Carel Fabritius's *The Raising of Lazarus* Revisited

In memory of Ernst van de Wetering

Having completed his training in Rembrandt's workshop in Amsterdam, Carel Fabritius (1622–54), the master's most talented student, as it would turn out, opened his own workshop in 1643 in Midden-Beemster and promptly became a respected painter in Amsterdam's art milieu. Yet, the height of his fame came only in Delft, where he moved to in 1652 and where he developed his optics and perspective-based painting formula to produce the effect of a space saturated with light. His *Raising of Lazarus* (**fig. 1**) residing and exhibited at the National Museum in Warsaw is one of the artist's earliest works, one still marked by his master's profound influence.¹ It was painted likely around 1643, therefore predating the other history paintings which have relatively recently (1998–2000) been ascribed to Fabritius's oeuvre, ones like: *Hera Hiding during the Battle of the Gods and Giants* (c. 1643, Pushkin Museum, Moscow), *Hagar and the Angel* (c. 1643–45; The Leiden Collection, Thomas S. Kaplan and Daphne Recanati Kaplan, New York), *Mercury, Argus, and Io* (c. 1645–47, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Martha Ann Edwards Fund) and *Mercury and Aglauros* (c. 1645–47, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of The Ahmanson Foundation) (**figs. 2-5**).²

Almost two decades ago, prior to the monographic exhibition Carel Fabritius 1622–1654, curated by Frederik J. Duparc, Gero Seelig and Ariane van Suchtelen at the Mauritshuis in The Hague and the Staatliches Museum in Schwerin in 2004, the painting underwent analysis (Elżbieta Rosłoniec, NMW Laboratory)³ and restoration (Grzegorz Janczarski, NMW Canvas Painting Conservation Studio). Unfortunately, the outcome of these actions and the resulting

¹ Carel Fabritius, The Raising of Lazarus, c. 1643, canvas, 210.5 \times 140 cm, signed CAR.FABR on the wall of the sarcophagus, at bottom, The National Museum in Warsaw, inv. no. M.OB.563 MNW. See Hanna Benesz, Maria Kluk, Early Netherlandish, Dutch, Flemish and Belgian Paintings 1494–1983 in the Collections of the National Museum in Warsaw and the Palace at Nieborów. Complete Illustrated Summary Catalogue, Hanna Benesz, Piotr Borusowski, eds, collection cat., The National Museum in Warsaw (Warsaw, 2016), vol. 1: Signed and Attributed Paintings, pp. 210–11, cat. no. 224 (with earlier literature).

² Frederik J. Duparc, Gero Seelig, Ariane van Suchtelen, *Carel Fabritius 1622–1654*, exh. cat., Mauritshuis, The Hague; Staatliches Museum, Schwerin (Zwolle, 2004), cat. nos. 1, 3, 2, 5, 6. See also Dominique Surh, "Carel Fabritius 'Hagar and the Angel" [online], *The Leiden Collection Catalogue*, Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. and Lara Yeager-Crasselt, eds. (New York, 2020), at: https://theleidencollection.com/artwork/hagar-and-the-angel/, [retrieved: 25 April 2021].

³ Elżbieta Rosłoniec, "Określenie palety malarskiej i techniki twórcy w świetle badań materiałowo-technologicznych na przykładzie *Wskrzeszenia Łazarza* Carela Fabritiusa," ["Determination of Painting Palette and Technique Following Material-Technological Analysis on the Example of Carel Fabritius's *The Raising of Lazarus*], 2013, TS, archives of the Department of the Old Masters of the National Museum in Warsaw.

conclusions, though important, as I believe, to the understanding of the painting, were not published. Therefore, it is high time now to make up for that, albeit with heinous tardiness.

The process of cleaning the painting's surface of its highly dulled varnish and removing old retouches and overpaintings revealed the work's cool colours consisting of tones of cold, greyish violet and pink characteristic of the artist's early output as well as metallically cold greyblue offset by bright but equally cool white and luminous green of a slightly jade shade (fig. 6).

