

The problem of originality and value in the Lady Michaelis gifts to the South African National Gallery

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The issue of authenticity in visual art is critically addressed at the outset of this paper. This general discussion leads to a study of the works presented by Lady Michaelis to the South African National Gallery in the 1930s. Many of the paintings and drawings in this gift collection have never been exhibited because of doubts about their authenticity and claims that they are fake. The collection is analysed to assess the justification or otherwise for these doubts. It is concluded that, even if doubts justifiably exist about some of the works, others have firmer attributions to interesting artists. Moreover, it is argued, even those which do not might still be exhibited in an age which has revised its view of the 'authenticity' issue.

Key words: authenticity, fake, forgery, Lady Michaelis, attribution

Originalité et valeur : le don de la lady Michaelis à la South African National Gallery

Cet article commence par considérer en critique la question de l'authenticité en tant qu'elle survient à propos des arts plastiques, discussion générale qui aboutit à une étude des œuvres qu'a données Lady Michaelis à la SANG pendant les années trente. Un grand nombre des peintures et des dessins qui composent ce don n'ont jamais été exposés parce qu'on doute qu'ils soient authentiques ou même prétend qu'ils sont truqués. Nous essayons ici l'analyse de la collection pour établir si ces doutes sont justifiés ou non. Nous concluons que s'il y a des équivoques légitimes sur quelques-unes de ces œuvres, il y en a qui s'attribuent sans contredit sérieux à des artistes intéressants. Qui plus est, nous soutenons que même celles qui posent des problèmes à cet égard pourraient être exposées à une époque comme la nôtre, où la question de l'authenticité est de nouveau à l'examen.

Mots clés: L'authenticité, Lady Michaelis, l'attribution, le trucage

One of the significant features of our response to the visual arts is our concern as to the originality of the work of art. The term originality is used here to denote not the modern concern for originality of idea, but the more basic concern as to whether the work is a unique specimen and whether it is truly the product of the artist it is attributed to. Visual art contrasts somewhat with the other arts on this issue, since the latter are experienced by us through performances or publications that for most purposes render the quest for an original work irrelevant. Our evaluation of music, literature, poetry and theatre is not hampered by the fact that the performance or publication we experience is just one of a vast number of reproductions from the original score or manuscript. For these arts, reproduction from the original (the musical performance from the musical score, the published book from the manuscript, multiple and various performances of the theatrical play) is basic to their procedure. For the visual arts, however, (excluding prints, though even here to some extent) originality and value (both monetary and perceived aesthetic value) are absolutely interlinked. It is widely believed that the material object that we see must be the very object created, worked upon, by the artist to whom it is attributed. Both reproductions and copies are regarded with suspicion; in the case of the latter, even where the copies are the products of the studio. Much anxiety is expended on the question of whether the physical work we see is really the original, the authentic object, worked on alone by the hand of the famous name. Given the collaborative nature of traditional studio practice, this is often a vain hope in the case of works of the past. The quest tends to have a particular urgency, however, because underlying it so often is the assumption that if the work is by a famous artist, the question of its aesthetic merit is settled; famous artists are assumed to produce more aesthetically valuable work, consistently. The task of deciding whether this is indeed the case is rarely taken on. Famous names confer status on collections, and both public galleries and private collectors gain from receiving 'positive' attributions of their works.

This question of originality or authenticity in visual art becomes a complex one, from which a sort of sliding scale of importance becomes established, with those works perceived the

most artistically and therefore monetarily valuable at the top. Underlying the scale, however, is an acknowledgement that probably only a few old master works, in fact, were autograph products of the signed artist alone. Thus the hierarchy offered by experts on authentication of paintings can offer as many as fifteen ‘categories of authenticity’, ranging from the autograph work to the forgery, and with numerous shades of collaborative involvement, studio copying or more remote imitation in-between (Marijnissen 1985: 20-34). More modestly, one might list the following distinctions: (1) the single, unique work, produced by one hand, (2) the work of which an artist produced more than one copy, such as the multiple versions of a portrait that might have been commissioned by the sitter for him/herself plus others, (3) the work which duplicates an original, but which is by studio assistants as well as by the ‘master’ who created the original (a likely scenario in the case of multiple portrait commissions), (4) the work which is entirely by studio assistants, but which duplicates as closely as possible the master’s work, or (5) the work in the *style* of a famous artist, done by a less famous name, but innocently. This might not have had any intention of being passed off as his work, but might have posthumously come to be confused with him, through lack or loss of vital supporting information. Finally (6) there is the work which deliberately makes a bid to pass as the work of a famous name, but which is in fact done by another hand, in the original artist’s day or much later. This, the most extreme case in the hierarchy, is the work we brand as a forgery. But there is one other interesting category also: (7) the works which, through systematic and insensitive restoration over a long period of time, have come to seem more the work of restorers than of the original artist.

