

CARAVAGGIO AND RUBENS

TOGETHER IN VIENNA

Two of the most famous names in the history of European art are undoubtedly Caravaggio and Rubens. Both of these artists worked in Rome at the beginning of the seventeenth century, and although their lives and careers later took very divergent paths, two of their works will be studied together in Vienna as part of the Getty Foundation's Panel Paintings Initiative.

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio's masterful *David with the Head of Goliath* and Peter Paul Rubens's expressive *Stormy Landscape* will both occupy the paintings conservation laboratory at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna (KHM). The Getty Foundation has recently awarded a grant to the KHM for the conservation of these two masterpieces, one of the last training grants of the Foundation's Panel Paintings Initiative, through which the next generation of conservators is being trained in the complexities of conserving works of art painted on wood panels.

"The conservation of these two spectacular paintings in Vienna provides a fascinating learning opportunity for all of the conservators involved in the project. When the last major training grants are completed, the Panel Paintings Initiative will have succeeded in reaching its goals, ensuring that the next generation of conservators is in place to provide quality care for panel paintings in major European and North American collections," said Deborah Marrow, director of the Getty Foundation.

Caravaggio's work, painted in the early 1600s, is a beautiful exploration of light and shadow. It is also rare—one of only two paintings by the artist on wood panel in existence. The painting is in critically fragile condition, the result of past, well-meaning conservation interventions that ultimately shaved the wood support to only a few millimeters in thickness, nearly as thin as a single sheet of paper.

The current conservation effort will require the gentle removal of the panel's rigid cradle—the latticed wooden structure which was attached to the back of the panel sometime after its creation. The cradle, intended to prevent warping, can create other challenges as the wood expands and contracts, including cracking the paint surface. After the cradle's removal, the panel must be allowed to rest and resume its natural shape. Only then can conservators determine the next steps, which will include the repair of multiple fractures that, if left untreated, threaten the beautiful painted image, and the construction of a new, more flexible support.

Rubens's *Stormy Landscape*, produced between 1620 and 1625, is among the greatest dramatic landscapes by the artist, a markedly powerful representation of the natural world that set the course for the future development of landscape painting. It is one of two large landscapes by the artist in this period that feature scenes from classical



David with the Head of Goliath, 1600–01, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. Oil on wood. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

literature—in this case, from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Small figures on the right side of the painting indicate it is the story of Philemon and Baucis being rescued from the storm by the gods Jupiter and Mercury, a colorful tale of gods disguised as mortals seeking hospitality in an unwelcoming land.

Rubens painted *Stormy Landscape* for his own personal collection. Unlike a painting he might have created for a commission, comprised of smooth, even panels, this personal painting was cobbled together from ten different pieces of wood, making it structurally complex. Because each plank has aged differently, the panel presents some unique conservation challenges, including separations between the pieces that are visible to the naked eye.

Until now there have been very few experts capable of undertaking this type of delicate conservation work—an intervention that requires the knowledge of both paintings and wood conservation, and the precision of a surgeon. The Getty Foundation grant to conserve these works is part of a larger grant initiative launched in 2009. Old Master paintings on wooden supports, or panels, are among the most significant works of art in American and European museum collections. With only a handful of experts fully qualified to conserve these paintings, and nearly all of them set to retire within the next decade, the initiative aims to ensure that the next generation of conservators are prepared to take their place. Since the launch, the Foundation has identified and supported a number of projects designed to achieve this goal, some of which



Above: *Stormy Landscape with Philemon and Baucis*, 1620–25, Peter Paul Rubens. Oil on wood. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

have been discussed in this magazine. The initiative has already achieved a concentrated but significant impact on the field, so far providing more than twenty conservators intensive training and hands-on experience in panel paintings conservation. In addition, hundreds of other conservators and students have benefited from the 2009 Getty symposium and publication of its proceedings, workshops that have been offered, university courses that have resulted, or translations of key works on panel painting that soon will be available to the field.

One of the key goals of the initiative is to increase knowledge among conservators in Central and Eastern Europe. The project in Vienna will support training for five conservators from Krakow, Dresden, Prague, and Vienna. Two of these individuals hold teaching positions at conservation schools in their respective countries, which will extend the reach of training activities as they incorporate their newly acquired knowledge into their courses.

"Our collaboration with the Getty Foundation has allowed us to expand the Kunsthistorisches Museum as a center of competence and training for panel conservation," said Sabine Haag, general director of the KHM. "I am extremely happy that we will continue this successful collaboration and that this long-term cooperation ensures the optimum examination and conservation of two icons of art history."

