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Where is the original Flower portrait?

**German Shakespeare scholar proves that the painting of William Shakespeare, the Flower portrait,
– examined in the laboratories of the *National Portrait Gallery*
and dismissed as a 19th century forgery – was not the original painting.
So where is the priceless 400 year old original Flower portrait?**

In spring 2005 the world media reported that the painting of William Shakespeare known as the Flower portrait was ‘a fake’. Experts, under the supervision of 16th century curator Dr Tarnya Cooper at the *National Portrait Gallery*, had subjected the portrait to tests which revealed that pigment segments from the painting contained chrome yellow; but this colour was only commercially available from 1814 onwards.

Between 1995 and 2005, the Shakespeare scholar Professor Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel (Universities of Marburg and Mainz) used academic research and extensive forensic tests to prove the authenticity of the Flower portrait [see fig. 1] and presented strong evidence that Shakespeare personally sat for the painter (see *The Case for the Authenticity of the Flower portrait* in *Editors Notes* below).

In the Autumn of 2002, Professor Hammerschmidt-Hummel was alerted to the possibility that the Flower portrait in the collection of the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford was not the same one she had originally subjected to forensic testing in 1995-1996. Her German publishers had requested a transparency of the portrait for reproduction from Stratford and had received a picture strikingly different from the one supplied in 1996 by the director of the collection, Brian Glover [see fig. 2].

She reported her suspicions to David Howells, the new RSC curator, and further forensic tests were carried out by Reinhardt Altmann, an expert at the German Federal Bureau of Criminal Investigation, which revealed striking differences between the two ‘versions’. Altmann concluded that the picture provided in 2002 must be a copy. Professor Wolfgang Speyer (University of Salzburg), an expert on Old Masters, confirmed the differences between the two pictures and expressed the opinion that the painting must have been thoroughly restored. In January 2004, David Howells stated that, according to his records, no form of restoration had taken place since the 1979 extensive restoration by Nancy Stocker. In July 2006, he added that minor conservation work had been done in 1994 to stabilise the top of the portrait as the two sections of wood forming the panel had begun to warp.

When the *National Portrait Gallery* announced its plan to submit the Flower portrait to technical and scientific tests prior to their 2006 exhibition *Searching for Shakespeare*, Professor Hammerschmidt-Hummel alerted them to her findings; that the Flower painting exhibited in Stratford at that time, which they proposed to examine, was not the original portrait that she had studied and verified in 1995-1996. Her advice was ignored and the results, as she had forewarned, revealed that the painting was a forgery.

So, where is the original portrait that Professor Hammerschmidt-Hummel personally saw in the presence of director Brian Glover and Prue Dunne from the Royal Shakespeare Theatre Company in July 1996?

In January 2007, Professor Hammerschmidt-Hummel visited the Royal Shakespeare Company depository to inspect the Flower portrait, which is no longer on public display [see fig. 3]. Her examinations of the portrait, which involved extensive photo documentation, revealed that the painting differed completely from the one she had seen in 1996, and from which she had received a high resolution transparency that year (still in her possession). The sound wood panel of the painting was in striking contrast to that of the original, which dates from the early 16th century, and is fragile and worm eaten, as documented by British experts around 1900 and in the 1920s. The edges of the portrait examined in January 2007 are partly sealed. Where the light brown wood

is visible, it is very solid, showing no signs of wormwood damage [see fig. 4]. The peripheral areas, which in the original painting are brittle and have been broken or chipped away in places [see fig. 1], exhibit no such damage in the portrait inspected in the RSC depository [see fig. 4 a]. The latter painting also differed greatly from the high resolution transparency of the 'copy' sent to her German publishers in 2002.

The discovery that there are now potentially two 'copies' of an original that has vanished was reinforced by analysis of the BBC documentary *The Flower Portrait* (2005), which presented Dr Cooper's results and used two versions of the portrait, neither of which corresponded to the original.

One copy, used for most of the documentary, is obviously the one Hammerschmidt-Hummel inspected in January 2007 - as the remnants of its beige-coloured strips of paper on its back show, which are in agreement with the painting in the RSC depository [see figs. 5 and 6]. A different copy was used for an x-ray to show the early 16th century Madonna painting underneath (first detected by an x-ray conducted by the London Courtauld Institute in 1966). The camera focuses upon the profile of the top edge of the x-rayed picture [see fig. 7] and reveals that the wood of this copy is even thicker, newer, sounder and more robust than the one she inspected in January 2007. From what can be seen in the film, the x-rayed image resembles the one provided to the author's German publisher in 2002.

The wood of the Flower portrait tested in the *National Portrait Gallery* laboratories for the exhibition was not scientifically dated.

Comparing a close-up of the 2005 x-ray from the documentary (right) with the 1966 x-ray of the original Flower portrait (left), Professor Hammerschmidt-Hummel found that the two differed considerably [see fig. 8]. The outlines in the 1966 x-ray are sharp and all the details of Shakespeare and the Madonna are clearly visible. The outlines in the 2005 x-ray are blurred and it is difficult to decipher the details. In the older x-ray the outline of the right-hand side of the Madonna's head runs through Shakespeare's left eye, close to the nasal side of the pupil; the new x-ray mistakenly has what appears to be the bridge of the Madonna's nose bisecting Shakespeare's left eye. The conclusion must be that the Madonna beneath the portrait is a (poor) imitation and it follows that the portrait is not genuine. Inexplicably, the close-up of the 2005 x-ray is followed immediately in the documentary by an enlarged detail showing the head of Shakespeare and the Madonna precisely in agreement with the 1966 x-ray of the original painting. In the catalogue that accompanied the 2006 *National Portrait Gallery* exhibition a faint and indistinct version of the 1966 x-ray was included.