As Secret notes (Secret 1979: 260), a range of qualifiers tacitly signify the distance of the work from a single ‘master’s’ hand: ‘attributed to’ testifies to reservations about the attribution offered, ‘school of’ or ‘studio of’ signifies that the work was done in the famous artist’s studio but not by his hand – or very little by his hand. ‘Follower of’, or ‘circle of’ is at one remove again, suggesting an artist trained or influenced by the major artist, but no longer with him, while ‘manner of’ is at a yet greater remove, suggesting a resemblance to a famous artist’s style, but a work for which only a tenuous connection can be made to the major name. ‘Copy of’ acknowledges that this is only a copy, and one which may be contemporary with the artist copied, but which may be later. Then there is ‘imitation’ or ‘falsification’. This signifies an outright fake – designed to be passed as a work by a major artist. Here an interesting distinction is sometimes drawn – between the ‘fake’ and the ‘forgery’, the fake or falsification being a genuinely old work, but one by a minor or unknown figure that has been enhanced in order to resemble the work of a far more celebrated artist, while the forgery is a term sometimes reserved for a more complete manufacture of a new work passed off as an old and valuable one.

The discovery of the original autograph work is sometimes very difficult, given that workshop assistants were very much a fact of artistic life in the past, and that the artists running those workshops often had a sanguine attitude towards the business of copying. Boucher and Corot are just two artists who are known to have signed as their own the copies of their work that they approved of. Boucher was described by a pupil, Christian von Mannlich, as having put his students to the task of copying his drawings, and then having corrected them, sometimes honouring a particularly good copy by signing his own name to it (Tietze 1934: 17-8). As recently as the 19th century, prolific landscapist Corot apparently ‘authorized poor artists who admired and imitated him to put his name on their canvases in order to make them more easily salable.’ (Tietze 1934: 18) There is also the known case of Rubens’s workshop which offered, along with its own commissions, a brisk trade in copying the work of others. As Craddock notes (Craddock 2009: 272), Rubens was entirely untroubled by the authentication issues this raised. In connection with such a commission he told customer Sir Dudley Carlton, “as the reproduction is not yet quite completed, I am going to retouch it throughout myself. So it can pass for an original if necessary.” Of other similar commissions, and to the same patron, he

noted “I have retouched them to such effect that they can hardly be distinguished from the originals...they are a perfect miracle at the price.”

Given our increasing knowledge of these kinds of practices, it can sometimes seem fruitless to obsess too much about the question of the autograph work. But the search for the authentic original material object continues, and much monetary and perceived aesthetic value hangs on it. So how is the process of authentication made as reliable as possible? Here, there are broadly two approaches, that of connoisseurship and that of scientific (chemical and physical) analysis, the one much older than the other. Scientific analysis has only seriously developed since the 1920s, but with the use of increasingly sophisticated technology it is becoming possible to investigate an increasing number of factors concerning a painting’s authenticity. Tests can now determine a range of issues to do with the age and condition of the support, the chemical structure and age of the pigments, the age of the varnish and the likely authenticity of the age cracks in the surface. By contrast, the authenticating work of the connoisseur is done with a trained eye alone, and is the far older but much more intuitive method. It looks for minute errors in style, often in areas so common but so narratively insignificant (ears, noses for example) that the artist – genuine or copyist – might not be aware of communicating there a ‘signature style’.

Connoisseurs acquired something of a pseudo-scientific status in the late 19th and early 20th century as generations of eager new collectors and astronomical prices made their expertise particularly crucial. But it has always been a profession beset by its own internal skulduggery. Celebrated connoisseurs like Bernard Berenson were, arguably, revealed to be influenced by who they authenticated on behalf of, being seemingly more generous in their attributions when working for commission on behalf of dealers than when sourcing fine art for vigilant collectors.¹ Other problems with the business of connoisseurship – competitive rivalries and the like – have sometimes seemed to play their part in distorting judgement. There is also the simple and striking fact of just how difficult it is to authenticate work with any real certainty; it is at best a practice in which many mistakes are made, in good faith. There can rarely be absolute *certainty* about authorship, where works of the distant past are concerned. There is also the ubiquitousness of the forgery industry, and the fact – evidenced in forgers’ success – that this is not as arcane a practice as we might believe or hope. As high-level forgers such as Eric Hebborn (Hebborn 1992) have shown, it is not enormously difficult to deceive a great many ‘experts’.

