

**Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel. *And the Flower Portrait of William Shakespeare is Genuine After All. Latest Investigations Again Prove its Authenticity* [Und das Flower-Portrait von William Shakespeare ist doch echt. Jüngste Untersuchungen beweisen erneut seine Authentizität]. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2010, 115 pp., with c. 70 illus. on CD-ROM / mit ca. 70 Abb. auf CD-ROM.**

When a new book on Shakespeare by Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel is released, it not only elicits academic interest among scholars, but stokes the coals in the fire of controversy that has been raging among orthodox Shakespeare researchers and Anti-Stratfordians for decades, especially in the media. The main bone of contention in this controversy has been the issue of Shakespeare's identity. Did he exist? Did he write the plays? Who was he?

Among Hammerschmidt-Hummel's most significant achievements is the ascertainment that Britain's national poet was a Catholic; not only a believer in the old faith, but an active organizer in the illegal underground movement in England under Elizabeth I.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, she has established the authenticity of portraits of the poet. Pioneering an utterly novel approach, Hammerschmidt-Hummel has collaborated with experts from the German Federal Bureau of Investigation (Bundeskriminalamt – BKA), who have deployed the most modern instruments available for personal identification, to examine and compare several likenesses said to depict Shakespeare. Using these techniques, Hammerschmidt-Hummel proved that only four could be credibly established: the Chandos portrait, the Flower portrait, the Davenant bust, and the Darmstadt death mask.<sup>2</sup> Of the four, the Flower portrait (so named after the person who owned it for a time), was very special; for, as x-ray examinations undertaken in 1966 revealed, beneath the Shakespeare likeness was a painting of a late fifteenth- or early sixteenth-century Italian Madonna and child. The fact that such Madonna images were so-called 'Catholic items' (and therefore strictly forbidden and extremely dangerous at the time of Queen Elizabeth I) had prompted Hammerschmidt-Hummel to launch her research into the poet's religious background.

In 2006, when her book on the portraits appeared, Dr Tarnya Cooper, a curator at the National Portrait Gallery, organized an exhibition of Shakespeare likenesses, entitled "Searching for Shakespeare" at the NPG in London. In her show, which ran from March 2 to May 29, Dr Cooper reported that in 2005 she had detected pigments of chrome yellow on the Flower portrait, pigments which had not been commercially available prior to 1814. On this basis, Dr Cooper ruled that the Flower portrait was a nineteenth-century forgery.

BBC, the official British Broadcasting Corporation, had presented a preview of Cooper's findings in a series of documentaries in 2005. Hammerschmidt-Hummel examined a time-coded copy of the BBC film "The Flower Portrait," broadcast on April 21, 2005, which she had received from BBC producer John Hay. She noticed that two different versions of the Flower portrait appeared interchangeably, each presented as the work that had surfaced around 1840 and been donated to the Stratford gallery in 1895. Examining the condition of the panel, surface, back, edges and corners, and other minute details of Painting C (the portrait Hammerschmidt-Hummel had examined in Stratford in January 2007), she concluded that it must be a copy, like Painting B (cf. BKA expert Reinhardt Altmann's findings below). It was from one of these paintings that Dr Cooper had extracted the nineteenth-century pigment. In her BBC appearance, Dr Cooper was shown in front of two x-ray images that she had commissioned of the portrait in 2005, portraying a barely identifiable Madonna and child. But here again the x-ray images Hammerschmidt-Hummel found after careful investigation did not cohere with the 1966 x-ray taken of the original. In only one frame of the BBC film

<sup>1</sup> *Die verborgene Existenz des William Shakespeare. Dichter und Rebell im katholischen Untergrund.* Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder Verlag, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> *Die authentischen Gesichtszüge William Shakespeares: Die Totenmaske des Dichters und Bildnisse aus drei Lebensabschnitten.* Hildesheim, Zürich, New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 2006 (Engl. transl.: *The True Face of William Shakespeare: The Poet's Death Mask and Likenesses from Three Periods of his Life.* London: Chaucer Press, 2006).

did the original x-ray appear; and there what was shown was a detail of the old 1966 x-ray – inserted to give the impression that it represented the new 2005 x-ray. Another important detail in the film pertains to the inscription with the poet's name and '1609', the date of the portrait. The only inscription shown on BBC was a detail, "which does not correspond to any of the details of Paintings A, B, and C" (56), Hammerschmidt-Hummel concluded that the paintings used by the BBC were copies, one of which contained a Madonna picture beneath the surface and the other, pigments of chrome yellow, commercially not available until the nineteenth century.

Since Dr Cooper's declaration that the Flower portrait was not authentic but a nineteenth-century forgery cast doubt on Hammerschmidt-Hummel's findings, the latter decided to conduct a thorough examination of the painting by that name kept in the Royal Shakespeare Company depository in Stratford. That was the painting exhibited at the 2006 London National Portrait Gallery exhibition, and later at the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven.

