

A painting of Tomyris by Georg Pencz in Zagreb

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33. *Tomyris with the head of King Cyrus*, by Georg Pencz. c.1541. Canvas, 89 by 83 cm. (Mimara Museum, Zagreb).

AS READERS OF the late Thomas Hoving's colourful memoir, *King of the Confessors* (1981), about his pursuit and eventual acquisition of the Bury St Edmund's Cross for the Cloisters in New York, will be only too well aware that its previous owner, Ante Topic Mimara (1898–1987), was a larger-than-life figure.¹ Even more than most collectors, he was pathologically inclined to believe his ugliest ducklings were the most gorgeous of swans. In consequence, and in spite of energetic attempts since his death to study his collection with appropriate rigour,² as a rule

a good dose of scepticism remains the correct response to the attributional optimism on display at the Mimara Museum in Zagreb, which opened in 1987 and contains no fewer than 3,754 artefacts from his collections.³ It therefore comes as something of a shock to realise that a painting of real quality (Fig.33) has been blushing unseen in such a place.

The 2003 general guide to the Mimara Museum listed the work in question, which is illustrated in colour, as 'Judith.North Italian School; mid-16th c.' and further noted that it is signed



34. *Tomyris with the head of King Cyrus*, by Georg Pencz. 1541. Canvas, 97 by 76 cm. (In 1966 in a private collection, New York).



35. Detail of Fig.33 showing the monogram 'GP'.



36. *Tomyris with the head of King Cyrus*, by Georg Pencz. c.1539. Engraving, 11.7 by 7.4 cm. (British Museum, London).

'GP'.⁴ More recently, in the 2007 revised edition of the same guide, this has been emended to 'Netherlandish School; c.1550'.⁵ Both the dating and the relocation are undoubtedly steps in the right direction, but as a matter of fact this is a monogrammed work by Georg Pencz.⁶ Indeed, it is in essence a variant of a painting formerly with the dealer Julius Weitzner (Fig.34), which is monogrammed and dated 1541.⁷ If anything, the Zagreb canvas seems to be the more powerful of the two, but must certainly date from precisely the same period, as is also confirmed by the very different style of slightly earlier and slightly later dated works by Pencz.⁸ The form of the 'GP' monogram, which is found on the sword blade in the Zagreb picture (Fig.35),⁹ is entirely consistent with Pencz's practice elsewhere.¹⁰

The subject of the Mimara picture, hitherto presumed to depict Judith, is actually the less commonly represented

Tomyris, Queen of Scythia, whose story is told by Herodotus, in the anonymous *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, and elsewhere.¹¹ This explains the presence of soldiers, as opposed to a maidservant, helping her stuff the head of her adversary, the Persian King Cyrus, into a wine-skin.¹² Interestingly, Figs.33 and 34 were not Pencz's only treatment of this comparatively recondite subject: he also executed an engraving of *Tomyris with the head of King Cyrus* (Fig.36) in a series of four prints depicting heroines of Antiquity (the others are Medea, Procris and Oenone), which once again shows her nude, but in this instance full-length and wearing a crown.¹³ The fact that two of the other engravings in the series are dated 1539 confirms the approximate date of the Mimara painting and suggests that the two paintings were preceded by the engraving of the same subject.

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¹ T. Hoving: *King of the Confessors*, London 1981.

² A series of occasional publications on individual works or groups of works in the collection, the *Studije Muzeja Mimara*, has now reached no.34, which was published in 2009.

³ B. Sewell: 'Museums of Zagreb', in J.J. Norwich *et al.*: *Croatia: Aspects of Art, Architecture and Cultural Heritage*, London 2009, pp.194–207, writes on p.195 that the Mimara Museum 'proved to be not the boasted Louvre of Zagreb, but an embarrassing assembly of pictures wrongly attributed and heavily and recently reworked'.

⁴ T. Luksic: *Musej Mimara: Guide*, Zagreb 2003, p.165, no.262 (entry by H. Zoricic).

⁵ *Idem*: *Musej Mimara: Guide*, Zagreb 2007, p.165, no.262 (entry by H. Zoricic and L. Mehulic).

⁶ H.G. Gmelin: 'Georg Pencz als Maler', *Münchner Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 27 (1966), pp.49–126, remains the best account of his painted *œuvre*.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.66 and 85–86, no.21, fig.36.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.84, no.17, fig.35, for a monogrammed and dated *Cimon and Pero* of 1538

in the National Museum, Warsaw, and pp.86–87, no.24, and p.89, fig.38, for a monogrammed and dated *Sleeping woman (Vanitas)* of 1544 in the Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena. For this latter work, see also D. Ekserdjian: *Alle Origini della Natura Morta*, Milan 2007, p.201 (illustrated in colour).

⁹ See P. Scarpellini: *Perugino*, Milan 1984, p.87, no.54, and p.182, fig.88, for a *St Sebastian* by Perugino in the State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, in which the artist's signature ('PETRVS PERVSINVS PINXIT') is inscribed along the single arrow that is embedded in the martyr's neck.

¹⁰ For a very considerable number of examples of this monogram, see D. Landau: *Catalogo completo dell'opera grafica di Georg Pencz*, Milan 1978. See also Gmelin, *op. cit.* (note 6), p.109, fig.62, for a drawing with the identical monogram.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.86, no.12, for the observation that in the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* Tomyris's heroic deed, like those of Judith and Jael, is seen as a prefiguration of the Virgin Mary's triumph over evil.

¹² The figure's nudity, although uncommon in representations of Judith, is not decisive, as is demonstrated by the celebrated alabaster statuette of *Judith* by Conrad Meit in the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich.

¹³ See Landau, *op. cit.* (note 10), pp.45–47, for discussion of the series, and p.113, no.3, for the catalogue entry for *Tomyris*. The engraving is inscribed 'TAMIRIS' in the top left-hand corner.