Made visible were the details of the background, which ceased to be a murky abyss, a neutral dark pane. Revealed were the shapes of the central rock formations on the right, and coming into clearer view in the depths, at the top edge, was the lambent flame of an oil lamp flickering somewhere far away between the trees and not, as previously thought, inside the burial cave. The bright spot of yellow on the right, previously taken to be a second flame, revealed itself to be a piece of a tree trunk. The cave does not occupy the whole of the right side of the background as previously widely believed;4 its edge being located near the bottom in the foreground. In fact, the grotto itself is hardly visible, save for a rock shelf on the right. The shapes once taken to be rocky contours and the inner walls of the cave turned out to be slender tree trunks, leaf-covered branches, knotted tree limbs and foliage. It is thus not a cave but a dark forest that constitutes the scenery for the miracle of resurrection. Behind Jesus' head, the restoration work brought out from the darkness a pale brown tree limb while the other outlines of trees, trunks, branches and foliage, only sketched in thick vigorous lines, were likely never finished with a layer of glaze. Could Fabritius have planned to model these elements in colour, but for some reason never did, or did he from the very beginning intend to create a conscious non finito impression in the impulsively painted shapes of the trees and forest blurred by the darkness? This we do not know and likely never will (fig. 7).

However it was intended, in this "new" version of the painting, Fabritius demonstrates his innovativeness, consciously moving on from the patterns laid out by Rembrandt and Jan Lievens and throwing down the gauntlet to their prints and paintings from the years 1630-1642 (figs. 8-12). Instead of, like in those earlier depictions, setting the scene in front of a rock face with a cave, as described in the Gospel of John (the only one to relate the story of Lazarus' resurrection; John 11:1-44): "Jesus [...] cometh to the grave. It was a cave, and a stone lay upon it." (John 11:38), Fabritius shows it against a wooded background, in front of a clump of trees. He makes the burial cave the vantage point of the viewer, thereby flipping the event's staging. We are thus inside the cave, surrounded by imaginary rock walls, and by entering it and looking out, we see the landscape that appears outside. In a way, we are to take part on the journey taken by the resurrected and just-now-waking Lazarus - his road from the abyss of the Sheol to the world of the living. This is a novelty, one that is truly innovative in comparison to the traditional approach. But perhaps Fabritius did to some degree take inspiration from the staging in Rembrandt's 1642 etching (fig. 10). There, however, the spatial situation is different than in the Warsaw painting: the background consists predominantly of the cave's walls, between which, deep in the distance, a crag opens up like an arcade with a view onto a distant landscape with a mountain topped with a towered building. Here, therefore, it is still rock formations and massifs that enclose the space and not a forest, nor even trees - of which only a single one can be seen. Sparse even is the shrubbery, only growing out of the rocks here and there.

Fabritius's innovation wonderfully underscores the direct and literal sense of Jesus' words: *Lazare*, *veni foras*! (Dutch: *Lazarus*, *kom naar buiten*!; Eng.: "Lazarus, come forth!" –

⁴ See, e.g., Antoni Ziemba, "Die Auferweckung des Lazarus' von Carel Fabritius in Warschau," *Niederdeutsche Beiträge zur Kunstgeschichte*, vol. 29 (1990), pp. 81–110.

John 11:43), in keeping with the Protestant rule of a literal reading of Scripture. These words come out from the clearly parted lips of Jesus, seen in the centre of the composition. From a daily reading of the Bible, the viewer would know the phrase and understand it literally as "Come out of the tomb, come out side, into the world" – into the world of living nature visible in the painting, a world at odds with the darkness of the burial cave. Thanks to this tactic, the painter conveys Christ's words with precision – the very Word of God, the foundation of faith, in line with the Reformers' adopted maxim of *Fides ex auditu est*, taken from Paul (Rom. 10:17). He forces the viewer to "hear" the speech in the painting: the crucial, agential words of the Son of God. Moreover, he lets the words be heard in a silent painting – this is an innovation compliant with classical and Early Modern rhetoric and poetics, with the humanistic topos of a "voice in a picture" and "speaking pictures" rooted therein, which Fabritius's master Rembrandt also readily embraced.⁵