Hammerschmidt-Hummel knew the Flower portrait intimately. After several earlier viewings of the original, she had inspected the Flower portrait in the Royal Shakespeare Company Theatre Gallery again in 1996 in the presence of its former director Brian Glover, who later provided her a high-resolution ectachrome of the painting. That painting, the authenticity of which Hammerschmidt-Hummel had proven in 1995/96 in close cooperation with BKA experts and medical specialists, had been x-rayed in 1966 and thoroughly restored in 1979. Hammerschmidt-Hummel has named this Painting A. From sometime in 1999, strangely, another painting, dubbed Painting B, was displayed at Stratford-on-Avon. In 2003, Reinhardt Altmann, a former expert at the BKA whose 1995 test results had played a crucial part in Hammerschmidt-Hummel's authentication of the Flower portrait, again deployed his most modern research techniques to compare Painting B with the photographic record of the original Flower painting (Painting A). He concluded that Painting B must be a copy. When the Shakespeare scholar arrived in Stratford on January 26, 2007, with a delegation including her husband, Dr.-Ing. Christoph Hummel, Professor Alan Bance, University of Southampton and his wife Sandra Bance, Southampton, and was allowed to examine the recently returned Flower portrait in the presence of David Howells, Curator of the RSC Company Collection at Stratford, she was struck by the fact that it appeared to be neither Painting A nor Painting B. She therefore dubbed it Painting C.

She measured the panel, examined the condition of its edges and back, and their color. Several details showed it could not be the original: it had some filled-in holes, but not caused by woodworm damage, as in the original; strips of paper had been torn off the back of the panel, which a professional restorer would have removed; there was no "cracked and pitted" face due to age; the inscriptions were divergent; one pronounced crack, visible in Portrait A, had been painted on in Painting B and was missing in Painting C. Hammerschmidt-Hummel concluded that Painting C was also a copy, not of the original, but of Painting B.

Reflecting back on the BBC feature, and comparing the two paintings used there with Paintings A, B, and C, she posited that the two copies B and C had been used. "The film", she writes, "proves that two distinctly different copies of the Flower portrait exist and were tested; their origins are mysterious, and both paintings differ significantly from the original." Though Dr Cooper had asserted that the underlying Madonna image dated from the sixteenth century, she had "not tested the panel for the age of the wood" (32). It follows that, since the items tested were copies, the evidence of a nineteenth-century pigment on one of them is irrelevant. The author concludes that Dr Cooper's claim that the Flower portrait was a fake, is groundless, and invites the curator to "explain the facts and contradictions I have brought to light" (33).

If Hammerschmidt-Hummel is right – and a host of experts have lined up to confirm in official opinions published in the book that she is right – then several disturbing questions demand attention.<sup>3</sup>

Hammerschmidt-Hummel has raised two questions at the beginning of her book: "the whereabouts of the original Flower portrait and the provenance of the versions examined by Dr Cooper" (8). I would add the following: who commissioned the copies? Who removed the original sometime around 1999 and replaced it with Painting B? Who then replaced B with C? Evidently some artist received a commission to copy the Madonna with child, then paint a Shakespeare likeness on top of it. This was required, given that the 1966 x-ray of the authentic work revealed this image. Who was the artist?

If, as the facts imply, there was deliberate fraud, the question of responsibility is not only academic, and should be rigorously pursued. The world has a right to view the original Flower portrait again.

There are other questions which go to the heart of the matter. Why should anyone take such pains to construct such a deceitful operation? This is not the only case of deception related to Shakespeare. For centuries doubt has been cast on the man's very existence. Literary critics have suggested Edward de Vere, the seventeenth Earl of Oxford, or Christopher Marlowe, Francis Bacon, or Queen Elisabeth I, as possible authors. When one enters the museum attached to the reconstructed Globe Theater in Southwark, this controversy is writ large. The visitor finds himself confronted with three large panels containing images and biographical information about three candidates, each of whom – according to the organizers of the museum (evidently staunch Anti-Stratfordians) – may lay claim to authorship: Oxford, Marlowe, and Bacon. William Shakespeare from Stratford-upon-Avon is not mentioned at all. This is not only a matter for debate. The original Flower portrait, a most precious national English relic, has disappeared and been replaced by not one but two copies, as Professor Hammerschmidt-Hummel has convincingly proven in this book. Other valuable artifacts related directly to Shakespeare have also "gone missing," as the Shakespeare scholar has noted *en passant* in her other books. Now is the time to act – at least to recover the missing original of the Flower portrait.

Wiesbaden

MURIEL MIRAK-WEIBACH

---

<sup>3</sup> These experts are: Reinhardt Altmann, former forensic expert at the German Bureau of Criminal Investigation, Wiesbaden; Professor Dr Wolfgang Speyer, University of Salzburg, expert on Old Masters at the Salzburg Dorotheum; Helmut E. Zitzwitz, conservator, former owner of Hudson River Gallery & Conservators, Yonkers, New York; Dr Tom Merriam, Anglo-American Shakespeare scholar, Basingstoke, England; Professor Dr Jost Metz, former Medical Superintendent of the Dermatological Clinic of the Horst-Schmidt-Clinics, Wiesbaden; Professor Volker Menges, former Head Physician of the Central Department for Radiology, Theresienkrankenhaus, Mannheim; Dr Eberhard Nikitsch, inscriptions expert at the Academy of Science and Literature, Mainz; Dr Eva Brachert, picture restorer at the Landesmuseum, Mainz.