The deceiving of experts is going to be heart-breaking where a private collector and private budget is concerned; the public art museum is going to be even more damaged by the revelation that it has bought poor copies, wildly misattributed works, or even deliberate fakes and forgeries. If there is doubt, the argument often goes, better to leave the work in storage. In the light of this issue, it is interesting to consider the Lady Michaelis collection. In 1930, Lady Michaelis presented to the Gallery a collection of old master drawings which largely remained in storage until the 1960s and which have been exhibited rarely since. In 1933, she presented a collection of paintings which were very poorly received, the criticism being made from the outset that many of the works were wrongly attributed and some possibly even modern forgeries. Again, many works from this gift have been little exhibited, the view being that they were not of ‘museum quality’. In what follows, I explore the background to these gifts and consider to what extent the prejudice against them is justified. How many of these works were not by the artists they were claimed to be by, were they by worthless artists instead, were they deliberate forgeries? And if the majority were not, in fact, worthless, how did they come to be regarded as if they were? I suggest that some of the stigma that has always attached to the Lady Michaelis collection began some years before it was ever given, when her husband Max Michaelis presented a body of works to Cape Town.

The Michaelis Collection in the Old Town House, Cape Town

In 1916, the Michaelis Collection of Dutch and Flemish art opened in the Old Town House in Cape Town. This collection, officially presented to the nation by Max Michaelis in 1914, gained an ambivalent reputation from the outset, firstly because of doubts about the authenticity of its leading work, ostensibly a Rembrandt, secondly because of doubts about the quality of the collection as a whole, and thirdly because of some condescension felt in the local art world about the benefactor. Some of the suspicion and even hostility felt towards the later Lady Michaelis collection might have started here, with concerns about the *bone fides* of the Michaelises as art collectors.

Michael Stevenson (Stevenson 1998 and 2002) and Hans Fransen (Fransen 1997) have already told in detail the story of this collection, a collection gathered together between 1910 and 1912 by Irish dealer Hugh Lane, and then bought by Max Michaelis, for presentation to the nation. It was a body of works chosen by someone other than the benefactor. And it was a collection whose star work, the ‘Demidoff Rembrandt’ (the *Portrait of a Lady with a Glove*, now in the National Gallery of Ireland), aroused doubts about authorship, in a saga that revealed all the trickiness of connoisseurship, even at the highest levels. Stevenson charts the progress of this saga: how esteemed German connoisseur Wilhelm von Bode authenticated all the works on behalf of Lane and Michaelis before the collector bought them, how London-based connoisseur Claude Phillips then doubted the authenticity of the Rembrandt (as well as the quality of the collection overall) when the collection was pre-exhibited in London (in May 1913) before travelling to South Africa, and how the doubts raised about the Rembrandt led to its being removed from the projected Michaelis collection and substituted with 23 other works before the collection was presented. It was an extraordinary tale of clashing connoisseurs, and protection of vested interests: Bode did not doubt the authenticity of the disputed Rembrandt, even after Phillips’s charge – and was supported in his belief by another respected connoisseur Walter Friedlander – but he angered Michaelis and Lane by refusing to argue publicly for his beliefs. The result was a discredited and devalued work, and embarrassment for Michaelis in whose name the now-notorious collection was presented.²

Whatever the truth about this work, the effect of the dispute was that the collection as a whole became somewhat tarnished by the issue of authenticity and quality. This one doubted work became the one by which the collection was so often remembered – and the fact that a large group of ‘minor’ replacements were substituted for it, at speed, did not help matters. It was also known that the whole collection was bought by a dealer rather than Michaelis himself and it was problematic for some that the works seemed to have been bought as a ‘job lot’ for the purposes of a public donation. Claude Phillips’s critique of the general quality of the collection lodged in the public mind. Meanwhile, those behind the scenes were always aware of the fact that one motive for this donation was Michaelis’s ambition for public recognition in the form of a title; he had been advised that to present an art collection to the nation would help towards this end. So there arose the idea that the gift was hasty, little considered (at least by Michaelis), backed by dubious motives, and of questionable artistic value. In presenting the gift, Michaelis explained it was given in order to express gratitude to a country that he had enjoyed so much in his youth (he was at this stage resident in Britain), and moreover to give “students of art the opportunity of studying old masters in their own country instead of having to go to Europe for that end...In selecting Dutch pictures, I thought of the settlers who left Holland at about the period when many of these pictures were painted.”³ But there were some who were cynical about this account of the genesis of the Michaelis Collection. And arguably the collection, and Michaelis himself, have never quite shed the stigma that attached to them at this stage.⁴