This is a concept conforming with the fundamental theoretical postulate put forth by Leon Battista Alberti in Book III of the treatise De pictura (1435; Italian version Della pittura, 1436) - the postulate of inventio, or the Italian invenzione, which feeds on words, literary texts,6 or, as in the case of Fabritius, the text of the Gospel of John. As we know, Alberti's principle made its way permanently into all Early Modern theoretical and textbook literature, including Karel van Mander's Het Schilder-boeck (Haarlem, 1604) (especially the purely theoretical section: Grondt der edel vry schilder-const), of which Rembrandt was a studious reader, as Fabritius surely was too. It was also, and above all, present in *Inleyding tot de hooge schoole der* schilderkonst. Anders de zichtbaere werelt (Rotterdam, 1678), a compendium written by Samuel van Hoogstraten, a colleague of Fabritius's and fellow pupil in the workshop of Rembrandt. Ernst van de Wetering correctly believed that from the two aforementioned painting manuals together, or perhaps somewhat from "in between" them, we may arrive at the theoretical concept embraced by Rembrandt himself,7 one that we might presume he had taught to his workshop apprentices, and thus to Carel Fabritius. Ordening (ordinantie) and inventie - the composition of figures in space and invention - are in this concept related and mutually complementary categories: the "story" must be composed in such an interesting manner that it attracts the viewer's attention with its idea of conveying the content of the source text. Also important in all this is the correct "ordination" of figures in natural scenery. It is tempting to connect the discussions Van Hoogstraten relates having with Carel Fabritius and Abraham Furnerius in Rembrandt's workshop with the matter of conceptualising a composition and to apply this to Fabritius's invention in his first "history" painting: "Our Fabritius, my colleague in the workshop [Rembrandt's], once put this question to me when we were young: 'What are the signs and indications in a young pupil that allow one to expect him to become a good painter?' I answered according to my knowledge in those old days: 'It is that he not only loves art itself but that he is truly in love with depicting the charms of beautiful nature. That he not only observes and studies art's dead body, following the fashionable trends and doing as the

⁵ Jan A. Emmens, "Ay, Rembrandt, maal Cornelis stem," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek*, Ann. 7 (1956), pp. 133–65. See also Maria A. Schenkeveld, *Dutch Literature in the Age of Rembrandt: Themes and Ideas* (Utrecht, 1991), ch. 6: *Literature and the visual arts*, pp. 115–36.

⁶ Leon Battista Alberti, On Painting: A New Translation and Critical Edition, ed. and tr. Rocco Sinisgalli (Cambridge, 2013), p. 76.

⁷ Ernst van de Wetering, "Towards a reconstruction of Rembrandt's art theory," in id., A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings, vol. 5: Small-Scale History Paintings (Rotterdam, 2011), pp. 3–140, esp. pp. 53–64; id., Rembrandt. The Painter Thinking, part 2: Towards a reconstruction of Rembrandt's art theory (Amsterdam, 2016), pp. 61–221.

others do, but looks deeply into art's soul, meaning he examines nature in all its aspects.' [...] In our painting school, I once posed this question to Furnerius, who hit the mark especially with his landscapes: 'How does one recognise and how does one know if [a painting depicting] a story is arranged correctly?' He replied: 'By having knowledge of history [i.e., of the literary record of the past]."'8

The discovery in the Warsaw painting of the view of the forest and trees, a view that was planned yet not finished, reveals one other aspect of Fabritius's early work that remains insufficiently noted and underappreciated in the existing scholarly literature. The wooded background in the Warsaw *Lazarus* replacing Rembrandt's and Lievens's amorphic cave wall makes the painting the first, though still somewhat timid, attempt in Fabritius's oeuvre to open "history" up to landscapes.

