* (see p. 96 and Fig. 3).²² He also habitually made his own more freely developed representations of subject paintings produced by Rubens, including *Moses and the Brazen Serpent*, *Susannah and the Elders*, *Saint Sebastian bound for Martyrdom*, *Samson and Delilah* (Fig. 6), the *Drunken Silenus* and a series of *Apostles*.

Van Dyck is generally agreed to be the painter of at least three versions of the Silenus subject: a now-destroyed *Drunken Silenus* formerly in the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, Berlin, the *Drunken Silenus with Faun and Bacchante* (Fig. 7) in the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, and the *Drunken Silenus* (Fig. 8) now in the Gemäldegalerie, Dresden. The Dresden version, recently dated to c.1620–1, is based on the first unexpanded version of Rubens’s Munich picture; the Brussels picture is dated slightly earlier.²³

It is reasonable also to include the National Gallery *Drunken Silenus* among the group of



Plate 7 Van Dyck, *Study Head of an Old Man with a White Beard*. Detail showing distinctive parallel hatched modelling of flesh and hair.



Plate 8 *Drunken Silenus*. Detail from the old bacchante, showing a similar hatched modelling and handling of lakes in the eye socket; unlike the New York picture, much of the reddish-brown lake pigment has faded.

paintings largely or entirely made by Van Dyck. The fact that it is loosely based on the backward leaning figure in the Chantilly drawing is entirely consistent with the principal artist drawing inspiration from the range of sources at hand in the studio. Furthermore, the type, flesh tones, and general tonality of the young bacchante of the London *Silenus* (Plate 8) are strikingly similar to the Delilah figure in Van Dyck's Dulwich *Samson and Delilah*. Other critics have seen Van Dyck's style as being particularly evident in the head of the pipe player and satyr at right.²⁴ The distinctive hatched working of flesh paint throughout the picture is also clearly evident in Van Dyck's *Study Head of an Old Man with a White Beard* in New York (Fig. 9; Plate 7),²⁵ which also bears a remarkable similarity in the handling of the modelling of the eyes and eye sockets (here unfaded).

The argument for the principal authorship of Van Dyck rests on a combination of different kinds of evidence, much of which is circumstantial. The very nature of the Rubens studio, with its streamlined production and group participation, meant that painting techniques and materials were also largely uniform, which inevitably limits the ability of technical study to inform specific attributional questions. Knowledge of technique is of great importance, however, in understanding how these works were painted, if not always by whom, and gives some insight into the working dynamic among the members of the studio. In the absence of firm documentation, individual attributions continue to rely heavily on traditional style-based Morellian connoisseurship. When used together, however, both technical information and aesthetic judgements can aid the understanding of works like the *Drunken Silenus*; and the present study is therefore underpinned by a wider range of information than

was available earlier. If in the end we are still unsure of the finer points of authorship of parts of the painting, we can reflect that present uncertainty undoubtedly echoes that of some of Rubens's patrons and contemporaries.

Notes and references

1. Gregory Martin, *National Gallery Catalogues: The Flemish School 1600–1900*, London 1970, pp. 217–25.
2. Past analyses, consisting of microscopy and X-ray diffraction were undertaken by Véronique Tissières and Ashok Roy, while medium analyses by GC–MS and FTIR techniques were carried out by Raymond White.
3. See Arnout Balis, “‘Fatto da un mio discepolo’: Rubens’ Studio Practices Reviewed”, *Rubens and his Workshop: The Flight of Lot and his Family from Sodom*, The National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo 1994, pp. 97–127, and *Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard, Part XVIII, II Hunting Scenes*, Oxford 1986, pp. 36–46, and Hans Vlieghe, ‘Rubens’ Atelier and History Painting in Flanders: A Review of the Evidence’, *The Age of Rubens*, ed. Peter Sutton, Boston 1994, pp. 159–70.
4. See Josua Bruyn, ‘The Rembrandt Workshop – function and production’, *Rembrandt: The Master and his Workshop*, pp. 68–89, for examples of loosely conceived authorship within the Rembrandt shop.
5. In a letter of 11 May 1611, to Jacob de Bie: ‘...ic over die hondert hebben moeten refuseren’ (‘I have had to refuse over one hundred’). See Max Rooses and Ch. Ruelens, *Correspondence de Rubens*, Vol. II, 1898, pp. 35–6, and Ruth Saunders Magurn, *The Letters of Peter Paul Rubens*, Cambridge, Mass., 1955, p. 55.
6. Balis, cited in note 3, p. 110.
7. For the *Prometheus Bound* (Philadelphia Museum of Art, inv. no W50-3-1, oil on canvas, 243 × 210 cm): ‘*Un Prometheo legato sopra il monte Caucauso con una aquila che li becce il fegato. Originale da mia mano e*