The later Michaelis loans and gifts and their public reception

The Michaelises, in fact, had begun to collect Old Masters in the 1890s, and in 1912 they donated £1000 to Johannesburg for the establishment of an art library, the present-day Michaelis Art Library (Stevenson 2002: 94). Once they returned to live in South Africa in 1920, Cape Town benefitted further from their generosity and concern for art. In 1920, Max Michaelis gave the University of Cape Town £20 000 to fund the establishment of a Chair of Fine Art. The school of art followed, named after him. In 1924, the first Chair of Fine Art was filled, by British artist John Wheatley, and Michaelis received a knighthood. Two important loans of art were made by the Michaelises at this time. In 1923, they presented on loan to the Michaelis Collection a further 21 paintings. And then in the mid-1920s there opened at the new Michaelis School of Art a large exhibition of (largely) old master works presented on loan by the couple. This body of works included 117 paintings, plus bronzes, terracotta sculptures, Sèvres porcelain works, and 189 old master drawings.⁵

What form the art school exhibition took, and how long it remained on show, is unclear, but a slim catalogue remains, *The Michaelis Loan Collection of Oil Paintings, Drawings and Craft Work* with a Foreword by Max Michaelis (Michaelis School of Art, n.d.).⁶ It is interesting here to read Michaelis's description of the background to the loan. He begins by discussing the immediate provenance of the 117 paintings, noting that "only about 30 were selected from our own collection, whilst the remaining 87, as well as the sculptures and terra cottas, were specially acquired for the purpose of giving South African artists an opportunity of studying different schools." He touches on the range of the works, noting that they "may appear to the spectator a strange conglomerate" but that the desire to be of help to the art student has dictated the wide range of schools and periods "right down to the Primitives." He adds, with respect to the latter point, "Some of the pictures may therefore not appear very attractive, but all have a value for the student."⁷

He goes on to discuss his and his wife's plans for this collection, and notes that many of the works (that is, at least the 87 that were not part of their private collection) were bought for the purpose of presenting them to a public institution (presumably the art gallery), a plan that met with resistance. In response, he notes, he and his wife formed an alternative plan:

not finding a suitable place in which to hang the pictures, after their arrival five years ago, we conceived the idea of extending...what is now commonly known as the Michaelis Gallery...The plan was to connect the Old Town House with [a] new building to be erected, which would have provided a large room for the pictures now on view at the Michaelis School of Art, a similar room for the purpose of the usual exhibitions by South African artists, and also a number of studios. However, it was not to be, and the pictures instead of being of use had to be left in our stables for five years, not without serious damage to some of them. We were not encouraged in other directions by those from whom we should most of all have expected support in doing something more for art, and we gave up our plans. We are pleased that henceforth they will be on daily view to, and will benefit, students of the School, whilst older artists and the public will be able to view them on certain days. (Michaelis School of Art, n.d.)

So, frustrated in the early 1920s in plans to present an extensive art collection to the Gallery or to the Michaelis Gallery, the Michaelises secured art-school director John Wheatley's agreement to house a loan exhibition there; and since the post of art-school director now - since the creation of the Chair of Fine Art - doubled with that of honorary director of the Gallery, it would not be difficult to have the loan works moved in time to the Gallery, where they would reach a large audience. This happened in 1929, when the 117 *paintings* from the loan exhibition were formally presented, again on loan, to the South African National Gallery.⁸ The following year, the Gallery was able to move into its own new premises on Government Avenue. In this year Lady Michaelis presented, *as a gift* to the Gallery, 51 drawings and two prints, by a variety of largely 17th century artists, Italian, French and Dutch. These works had been part of the

original large exhibition shown at the Michaelis School of Art. They now belonged to a public institution.

There is no record in the press of this gift of works on paper in 1930; little seemed to be known about it at the time, outside the Gallery. Within the Gallery it is mentioned only by a rather laconic note in the Board Minutes of July 1930.⁹ It was an extraordinarily low-key response to a gift of a fine collection of works on paper. But worse was to come. In 1932, Max Michaelis died. In the following year, his wife opted to present the loaned *painting* collection (currently at the Gallery) to the nation, but with the requirement that the works be divided between Cape Town and Pretoria, 59 of them staying in Cape Town and 58 going to Pretoria, with Lady Michaelis herself making the choice as to which belonged where. She also now presented to the Michaelis Collection the 21 pictures loaned to it in 1923. So in the space of three years, Lady Michaelis had presented just under 200 paintings and works on paper to the nation. One might have expected that this would have been met with some considerable public gratitude; in fact, the general reaction was quite the opposite. With the promise to *give* much of her and her late husband's art collection to the nation, sentiment in the local art world against the Michaelises now hardened.