Fabritius the landscapist? And still in the early stage of his career, when he painted exclusively biblical and mythological "histories"? Why, certainly! With the discovery of the tree outlines in The Raising of Lazarus, we now have no less than four paintings (in a total of five confirmed "histories" from before 1652) with pronounced, and sometimes even quite ostentatious, natural scenery. The painting opens an entire sequence of such historical-landscape compositions: the Warsaw Lazarus, the Moscow Hera, the New York Hagar with the Angel, and the Los Angeles Mercury, Argus and Io (figs. 1-4). Following the lessons he learned in Rembrandt's workshop, later written down by Van Hoogstraten, Fabritius tries to be a "good young painter," one who, let us recall, ought to be "in love with depicting the charms of beautiful nature" and instead of "study[ing] art's dead body" must "look[...] deeply into art's soul, meaning [...] examine [...] nature in all its aspects." He does this by travestying and creatively challenging the various landscape models he had encountered in the master's workshop: the landscape formulae of Rembrandt himself, but also those of Rembrandt's mentor Pieter Lastman, Hercules Segers (a 1656 inventory indicates that Rembrandt possessed paintings and painted etchings by him), Adam Elsheimer, and the Flemish masters of manneristic forest and mountain landscapes in overlapping and one-point perspective. In Hera, he employs a compositional model with a wall of dense forest next to a body of water - like a river, pond or sea - that Rembrandt had used in his earliest landscapes from 1632 and 1634: The Abduction of Europa (J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles) and Diana Bathing with Her Nymphs with Actaeon and Callisto (Museum Wasserburg, Anholt). In Hagar with the Angel and Mercury, Argus and Io, he transforms that forest model and relocates it to the edge of a sprawling valley or plane, as in, e.g., Rembrandt's Landscape with the Good Samaritan (1638, The National Museum in Krakow / Princes Czartoryski Museum), in which the master adopts the traditionally Flemish formula of late-manneristic overlapping perspective landscapes. In the background of Mercury, Argus and Io we can also make out clear echoes of Segers's compositional approach - the view is closed off by a massive vertical rocky mountain wall of the kind that occasionally also structures the space in landscapes by Rembrandt (the Krakow Good Samaritan) and Govaert Flinck (Landscape with an Obelisk, 1638, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston). In the latter two paintings, dominating the spatial "ordination" is a huge tree or pair of trees with gnarled trunks and forked branches, a motif frequently employed by

⁸ "Welk zijn de gewisse kenteykenen, en vruchten van den geest in een jong leerling, om een goet Schilder uit te verhoopen? Dat hy niet alleen schijne de konst te beminnen, maer dat hy in der daet inde aerdicheden der bevallijke natuur uit te beelden, verlieft is. Dat hy niet alleen het doode lichaem der konst beooge, dat is trant te volgen, en te doen als andre, maer dat hy op de ziele der konst als verslingert is: dat is, de natuur in hare eigenschappen te onderzoeken." – cited from: Samuel van Hoogstraten, *Inleyding tot de hooge schoole der schilderkonst.* Anders de zichtbaere werelt (Rotterdam, 1678), pp. 11–12.

Carel Fabritius: in *Hera*, at centre; in *Hagar and the Angel*, on the right edge; or in the shape of the imposing palm tree in front of the forest line in the left wing of *Mercury*, *Argus and Io*.

Of course, though it cannot be said that the Warsaw painting is a highly developed land-scape composition, the fact that the presumed cave occurred to be an open view of a forest landscape upon the painting's restoration puts it squarely in the sequence of Fabritius's "histories" in a landscape.

During the restoration work on the painting, Grzegorz Janczarski found no traces of panoply or weaponry hanging on a rock or tree, which is a motif that invariably appears in the templates by Rembrandt that may have inspired Fabritius: in the large etching (Bartsch 73) and in the painting from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (figs. 8, 9). The artist omits this motif for its being non-biblical, in no way suggested in the Gospel of John (11:1-44) and having not the slightest justification in the text, but drawn by his predecessors from the history painting iconographic tradition to signify oriental weaponry (curved swords) and thereby endowing the scene with an atmosphere of the Levant and suggesting an ancient-biblical Judean scenery. Moreover, this attests to the artist's strict Calvinist fidelity to Scripture cleansed of apocryphal, legendary and imaginary additives (*Sola Scriptura*), a fidelity considerably stronger than Rembrandt's and Lievens's more casual treatment of the text.9

As a result of the restoration work, coming into clearer view on the left side of the composition behind the figure of the grey-bearded old man in an opulent outfit and fur cap was the partial view of the man with a dark face (he is not dark-skinned nor does he have African features, as was earlier interpreted) holding a parasol with a long shaft – evidently the servant of the grey-bearded rich man standing in front of him (fig. 13). This figure's legibility is important to the composition: he closes off the triangular curtain consisting of the group of witnesses, counterbalancing the analogous group on the right. Between the grey-bearded elder and the boy next to Christ, becoming better visible were the heads of the two men leaning toward each other in conversation. This is a minor detail, but significant in highlighting the aforementioned role of words and speech in the painting.