- l'aquila fatta da Snyders.*' See also Peter Sutton, *Northern European Paintings in the Philadelphia Museum of Art*, Philadelphia 1990, pp. 251–61. The described leopard hunt is now lost: *'Leopardi cavati del naturale con satiri e nimfe. Originale de mia mano, eccetto un bellissimo paese fatto per mano di un valentuomo in quel mestiere.'* The Prado *Achilles discovered among the Daughters of Lycomedes* (inv. no. 1661, oil on canvas, 246 × 267) is described as: *'Un quadro di un Achille vestito di donna fatto del miglior mio discepolo, i tutto ritocco de mia mano, quadro vaghissimo e pieno de molte fanciulle bellissime.'* See also Matías Díaz Padrón, *El Siglo de Rubens en el Museo del Prado: Catálogo Razonado de Pintura [Flamenca del Siglo XVIII]*, Madrid 1995, pp. 1086–9. Rubens's letter quoted from Rooses and Ruelens, cited in note 5, II, pp. 135–44, and Magurn, cited in note 5, pp. 59–61, 441 (note 3).
8. Rooses and Ruelens, cited in note 5, II, p. 156. Also quoted in Susan J. Barnes, 'The Young Van Dyck and Rubens', *Anthony Van Dyck*, ed. A.K. Wheelock, S.J. Barnes and J.S. Held, exh. cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington DC 1990, p. 18.
 9. Giovanni Pietro Bellori, *Le vite de' pittori, scultori et architetti moderne*, Rome 1672, p. 254; Joachim von Sandrart, *Der Teutschen Academie der edlen Bau-Bild- und Mahleren Künste*, Nürnberg 1675, p. 157; Roger de Piles, *Abregé de la vie des peintres, avec des réflexions sur leurs ouvrages (seconde edition)*, Paris 1699, pp. 396–7.
 10. This development can be seen in the history of scholarship of the *Drunken Silenus* itself in the way that technical information gleaned from the 1946 restoration, incorporated in the 1947 National Gallery catalogue of *An Exhibition of Cleaned Pictures (1936–1947)*, was used in the 1970 National Gallery school catalogue. See Martin, cited in note 1, pp. 217–18 and 221.
 11. The use of an oil medium, rather than glue, for chalk has not been extensively documented but may be more common than had been supposed. It has been found on the National Gallery's *Portrait of a Woman and Child* (NG 3011, 131.5 × 106 cm) by Anthony van Dyck.
 12. Any carbonaceous material used in preparatory drawing would be effectively swamped by the extensive carbon black in the grey layer of the preparation, while the density of the lead white from that same layer, as well as the subsequent working of many light and dense areas of the painting, would probably overwhelm the traces of any painted drawing in the X-radiograph.
 13. Identified by Jo Kirby using microspectrophotometry as an insect dyestuff, probably cochineal.
 14. The sleeve drapery may have been crudely reworked in a very early restoration. Although it has developed a similar craquelure to the rest of the painting, it is the only area sampled on the picture to have used non-heat-bodied linseed oil as the principal constituent of the paint medium (except for white flesh highlights, which were painted in the less yellowing walnut oil, which was however also heat-bodied). All other samples taken were found to have been painted in heat-bodied linseed oil, with the addition of a trace of pine resin in brown samples taken from shadowed areas of the old bacchante's head.
 15. See Svetlana Alpers, 'Creativity in the Flesh: The "Drunken Silenus"', *The Making of Rubens*, New Haven 1995, pp. 101–57.
 16. See Christopher Brown, *Making and Meaning: Rubens's Landscapes*, exh. cat., London 1996, pp. 52–5, 95–103 and 116–21, and George Bisacca and José de la Fuente, 'Consideraciones técnicas de la construcción y restauración del soporte de las Tres Gracias de Rubens', *Las "Tres Gracias" de Rubens: Estudio técnico y Restauración*, Madrid 1998, pp. 51–8.
 17. See *Alte Pinakothek München: Erläuterungen zu den ausstellten Gemälden*, Munich 1983, pp. 453–4.
 18. Rooses and Ruelens, cited in note 5, II, p. 137, and Magurn, cited in note 5, pp. 61, 441.
 19. See Margaret Roland, 'Van Dyck's Early Workshop, The "Apostle" Series, and the "Drunken Silenus"', *Art Bulletin*, LXVI, no. 2, 1984, pp. 211–23.
 20. See Roland, cited in note 19, p. 216, and Barnes, cited in note 8, p. 18.
 21. *'Ten tweeden dat den voors. Sr Rubens de tekeninge van alle de voors. 39 stucken sal gehouden syn met eygen handt in't cleyne te maken, ende door Van Dyck mitsgaders sommige adere syne disipelen soo in't groot te doen opwerken'* (the above named Senor Rubens shall make all the above named thirty-nine pieces in small format in his own hand, from which Van Dyck and other of his pupils shall work them up in the full scale), in J. Rupert Martin, *Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard I: The Ceiling Paintings for the Jesuit Church in Antwerp*, p. 214.
 22. Rubens does not actually use Van Dyck's name, but his description of the collaborative artist as 'the best of my pupils' (*il miglior mio discepolo*) is universally understood to describe the young Van Dyck. See Rooses and Ruelens, cited in note 5, II, p. 137, Magurn, cited in note 5, pp. 61, 441, Vlieghe, cited in note 3, p. 161, and Balis, cited in note 3, p. 110.
 23. See Barnes, 'Drunken Silenus' (catalogue entry of the picture now in the Gemäldegalerie, Dresden), in *Anthony Van Dyck*, cited in note 8, p. 106.
 24. Martin, cited in note 1, pp. 217–19, and personal communication from Christopher Brown.
 25. See Walter Liedtke, *Flemish Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 1984, pp. 64–7. The picture is given a date of 1617–20, which accords well with the National Gallery picture. I am grateful to George Bisacca, Associate Paintings Conservator at the Metropolitan Museum, for making photographic details of the painting.