The public charge against the collection was led by local (though originally British) artist Robert 'Gwelo' Goodman. As news broke of the proposed presentation of 59 paintings to Cape Town, he made clear in a series of press reports – as well as in numerous conversations, one can imagine – his violent scepticism about the collection. In a report in the *Cape Times* (Goodman 1933), he traced events back to the early 1920s, when the Michaelises' specially-purchased artworks arrived in South Africa. He had been sought out for help and advice by Max Michaelis at this time, he claimed, but had seen the prices paid for the works, and doubted their authenticity. He felt the collection as a whole was sub-standard, so when "Sir Max asked me to help find a permanent public home for them [I] refused absolutely and told him why." In the same report, he went on to recall dismissively that "Professor Wheatley, being more amenable [to the collection than he], hung them in the School in odd corners and eventually in the Art Gallery to fill one of the rooms for the [1930] opening."

The *Cape Argus* carried details of another inflammatory interview with Goodman,¹⁰ in which he claimed: (1) that the collection was bought in a job lot from America, (2) without first being seen by the Michaelises, (3) that it was bought collectively for very little, (4) that the low price was justified by the poor quality and doubtful authenticity of many of the works, and (5) that these works, since coming to South Africa, had languished in the stables of the Michaelises' home. He added that he had gained the necessary evidence for these claims when asked by Max Michaelis to advise on the cost of restoring some of the works after damage in transit from America.¹¹ In both articles, Goodman's final sweeping dismissals of the works were cited. In the *Cape Times*: "if they must remain in our Gallery, then I insist that the following notice be placed on every wall: Beware. These pictures are 'Dud'. Let no student accept any part of them either as works of art or as of any value in the history of art." (Goodman 1933) And in the *Argus*: "I defy anybody to pick any six of these pictures, send them to Europe or to the country of their supposed origin, have them tested, and find one of the six declared to be a great masterpiece."¹² He used this interview on the proposed new gift to cast aspersions also on the earlier Michaelis collection at the Old Town House, arguing for its general mediocrity and its inclusion of works of doubtful attribution.

It is possible that these attacks were motivated by more just a concern for the quality of the works. Goodman was notoriously outspoken and proud of his forthrightness, in both encounters with associates and with the press, and there might have been some personal agenda lying behind the attack, a sense perhaps that the Gallery had paid him and his work insufficient

attention in the past. Goodman was a man with a powerful sense of his own importance, an attitude that was fostered in Cape Town where he was treated with extraordinary deference as a major artist and connoisseur. Whatever Goodman's motives, his views gained great publicity and others either hurried to distance themselves from him, or nailed their flag to his mast. Ruth Prowse, curator of the Michaelis Collection in the Old Town House, disputed Goodman's slights against that earlier collection,¹³ as did Professor Wheatley,¹⁴ while Edward Roworth, local artist and member of the gallery Board, disputed his views on the new gift, arguing that "I am on safe ground in declaring that a considerable number of the canvasses are beautiful works of art and an attraction to any gallery."¹⁵

But there were some influential supporters of Goodman's views, including Lady Phillips, leading player in the establishment of the original Michaelis Collection, and member of the Gallery Board. Phillips distanced herself from Goodman's criticism of the 1916 Michaelis collection, but added that "as to what Mr Gwelo Goodman says about...the rest of the pictures now donated, I regretfully agree." She described this collection being accepted on loan initially "*merely as an act of courtesy...and...as a temporary stop-gap in a beautiful gallery which is most poverty-stricken in pictures.*"¹⁶ (my italics) Some years later, her biographer Thelma Gutsche wrote of the Michaelises, "Max loved his paintings and knew every detail of every one. Before he died, he had added his own Flemish and Dutch pictures to the Michaelis collection." Gutsche added, "later Lady Michaelis embarrassed the National Gallery by presenting others of unequal standard and provoking a typical Cape Town controversy." (R de Villiers, in Werth 1992, unpaginated) There is no knowing whether this account is based on Lady Phillips's version of events, but one suspects that it *is*; what is striking is that it is quite inaccurate on the main facts, since the Michaelises together had tried to have the 117 paintings presented to a public institution since the early 20s. But one senses here a special animus against the female art collector-benefactor; it may be simply the biographer's, it may be that of Lady Phillips herself.

Another who allied himself with Goodman against the Michaelises was art collector and SANG benefactor Alfred de Pass. At the time of Goodman's public denunciations, de Pass wrote to the press to give his opinion. He argued that

in my judgement there are only half a dozen pictures [from the new gift collection] worthy of hanging; the rest if not actual fakes are by second or third rate artists. If these pictures are accepted and hung, they will do no credit to Sir Max's reputation as a connoisseur and art collector, and less to the Trustees of the Gallery for accepting them.