The work on the painting also showed that both in the background, painted very thinly with the use of the greyish hue of the imprimatura of the ground, as well as in the section with figures modelled in a threefold manner: firstly – fluidly, with runny paint, secondly – with flat blots and points with jagged edges, thirdly – with gritty impasto, the young Fabritius applied the paints non-simultaneously and in stages, as had Rembrandt, but he ostensibly did so quickly and tentatively. The blots of colour overlap in an amorphous way and randomly, often existing side-by-side chaotically and placed with little precision, without the discipline evident in the master's technique. This is a telling indication of the inexperience of the twenty-one, perhaps twenty-two-year-old artist. This also supports the very early dating of the painting, to c. 1643 and not later, like the year 1645 (or thereafter), when Fabritius had likely already finished his aforementioned mythological and biblical "histories" or was in the process of finishing them.¹⁰

⁹ Ziemba, "Die Auferweckung des Lazarus'...," op. cit., pp. 81-110.

¹⁰ Here, I refer the reader to: Ziemba, ibid. (dated to 1645) and Europäische Malerei des Barock aus dem Nationalmuseum Warschau, Jan Białostocki, Rüdiger Klessman, eds, exh. cat., Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig; Centraal Museum, Utrecht; Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Cologne; Alte Pinakothek, Munich, 1988-90 (Brunswick, 1988), p. 38, cat. no. 5 (dated to c. 1643) (Antoni Ziemba).

It also occurred that the old suspicions about the canvas having been trimmed at a later time, and consequently that the composition was altered, were unjustified. Having removed the canvas from the frame and stretcher bars, Grzegorz Janczarski identified crescent-shaped traces along the upper and lower edges resulting from the textile fibres' being pulled taut when the edges of the canvas were nailed to the stretcher, which evidences the fact that the substrate survives in its original, unreduced dimensions and format.

Fabritius's *The Raising of Lazarus* underwent comprehensive inspection under visible light (VIS), ultraviolet light (UV), infrared light (IR), and x-ray radiation (RTX) in the NMW Easel Painting Conservation Studio. After the study of the structure of the canvas and its condition, points for analytical study were selected and ten samples were taken for the purpose of identifying the pigments used and determining the stratigraphic paint layers: (1) from the ground in the section where the background is eroded, (2) from the dark background in the upper part of the composition, (3) from the white of Lazarus' burial cloak, (4) from the white of his headscarf, (5) from the dark shawl on the shoulders of the woman (Martha?) visible in the depth, (6) from the green of Christ's robe, (7), from the green of the coat of the bearded man in the beret, visible at centre, (8) from the brown of Christ's sleeve, (9) from the hand skin tone of a figure visible in the uppermost part of the right figural group, and (10) from the yellow of that figure's cloak (fig. 14). The samples underwent microchemical analysis, the thickness of the ground, underpainting and actual painting layers was measured, and their sequence was determined.

The canvas had been primed with animal, bone or tanner's glue with the aim of protecting it from absorbing the binding medium of the layers applied later. Next, Fabritius applied a brownish, chalk-glue ground consisting of ochre bound with resin and animal glue; identified in it was the presence of natural bole, giving it a reddish-brown colour. Applied over the ground and altering its brown colour is the grey imprimatura, called *primuersel* in Carel van Mander's Schilder-boeck (1604). It is a thin, coarse-grain, uniform, grey (greyish-yellow) underpainting whose composition consists of: lead white, iron yellows and light blue containing iron, likely vivianite (a hydrated iron phosphate mineral which turns blue, dark blue or green with oxidation). This grey underpainting - characteristic of Rembrandt's workshops and his pupils, used quite consistently in their canvas paintings (in their panel paintings, the ground is generally yellowish to light-brownish)¹¹ - is clearly visible in the stratigraphic paint layers - in the photographs of select sample shavings embedded in acrylic resin (figs. 15-17). The composition and the distribution of the light and shadows were planned in the subsequent layer of monochromatic, greyish-brown "dead colour" (doodverf per Van Mander). The procedure for applying the successive, chromatically different underlayers preceding the actual layers of colour modelling - the reddish-brown ground, greyish primuersel and the greyish-brown "dead colour" - follows the formula regularly employed by Rembrandt in his canvas paintings. In this regard, Fabritius remains loyal to his master, not introducing any experimentation or innovations.12

 $^{^{11}\,}$ Ernst van de Wetering, "The canvas support," in Josua Bruyn et al., A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings, vol. 2 (The Hague–Boston–London, 1986), p. 42.

