

University of Mainz

Press Release

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Where is the original of the Flower portrait?

Latest Discoveries about the Flower Portrait of William Shakespeare. Mainz Shakespeare scholar refutes claim by curator of the London Portrait Gallery

The painting of William Shakespeare known as the Flower portrait, discovered in 1840, has been owned since 1895 by the Theatre Gallery at Stratford-upon-Avon. It underwent a thorough restoration in 1979. Between 1995 and 2005, the Shakespeare scholar Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel together with other experts succeeded in proving the authenticity of the portrait.¹ Meanwhile, by contrast, Tarnya Cooper, a curator at the National Portrait Gallery in London, has sought to show that the painting is a nineteenth-century forgery.² However, it emerges from a critical evaluation of the BBC film "The Flower Portrait" (2005),³ which documented Cooper's investigations, that - for whatever reason - the picture examined and presented in the film was not the original. Particularly striking and conclusive was the marked difference between the x-ray image, - produced in the NPG laboratories under Cooper's direction in 2005 and intended to reveal the early 16th-century Madonna painting

¹ Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel, *The True Face of William Shakespeare. The Poet's Death Mask and Likenesses from Three Periods of His Life* (London: Chaucer Press, 2006).

² Tarnya Cooper, *Searching for Shakespeare* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2006).

³ John Hay, "The Flower Portrait", *BBC - The Culture Show* (21 April 2005).

beneath the Shakespeare portrait - and the x-ray of the original Flower portrait taken in 1966 and published in that year in a very high-quality reproduction.,. The retired BKA (Federal Bureau of Criminal Investigation) expert Reinhardt Altmann has examined and confirmed Hammerschmidt-Hummel's latest findings.

As long as two years before the exhibition "Searching for Shakespeare" (2006), curated by Cooper, the Mainz Shakespeare scholar had advised those concerned that the supposedly original picture displayed in the Stratford collection from about 1999 onwards was in fact a copy. Her conviction was supported by the forensic report provided by the retired BKA expert, Reinhardt Altmann, on 21 December 2003. She published her conclusions in an appendix to her 2006 book, *The True Face of William Shakespeare*, where she juxtaposed the original and the copy, as well as details from the two pictures.

In preparation for the exhibition, Tarnya Cooper submitted various pictures for examination in 2005, including the Flower portrait. She was not receptive to Hammerschmidt-Hummel's advice that the picture on show in Stratford was a copy. Cooper's conclusion was that, as the paint used in the Flower portrait included chrome yellow, a pigment only available from about 1814, the portrait must therefore be a 19th-century fake. The forger had re-used an old panel bearing a Madonna image dating from the early 16th century. Having publicly cast doubt on this finding in 2006, Hammerschmidt-Hummel subjected the picture – which had meanwhile returned from the USA – to further detailed investigation early in 2007.

On inspecting and photographing the Flower portrait in the Royal Shakespeare Company depository

in Stratford-upon-Avon on 26 January 2007, Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel discovered not only that this picture diverged considerably from the original Flower portrait, but also that it differed from the copy on view in Stratford from about 1999 onwards, a reproduction of which she had published in 2006. Furthermore, the inspection revealed that the sound wood of the panel in Stratford was in striking contrast to that of the original picture, which is over 400 years old, fragile and worm-eaten. It had already been described in these terms by British experts at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, among them the directors of the National Portrait Gallery and the Royal Academy, as well British Museum specialists and a leading art historian.

The German Shakespeare scholar also evaluated stills from the BBC documentary film "The Flower Portrait" presenting Cooper's results. She discovered to her surprise that the film featured not just one, but *two* different versions of the Flower portrait, neither of which actually corresponded to the original. While one of the copies was very probably the one inspected in January 2007 in Stratford – as attested by comparing the edges of the picture – it is not possible to say for certain whether the other copy seen in the film was the same as that on view in Stratford from about 1999.

As a still from the film clearly shows, this second copy was x-rayed to reveal the early Madonna painting underlying the Shakespeare portrait. In the process, the camera was focussed upon the profile of the top edge of the picture. The shot plainly reveals that the wood is even thicker, newer, sounder and more robust than that of the copy viewed in Stratford. This cannot possibly be the more than 400-years-old original. Tarnya Cooper never had the wood scientifically dated.

An overall view of the x-ray taken in the NPG laboratories in 2005 under Cooper's direction was

inserted into the film, with a commentary by Cooper. Hammerschmidt-Hummel compared this x-ray with the one made of the original Flower portrait in 1966 at the London Courtauld Institute, and found that the two images differed very considerably. Whereas in the older x-ray the outline of the right-hand side of the Madonna's head clearly runs through Shakespeare's left eye, close to the nasal side of the pupil, the new image wrongly has the ridge of the Madonna's nose bisecting Shakespeare's left eye.

The conclusion must be that the Madonna beneath the portrait is a (poor) imitation. It follows that the portrait of Shakespeare that was investigated in the NPG was not genuine either. Surprisingly and inexplicably, moreover, the view of the x-ray as a whole is followed immediately in the BBC film by an enlarged detail showing the heads of Shakespeare and the Madonna, precisely in agreement with the 1966 x-ray of the original painting.

The catalogue *Searching for Shakespeare* (2006), produced and edited by Cooper, contains for the most part extremely high-quality illustrations. Yet her reproduction of the Flower portrait x-ray is faint and indistinct. None the less, it is apparent that it derives from the 1966 x-ray of the original picture. Her reproduction of the Flower portrait in the catalogue is most probably taken from the version in the Stratford Theatre Gallery depository examined by Hammerschmidt-Hummel in January 2007.

The Shakespeare expert's most recent findings, presented in two separate accounts, were scrutinised by the former BKA specialist Reinhardt Altmann. In his report of 20 June 2007, Altmann stresses the "forensic precision" applied to detecting "minutiae", and declares that he "fully and wholly" endorses Hammerschmidt-Hummel's conclusions. The Austrian expert on Old Masters, Professor

Wolfgang Speyer from the University of Salzburg, also confirmed her results.