He added, inconsequentially, but significantly, "to me Italian pictures seem wrong out here."¹⁷ The motives of Alfred de Pass might also not have been entirely pure. He was a serious art collector who since 1926 had been presenting works to the Gallery and gaining increasing importance there as a decision-maker. The Michaelises' desire to forge for themselves an image as art benefactors might possibly have aroused ugly feelings of rivalry. But the criticism of Italian pictures as 'wrong' in South Africa is an interesting one which points to another strong prejudice, and a prejudice seen at the time of the initial 1916 Michaelis presentation. This was that Old Masters – roughly, pictures that pre-dated the 19th century – were inappropriate gifts for South African art galleries, and that Italian Old Masters in particular were utterly out of keeping with the national mood and aesthetic.

The reception of the Lady Michaelis Collection by the Gallery

Within the Gallery, the response to the proposed presentation of paintings was no less hostile. Partly there was a genuine grievance since the entire negotiations to present the work to the

nation had been conducted between Lady Michaelis's lawyers and the government, with the government unilaterally agreeing to accept the gift without any prior consultation with the Gallery. Not only had the Gallery not been consulted on whether it thought the works worthy of acquisition, but it had also been presented with particularly stringent terms of donation, namely that the works be 'permanently exhibited' in the gallery.¹⁸ Internal Gallery discussions raise this practical question of the exhibitionary terms. Gallery Board minutes for 25/3/33 note the rehearsal of two key questions to be asked of the Department of the Interior which was handling the case: "will the Board have the power to show the collection in sections which are changed periodically?", followed by, if not, "will it be possible to modify the Deed?" They add that they "respectfully suggest that it would perhaps be helpful to all, in in future the Board could be consulted before such a Deed of Gift is signed."¹⁹

Following this Board meeting, a subcommittee is recorded as having been formed, to re-inspect the sub-collection selected for Cape Town, and at this point the issue was raised of the overall quality of the collection. The Board minutes of 28/4/34 noted that this sub-committee "recommended that they be not accepted as they do not reach the standard aimed at by the Board", and the Secretary of the Trustees explained to the Secretary of the Interior, "In building up a collection at the National Gallery, the Board is aiming at a high standard, and it does not feel that the works offered reach this standard. The condition of 'permanent exhibition' is another difficulty." He concludes that they have "resolved not to accept the gift".²⁰

In response, the Department of the Interior convened a meeting with the Trustees. Arms were twisted, and concessions made. A communiqué after this meeting noted that the Gallery accepted the gift on the "definite understanding" that 'permanent exhibition' was not possible, but that "the Board will exhibit the collection in sections and do all that is possible to carry out the terms of the deed of gift."²¹ It was added that "the Minister undertook that in future the Board would be consulted before any gifts were accepted."²² With this, the 59 paintings – mostly pre-18th century works by a variety of European artists, many Dutch – entered the collection. Little was seen or heard of it, and it was the notorious sales of work from the gallery's permanent collection in the 1940s that brought it back, briefly, to public attention because it was revealed that a number of the Lady Michaelis paintings had been included in these sales.

By the 1940s, John Wheatley had been replaced by Edward Roworth as Professor of Fine Art at the Michaelis School of Art and Honorary Director of the South African National Gallery. Roworth took up his appointment at the Gallery with a desire to sweep away the artistic detritus of the past. In this spirit, on three occasions in the 1940s, he decided that parts of the permanent collection should be sold off; a group of works were sold to a Mr Monnickendam in 1944, a second group to a Mr Ter Beek in 1945 (this was a sale that not even the Gallery trustees were aware of), and a third, and the largest, group to a Mr Krook in 1947. On the third occasion, in February 1947, the sales became public knowledge, and an outcry ensued. The general story of these sales is not relevant here; what *is* relevant is that among the works sold off were some that had been presented as gifts, and a number of those were Lady Michaelis gifts. Included in the first sale, in 1944, there were eleven Lady Michaelis paintings, in the second, four, and in the third, eight. It was an astonishing fate for works that had been presented barely ten years previously, and a strange about-face from a director who at that time (when only a Board member) had said of the Lady Michaelis presentation that it contained "a considerable number of ... beautiful works of art...[which are] an attraction to any gallery."²³

The one-man commission into the sales, the Stratford Report, particularly castigated Roworth for his sales of the Lady Michaelis works, noting that a glance at the back of the works would have revealed labels stating they were from her collection.²⁴ But most of the Gallery trustees supported Roworth, arguing that many works in the permanent collection were sub-

standard²⁵ and that the Lady Michaelis pictures sold (of which the trustees, wrongly, said there were just seven) had never been exhibited since their donation.²⁶ So much for the 1935 promise to “exhibit the collection in sections and do all that is possible to carry out the terms of the deed of gift.”²⁷

