

The Connoisseur

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It was said of Aubrey Wren that he could smell a forgery at twenty paces, and the observation, like most made about him, fell short of the truth. The authentication of a doubtful canvas was, in his hands, less an act of scholarship than a small public execution. Dealers dreaded him and courted him in equal measure. Students learnt his name before those of half the painters in the canon; his verdicts, delivered in a voice of unusual softness, had the finality of a guillotine. What he loved above all else was not beauty, he used to remark, but the exquisite moment when certainty arrived.

The invitation came on a Tuesday in October, on paper so thick it might have been cut from a tablecloth. Lord Pemberton Hale requested, or rather insisted, that Wren be present at Chalfont House on the first Saturday of November, to examine a painting of unusual importance. That it be sent by messenger rather than post was typical of the man, who regarded electricity as a passing fashion and the telephone as an affront to decorum. Wren, whose acumen was matched only by his appetite for mystery, accepted with alacrity. He had heard the rumours. A lost portrait by Halliday, the elusive master of the Fenwick school, was said to have surfaced after a century of darkness, and its discovery had set the art world murmuring.

Chalfont House stood at the end of an avenue of blackened elms, ostensibly a country seat, though it resembled nothing so much as a bank that had lost interest in money. Wren was received by the housekeeper, a woman of such formidable composure that he felt briefly ashamed of his excellent coat. Talented though he was at reading pictures, he had never learnt to read servants, and he set her down, with some deference, as an enigma.

Lord Pemberton awaited him in the long gallery, and proved to be a small, pink man with the aggrieved air of someone who has been told a joke and suspects it is about him. "You come recommended," he said, "by people I pay to recommend people." Wren bowed. "And you," said his lordship, "are to tell me whether I have bought a masterpiece or a very expensive piece of firewood." There was, Wren noted with approval, a dearth of small talk in the man, arguably his most attractive quality.

The painting hung at the far end of the gallery, alone, lit by a single lamp, and it was, Wren admitted later, beautiful beyond anything he had prepared himself for. A woman at a window, her face half turned, one hand resting on a table where a letter lay open. The allure of it was immediate and almost physical. He stood before it in silence, and something in his chest, some instrument he had believed retired, began quietly to play.

Then he set to work. His examination was meticulous, patient and without drama: the crackle of the varnish under the lens, the weave of the canvas, the chemistry of the pigments, the handwriting of

the brush. It was in the third hour that he found it, or rather that he ceased to be able to pretend he had not found it. Astute though the deception was, and meticulous though the hand had been, there was, beneath the signature in the lower corner, a ghost. Another signature. Painted out, buried, and, to any eye but his, invisible.

It was his own. He stood very still. The room, the lamp, the watching lord, all of it receded, and he was twenty two again, in a garret in Amsterdam, painting a portrait in the manner of Halliday because the rent was due and a dealer of flexible morals had offered him money he could not refuse. The desperation of that winter, the shame of the transaction, the relief when it was over: all of it returned with the force of a blow. He had signed it in a fit of youthful vanity, and then, in a fit of youthful terror, painted the signature out. He had spent thirty years building a reputation upon the ruins of exactly such deceptions, and now the cleverest of them all had come home.

"Well?" said Lord Pemberton. Wren turned, aware that his face must be arranged with care. "It is," he said, "an interesting picture." "Interesting," his lordship repeated, with open disdain. "Interesting I cannot sell. I did not pay interesting money for it." Wren smiled. "One might suggest," he said, "that interesting is the highest praise a painting can earn. Masterpieces, in my experience, tend to be a little dull." It could be argued, he reflected, that he had never spoken a truer word, albeit rarely to paying clients.

His lordship was not appeased. "All I want is a verdict, Wren, and I insist that it be given plainly, without your usual fog." Wren considered the picture, the buried signature, and the long architecture of his own reputation. Ambivalence was a luxury he had rarely permitted himself, and he did not permit it now. "Then plainly," he said. "The painting is genuine. It is a Halliday, and a fine one. I shall stake my name upon it." The relief in the room was almost audible. His own duplicity sat quietly within him, well behaved, like a dog that has decided to wait.

As he was leaving, the housekeeper, helping him into his coat with the solemnity of a nurse, said quietly, "We had the picture photographed through the canvas, sir, before your visit. There is something under the paint. A name." Wren looked at her. Her expression was impeccable. "Indeed," he said. "And what did you make of it?" "Nothing at all, sir," she said, and handed him his hat. "It is not my place to make anything of anything." Her candour was, he thought, the most elegant threat he had ever received.

He dined out on the story for years, alluding to it often, naming it never. When the portrait sold at auction for a sum that made the newspapers, several astute colleagues wrote to congratulate him on the attribution, and one, more caustic than the rest, asked whether he had ever, even for a moment, doubted it. "Doubted it?" Wren replied, with the composure of a man signing his own warrant. "My dear fellow, I was never more certain of anything in my life." It was, as it happened, the only honest answer he gave that year, and it amused him, wryly and often, that not a soul in England believed a word of it.