Discovering Signorelli

Dr Tom Henry, Lecturer in Italian Renaissance Painting at Oxford Brookes University, describes his work on a particular painting by Luca Signorelli, achieved during his term as British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at the Courtauld Institute, from 1997 to 2000.

The corpus of works by Luca Signorelli (c.1450–1523) is still being defined, and anyone studying the artist must establish what he painted. As with other artists of the Italian Renaissance, there is a core of signed, documented or universally accepted works by Signorelli, and wide margins of attributed works that have been favoured by some scholars and rejected by others. In the course of my British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship at the Courtauld Institute of Art, I have completed a catalogue raisonné of the paintings of Luca Signorelli, and have added my views to those of previous scholars. Although it was plainly incumbent on me to reach my own conclusions about the disputed attributions (on the basis that one cannot proceed to advanced study of Signorelli without knowing what he actually painted), it would be foolish not to recognise that my views will never represent the last word on the subject, and will, over time, become another voice in a babble of disagreement or consensus.

Although the same fate can befall any attribution, the discovery of new works by an artist has several virtues. Virgin territory is uncluttered by dispute and (in some circumstances) a newly discovered picture can install itself among the core pictures and enrich our knowledge of an artist’s overall production. This appears to be the case with a painting by Signorelli that I was able to trace during my Fellowship. The picture in question (Figure 1) has been in the Musée Jacquemart-André at the Abbaye Royale de Chaalis for over one hundred years. Despite the fact that it was acquired as a work by the artist and is exhibited as by Signorelli, it had never been referred to in any of the books or articles that have discussed the artist’s work, and it had never been reproduced. I ‘discovered’ a photograph of the picture in the Witt Library at the Courtauld (where it was labelled as ‘Signorelli?’), and was subsequently able to study it at Chaalis. Having seen the original, it seemed clear to me that the picture was an important early work, and I published it as such in The Burlington Magazine in August 1999.

The painting, which measures 83 × 53.5 cm, is in oil (or a mixture of oil and tempera) on a poplar support. The painted surface is generally well-preserved, although there are several scattered damages and discoloured retouchings. The picture represents the Virgin and Child with a youthful Saint John the Baptist and an elderly male saint. Although Christ and the Baptist were commonly held to have been born within months of each other, it is not especially unusual for Saint John to be shown as a youth and Jesus as a baby. At Chaalis the Baptist is the only figure who is standing (the other two adults are shown on one knee) and his adolescence is suggested by his height as well as his facial features. The identity of the elder saint in the Chaalis picture is uncertain. He is clean-shaven and...
wears a red cloak with an orange border over a green shirt. He is writing with a quill pen on a paper balanced on his left knee. In some circumstances the act of writing might identify the figure as Saint Zacharias (the Baptist's father), but this seems unlikely here. He is also unlikely to be Saint Joseph (whom Signorelli normally represents in orange, or with a very decorative scarf), Saint Paul (who is almost always bearded and traditionally wears red and green) or Saint John the Evangelist (who is usually younger). In the absence of any other attribute he must remain unidentified.

The attribution of the painting to Signorelli can be supported on the basis of various comparisons. The child can be compared to the Circumcision in the National Gallery, London, and there are close similarities with Virgin and Child with Saints John the Baptist and Jerome (?) in the Pallavicini-Rospigliosi collection in Rome. The slightly unsatisfactory aspects of the painting (its unconvincing spatial recession, as well as the vertiginous disequilibrium of the heads and the uncomfortable crowding of the figures) all point to a date early in Signorelli's career. Since it seems overwhelmingly likely that Signorelli spent some time in Florence in the 1480s, it may not be a coincidence that the format of the picture is both typically Florentine, and unusual in Signorelli. This picture at Chaalis, newly incorporated into Signorelli's corpus, should probably be dated c.1485–7 and represents another building block in our understanding of the artist's work.

Dr Henry currently holds an Academy research grant for the completion of his Catalogue Raisonné of the works of Luca Signorelli.

**Witness Accuracy**

"I put it to you that lawyers' questions can have an adverse influence on witness accuracy"

Dr Mark Kebbell, currently a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow in the School of Psychology at the University of Birmingham, describes his research on jurors' perceptions of eyewitness evidence.

Imagine you have witnessed a robbery. A police officer interviews you about what you saw and six months later you are called to give evidence in court. You are likely to be concerned about giving evidence in front of a Judge and Jury. You might be worried about what you can remember and what the barrister will do. You might ask yourself 'Will the barrister try to confuse me with his questions? Will I be able to answer his questions? Will I be a good witness?' To shed light on these issues the British Academy funded a Postdoctoral Research Fellowship looking at the influence of lawyers' questions on witnesses' answers. The research has two complementary strands. The first is to document the types of questions that lawyers ask with a particular emphasis on cross-examination. The second is to test the influence of these questions on witness accuracy and credibility.

To document the kinds of questions lawyers ask we looked at sixteen serious cases (e.g., rape, robbery, assault) in which witness evidence was crucial. Each lawyer's question and witness's answer was coded. The results showed that witnesses were constrained into giving short answers. Eighty-three percent of questions in cross-examination required simply a 'yes' or 'no' answer meaning that witnesses had little opportunity to provide their own account. Furthermore, many of the questions were potentially confusing to witnesses. Frequently, witnesses were asked questions involving negatives (e.g., 'When he was kissing you, you were kissing him back, were you not?'), leading questions (e.g., 'All right, because you are not in fact very good with times and dates are you?'), multiple questions (e.g., 'Did you feel upset when you arrived at the discotheque? Well let me put this to you. You appeared your normal happy self when you got there and in no way distressed because nothing had happened.'), questions involving complex syntax (e.g., 'This is certainly right, is it not, it was not that you proposed getting the police involved, or was it?'), and complex vocabulary (e.g., 'Was John being gregarious?'). All of these questions could plausibly reduce witness accuracy because witnesses are unable to understand the question. Perhaps it is possible they could have been able to answer accurately if the question was simply phrased.

However, studying lawyers' questions in real cases is limited by the fact that we cannot be absolutely