In response to public pressure and a demand from Lord Stratford, the trustees scrambled to recover the Lady Michaelis paintings that had been sold. Shortly after the 1947 sale, Lady Michaelis’s lawyers wrote to the trustees for “assurance that all the pictures from the gift were safe” at the gallery. A reply was only sent a year later. In this, the trustees expressed their “very sincere regret” for the sale of some of the works, and added their apologies for the delay in writing to her about the matter.²⁸ In truth, the pictures were not easy to recover. Under pressure, the trustees applied to Krook to buy back the Lady Michaelis works sold to him. He agreed, on the understanding that the resale covered his costs, and sold them back to the Gallery at a cost of £8 16s. 6d. each. However, of the Lady Michaelis works sold in previous sales, only one (the *Interior with Peasants* by Ludolph de Jonghe [346])²⁹ was recovered. In all, fourteen Lady Michaelis gifts were gone.³⁰

The Value of the Lady Michaelis gifts to the South African National Gallery

All in all, then, this combined gift of paintings, drawings, prints and some sculptural pieces was poorly received by the Gallery. The drawings and prints were received in 1930 with virtually no advertisement of their arrival, while the proposed presentation of paintings in 1933 was met with either ambivalence or outright hostility in the Gallery and press. Once grudgingly accepted, the works were scarcely exhibited, and then a number of them were sold off. It remains to see to what extent this dismissive response to the collection was justified.

The paintings

The charge against the collection was that it contained much that was worthless, so it is useful to test this claim in some detail. The Lady Michaelis paintings can be divided into the following broad categories: (1) those that retain the attribution with which they entered the collection, (2) those that have been re-attributed to an artist of the same period as the original attribution, but one of lesser status, and (3) those that have been given as modern (19th or 20th century) fakes. There is also (4) the case of the work which is possibly by the artist to whom it was originally attributed, but which has been pronounced as too heavily restored to make a judgement on, and too heavily restored to retain its original value. But it is crucial to note that many of these works have not been scrutinised by art-historical specialists in their field, and those that have have largely been studied only through photographs. It appears that no chemical analysis has been done of any of the works, leaving the ‘authentication’ of date and hand a matter of connoisseurship. And to repeat, in some cases the original authentication might stand because nobody at the Gallery has questioned it or seen fit to ask outside specialists to comment on it. Obviously, this is not to say that the original authentication is necessarily correct, just that it has not so far been pronounced incorrect. In this category is a work by Gustave Courbet [307], one by Daubigny [370], and one by Charles-Emile Jacques [361], all of the 19th century, as well as a work by the 18th century artist Lemoyne [330] and a 16th century portrait attributed to Guillim Stretes, *Portrait of My Lady Dorrell* [352]. There are others that have received some specialist attention, and still retained their original attributions, such as the 19th century portrait by H. P. Briggs, *The Actor Charles Kemble* [331], and the 18th century Hogarth portrait, originally titled *Portrait of Peg Woffington*, whose subject (but not its artist) has been disputed by specialists at London’s National Portrait Gallery, and which is now catalogued simply as Hogarth, *Portrait of a Lady* [334].³¹

Of the paintings on which specialist advice has been sought, the majority are of the Dutch and Flemish 17th century – these comprise, in any case, nearly half of the total painting collection. Here research has been done by specialists in the Netherlands and the United States (as well as locally) in the 1970s, 1980s and most recently by Jillian Carman (Carman 1994), as part of her project of cataloguing all Dutch and Flemish paintings in South African collections.³² As a result of this research, the majority of the Netherlandish works in the Lady Michaelis collection have been reattributed, and this has nearly always meant being demoted – but this has generally been a demotion of the work to an artist active at approximately the same time as the artist originally given. An example here is the pair of portraits originally given as ‘attributed to Thomas de Keyser’, and now given as ‘studio of Paulus Moreelse [298 and 299]. A contrast would be those works which are re-attributed to a ‘later imitator’ (such as Johannes van der Bent’s *War-time Ambuscade* [358] or Gerrit van Hees’s *Landscape with Two Anglers* [336]), although there is no suggestion here that the imitator is *radically* later than the originally cited artist. Others, such as the *Still-life on Table* by Heda [337], *The Good Samaritan* by Moeyaert [333], *Vegetable Stall in Delft* by van Battem [305], and *Portrait of a Man* by Jan Westerbaen Senior [338] have retained their attribution while, in qualitative sideways moves, the *Portrait of a Lady* [353] once attributed to Elias Pickenoy is now given to Pieter Dubordieu, and the *Musical Party* [354], formerly given to Horemans, is now attributed, tentatively, to Hendrik Govaerts.