The questions remain. **What has happened to the original Flower portrait? And where is the first copy?**

Notes to Editors

If you would like to talk to Professor Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel (www.hammerschmidt-hummel.de), please contact Bethan Jones or Beth Macdougall at MGA on 020 7836 4774 or email bethan@mag-pr.com or beth@mag-pr.com

Professor Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel is the author of *The Life and Times of William Shakespeare* which is published by Chaucer Press on 5th November.

Figures 1, 2, 3, 4, 4a and 6 have been provided by the Royal Shakespeare Company. For permission to use these images, and for right of reply, please contact Nada Zakula at the Royal Shakespeare Company on 01789 412622 or email nada.zakula@rsc.org.uk

Figures 5, 7 and 8 [BBC timecodes: 19:10:20:17 - 19:05:22:23 - 19:05:44:14] are stills from the BBC documentary 'The Flower Portrait' (*The Culture Show*, 21 April 2005), showing the paintings and x-rays used in the film. Fig. 8 presents a juxtaposition of the 1966 and the 2005 x-rays. For permission to use these images, please contact Stephanie Molloy at the BBC Stephanie.Molloy@bbc.co.uk.

History of the Flower portrait

The Flower portrait is a panel painting in oil measuring 59.7 x 43.8 cm, bearing the inscription 'Willm Shakespeare 1609'. It was named after Mrs Charles Flower, who bought it in 1895 from a Mrs Clements, the widow of H. C. Clements from Peckham Rye in London, in whose possession it had been since approximately 1840. Mrs Flower presented it to the Stratford Memorial Gallery in 1895, where it remained until approximately 1996. Its present whereabouts are not known.

While in Clements' possession, the portrait had been shown at the Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace in 1851, and from May to June 1873 at the Alexandra Palace in London. In a fire that completely destroyed the palace on 9 June 1873, the picture was badly damaged but was rescued. In 1892 the portrait was exhibited at the Stratford Gallery where it remained on loan until 1895.

After the Flower painting had been formally donated to the Stratford Memorial Gallery in 1895 by Mrs Flower, it was professionally cleaned, restored and examined by experts. A number of experts concluded that the painting pre-dated the Droeshout engraving and was in all probability the original model for this portrait engraving of Shakespeare in the First Folio (1623). Sir E. J. Poynter, director of the National Gallery, was convinced that the Flower portrait had been painted from life. Mr Lionel Cust, director of the National Portrait Gallery, and Mr S. Colvin, curator of the British Museum print-room, expressed their conviction that the portrait was a genuine early seventeenth-century picture. They believed the '1609' date to be authentic. By around 1900, it had already become quite usual for encyclopaedias to refer to the painting as 'the original used by Droeshout'.

In his book *The Title-Page of the First Folio of Shakespeare's Plays* (1924), the English art historian Marion H. Spielmann reported that the picture was painted 'on a worm-eaten panel' (p. 36). Spielmann was the first to conjecture that it was actually painted from the Droeshout engraving in the First Folio (1623), shortly after its publication. He published his opinion in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* of 1911 and it became the accepted doctrine throughout the twentieth century.

In 1966 an x-ray examination of the painting by The London Courtauld Institute revealed a valuable old painting of the Madonna and the Christchild, from the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century, underneath the Shakespeare portrait.

The painting was restored thoroughly in 1979 by Nancy Stocker of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford.

The Case for the Authenticity of the Flower portrait

In her book, *The True Face of William Shakespeare* (published by Chaucer Press in 2006) Professor Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel makes the case for the authenticity of the Flower portrait.

Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel is the first to combine her academic research with the latest scientific techniques and new forensic technology carried out by specialists from the German Federal Bureau of Criminal Investigation (BKA).

The BKA expert first employed an old, thoroughly tested criminology investigation technique ('Conventional Comparison of Images'), which revealed that the original Flower portrait, the Chandos portrait and the Droeshout engraving of 1623 (from the First Folio) – agreed to be the most reliable existing likenesses of Shakespeare (together with the Holy Trinity Bust in Stratford) – share 17 identical facial features. The conclusion is that the person depicted in all three images was indeed William Shakespeare. When employing the BKA identification method (Trick Image Differentiation Technique), usually combining two halves of different images, the specialist found that all the details along the lines of the joins were in striking agreement.

Professor Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel was also the first to consult medical experts – an ophthalmologist, a dermatologist, a pathologist and a specialist on the physiognomy of the sick, as well as physicists and 3D engineers. During these tests, medical specialists working on Hammerschmidt-Hummel's behalf diagnosed a pronounced pathological swelling on the upper eyelid. According to an ophthalmologist this was a symptom of Mikulicz Syndrome, an abnormality of the tear glands which can occur together with general disease conditions such as lymphomas and sarcoidosis. The ophthalmologist also diagnosed a small tumour in the nasal corner of Shakespeare's left eye. A swelling on the forehead was also discovered by Hammerschmidt-Hummel, which, according to a pathologist, could be a (benign) bone tumour or, as a dermatologist proposed, 'a chronic, annular skin sarkoidosis', an immune system disorder, which normally leads to death after many years. The Droeshout engraving only vaguely indicates a swelling on the forehead, showing that the engraver chose not to depict this sign of illness wholly and realistically. As to the small tumour in the nasal corner of Shakespeare's left eye, Droeshout, did not reproduce this abnormality at all. This suggests that the original Flower portrait, where the symptoms are clearly pronounced, cannot have been based on the Droeshout engraving. No painter would have invented signs of illness in Shakespeare's face, symptoms depicted so realistically that they can be diagnosed by today's medical experts. Hammerschmidt-Hummel's investigations prove that Shakespeare must have sat for the painting and thus that the inscribed date of '1609' is, in fact, authentic.