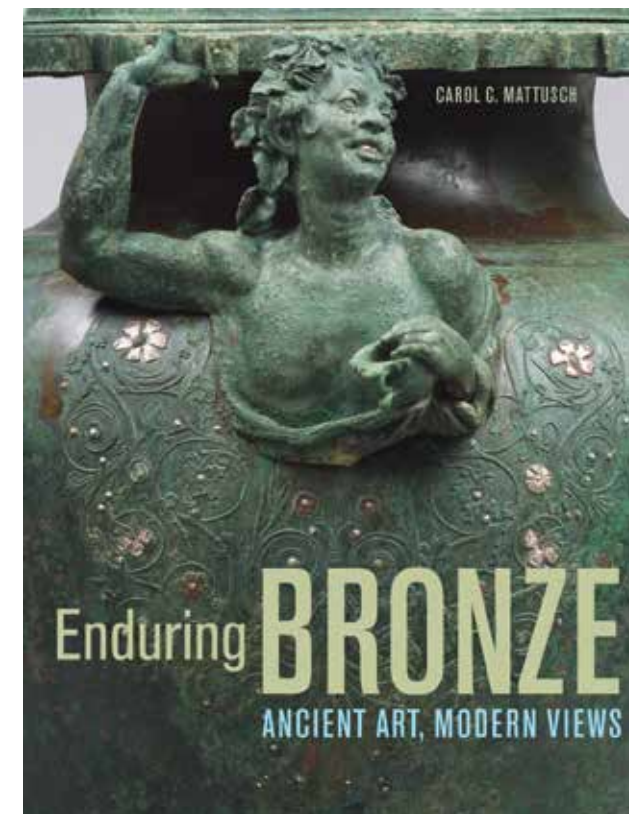
Although the grant to the KHM is one of the last major training grants of the initiative, other current projects remain active and will continue to yield interesting results over the next two to three years.

The conservation of Caravaggio's *David with the Head of Goliath* and Rubens's *Stormy Landscape* are expected to be completed over the course of two years, at which time the public can once again view these powerful masterpieces on display in Vienna.

BOOK EXCERPT

Enduring Bronze Ancient Art, Modern Views

Carol C. Mattusch



This lavishly illustrated book examines ancient bronzes from their halcyon days in antiquity to their undeniable allure today. The book is richly illustrated with works from the J. Paul Getty Museum.

In an article entitled "The Lingua Franca of Great Art," Tom Phillips reviewed enthusiastically an exhibition called simply *Bronze*—with no subtitle—which was on view at London's Royal Academy of Arts. What was it that attracted nearly 225,000 visitors to that exhibition during its four-month run? Perhaps the fact that a nude bronze statue can look startlingly lifelike, with muscles that reflect light and hold shadows, and with inset bone and stone eyes that fix the viewer with a strikingly realistic gaze. These qualities have always sparked the imagination, and perhaps because of them bronze statues from the classical world have been linked to curious events and powerful deeds. In fact, statuary has played an active role in mythology, politics, athletics, and public relations.

Fact and fiction mingle in the classical myth of Talos, a Cretan giant made of bronze, who died when a bronze nail plugging his only vein was removed, allowing his blood to run out like molten lead. And the

Riace Bronzes, two over-lifesize standing nudes fished from the sea in 1972, seemed so alive that they were at first called Saints Cosmas and Damian, and they were soon imbued with magical powers, as well as being seen as a silent link to the beauty and culture of classical antiquity. Three hundred thousand people saw them during their two-week display in Rome's Quirinal Palace; and after their return to Reggio Calabria, enthusiastic visitors stormed the gates of the town's archaeological museum. Since then they have been reproduced in gold, in silver, and in Murano glass. The full-sized copies of the two bronzes outside a shop in Naples attract schoolboys, who quickly touch the statues' bronze genitals as they run past, shouting with glee. The statues have made appearances as animated characters in a video promoting tourism to Reggio Calabria and as characters in comics and in graphic novels.

The study of classical bronze statuary was once primarily a philological and stylistic endeavor. Scholars turned to Book 34 of Pliny the Elder's (AD 23–79) *Natural History* for answers to their questions about the identity and authorship of famous Greek bronze statues, trying to match them with existing Roman marble sculptures in the classical style, which were then identified as copies of particular Greek bronzes. Greek freestanding statuary from the fifth century BC onward was primarily made of bronze and intended for public display. The Romans were collectors of Greek statuary, but also of Roman statuary produced in the Greek style. They amassed portraits of Greek statesmen, generals, athletes, and thinkers. Even though busts were a distinctly Roman genre, and although marble was the Roman medium of choice, some Romans collected bronze statues, as if they were Greeks.

In the modern world admiration for ancient bronzes has been driven by their rarity and by the thrill of fishing a statue from the sea or of uncovering a bronze head or torso after thousands of years of burial. Modern viewers may not realize that bronzes were ubiquitous during classical antiquity. Products of a major industry, bronzes were turned out quickly and in multiples. The alloy consists primarily of copper, mixed with tin or lead or both, along with scrap metal and numerous unintended trace elements, sometimes even gold. Each intentional additive affects the properties of the copper and simplifies production, making the alloy stronger and more malleable by reducing its melting point or changing its color. Bronze casting is somewhat like shaping glass in that both procedures begin with mixing a dangerously hot molten mass, and both end with the creation of a solid form that has been manipulated into a precise shape.

This excerpt is taken from the book *Enduring Bronze: Ancient Art, Modern Views*, published by the J. Paul Getty Museum. ©2014 by The J. Paul Getty Trust. All rights reserved.