¹² On Rembrandt's painting technique, see Ernst van de Wetering, "Painting materials and working methods" in Bruyn et al., op. cit., vol. 1 (The Hague-Boston-London, 1982), pp. 11-33; id., Rembrandt. The Painter at Work (Amsterdam, 2000); Karin Groen, "Ground in Rembrandt's workshop and in paintings by his contemporaries," in Ernst van de Wetering, A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings, vol. 4: The Self-Portraits (Dordrecht, 2005), pp. 318-34.

Determined via microscopic analysis on the basis of characteristic microchemical reactions was the presence of ground fillers and the combination of pigments in the individual layers. Then, identification of the elements was performed in the University of Warsaw Faculty of Chemistry laboratory. Analysis of the samples' elemental composition was performed via the SEM/EDS method, with the use of a LEO 435VP (Zeiss) electron microscope, a scanning microscope with wolfram cathode operating at an electron beam current from 0.1 to 30 kV, with a peripheral EDS device (Roentec, Berlin). Because the findings of this analysis are entirely consistent with the technological convention of Rembrandt's workshop and pupils from 1632–1645 and do not proffer any new knowledge on the procedures used by the workshop, we will only cursorily outline the assortment of pigments here.

Dominant in the analysed samples are: lead white, chalk, plant-based black, iron brown pigments, natural iron yellows and red lacquers. This is a combination typical of Rembrandt's workshop, which indicates that Fabritius faithfully followed the technical knowledge passed down from his master. The pigments are suspended in an oil-based (linseed) binding medium. Repeated measurements using an electron probe confirm the obvious presence of lead white pigment in the first, lowest, painting layers (and in the primuersel and "dead colour"), as well as of lead browns, ochre, chalk, and plant-based black with bitumen. The testing also identified the pigments in the higher paint layers and glaze, where cinnabar, lead-tin yellow, and red lacquer applied to a blue layer (sample 7) appear in addition to lead white and the aforementioned brown, brownish-red and black constituents. The dark, deep-grey areas of the background saturated with a cool shade of light blue are painted with paint containing ultramarine particles (which is not very typical of the technique of Rembrandt and the Rembrandtists)¹³ and plant-based black, most likely charcoal (samples 1, 2). The yellowish-beige skin tone of the hand of the figure on the right edge of the composition contains bone black with traces of cinnabar (sample q). Identified in the glaze applied over the layer of light blue in this figure's cloak were cinnabar and lead-tin yellow with added chalk, plant-based black, iron browns, bitumen and ochre (sample 10). Taking advantage of the colour of the greyish-brown and greyish-blue substrate - the primuersel and "dead colour" layers - Fabritius applied several coats of glaze to the painting, occasionally superimposing them (red lacquer over light blue). The partially surviving coloured varnish contains hydrated iron oxides, which points to the use of hematite, sienna and ochre.

As presented in this overview, the palette of colours and pigments used by Fabritius is quite rich and far advanced from the impression made by the painting's dark-brown monochromatism prior to its cleaning. From the painting's analysis and restoration, we have learned how faithfully Fabritius tried to utilise Rembrandt's technical procedures and typical assortment of colour materials. Yet, what we see is that, at the stage of his deft compositional "ordination," he was able to progress that learned conventional workshop routine into a striking innovation drawing on humanist tradition and reflecting the artist's Calvinist beliefs.

Translated by Szymon Włoch

Rembrandt's use of ultramarine was noted in, i.a., Self-Portrait as the Prodigal Son in the Tavern, c. 1635, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister (Dresden), see Bruyn et al., op. cit., p. 140. Ultramarine was likely used in the blue background of The Storm on the Sea of Galilee (1633, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, stolen).