By contrast with the 17th century Dutch and Flemish works, there is a group of paintings by an assortment of European artists – German, Italian, Spanish – on which virtually no research has been done. These works predate the 18th century, or at least claim to. Some of these have been *assumed* by the Gallery to fall into the category of deliberate, modern fakes. One is 16th century Leandro da Ponte/Leandro Bassano’s *Portrait of a Doge of Venice* [359], on which the Gallery files say “doubtful authenticity, probably modern copy”, another is the 15th century work, *St Francis*, by Filippo Lippi [365], described by the Trustees in the 1940s as a “palpable falsification”. There are the 16th century works *St Catherine* [369], by the ‘school of Bernardino Luini’ whose files say “doubtful attribution...probably 20th century copy”, and *Saint and Two Angels Adoring the Virgin* by Cosimo Roselli (attributed) [351], of which the files note “doubtful authenticity”. However these works do not appear to have been examined by specialists; like all the others, they have also not been chemically analysed.

In the fourth category, the work whose over-restoration prevents its accurate attribution, and lessens its value, is a portrait originally given as by either Sebastiano del Piombo or Vasari, *The Portrait of the Writer Giovio* [304]. The Gallery’s notes on this work reveal something of the confusion and uncertainty that has dogged so many of these paintings. The work is now filed as “artist unknown”, or “attributed to Sebastiano del Piombo”. Research on its authorship appears to have begun in the 1970s, when Gallery curator Valerie Leigh decided that “the work is probably 19th century in the Italianate manner. It does not resemble the portrait style of Sebastiano del Piombo.” She later added, however, that it could be a portrait of Giovius Paulus (1483-1552) by Sebastiano del Piombo, and consulted Dr Alice Moir, Professor of Art History at the University of California, Santa Barbara, sending her a photograph. Alice Moir replied that she “feels it could be by Sebastiano del Piombo.” Leigh noted separately, however, that the picture was so extensively retouched on the head that “its quality is almost lost...consequently it is difficult to accept the portrait.” So it might be a 19th century copy, or it might be genuine, but heavily retouched – the latter having consequences for the work’s value (though surely not for its attribution?).

In conclusion, then, it might be said that while there are *possibly* some deliberate fakes or even forgeries among the Lady Michaelis paintings, this possibility has not been seriously tested; and along with the small number of highly doubted works, there is a considerable number

which appear to be of their age, but often not by the well-known names to whom they were originally attributed. It is far from clear that this renders them worthless. Meanwhile another small group are likely by the artists to whom they were originally given and these are in some cases artists of high reputation.

The drawings

The situation with the drawings (and prints) is very different from that of the paintings. A large number of them have a known provenance – often a very impressive one – and there is also the fact that two highly distinguished specialists, Philip Pouncey³³ and Nicholas Turner³⁴ have studied the collection *in the Gallery* at two points in the past (1962 and 1995 respectively), and offered their opinions on attributions. These opinions have been recorded in the Gallery’s files. Other expert help has been sought in addition, though it appears that this was on the basis of photographic evidence. However, this combination of recorded provenances, and attributions done from the originals, by experts in the field, makes the collection of works on paper far easier to judge at this stage than the painting collection.

What emerges from a study of the works on paper is, it would appear, a highly impressive collection of Old Master drawings, despite changes – often demotions - in a number of the original attributions.³⁵ Of those whose original attribution has stood, there is a 17th century work by Guercino [283], described by Nicholas Turner as “a fine autograph drawing... probably dating from the 1630s”,³⁶ a 16th century Samacchini, described by Turner again as “a fine autograph work by Samacchino”, and a 17th century Salvator Rosa [255], described in the 1960s by Professor Walter Vitzthum of the University of Toronto as being “a Rosa of exceptionally fine quality”. From the French school, and again of the 17th century, is a work by Gaspard Dughet [271], and two works by Claude Lorraine [318, 326], with a third [277] now given (by Michael Kitson) to an 18th century follower. Of those works whose authorship has been doubted, strong alternative suggestions have been offered by Pouncey or Turner. A Domenichino [266] has been doubted, but the artist Giovanni Francesco Grimaldi suggested in his place (Pouncey), two Correggios [273, 312] have been reattributed, and two later artists, Francesco del Cairo and Francesco Allegrini respectively, offered as possible alternatives (Pouncey). Moreover, a number of works originally filed by the Gallery as artist ‘Unknown’ have been given tentative attributions, and therefore approximate dates: an Italian pen and ink *Torso* [310] was, probably in the late 50s, tentatively attributed by Dr Kurt Bauch to Giovanni Battista Franco, an Italian drawing of *Hannah with the Infant Samuel before Eli* was dated by Pouncey as being late 16th century, and tentatively attributed by Turner to Filippo Bellini (1550-1604), while an ‘unknown’ *Group of Allegorical Figures* ‘in the style of Tiepolo’ has been described by Turner as “probably Sebastiano Galleotti” (1676-1746). A final intriguing example is a *Head of a Woman* [313], originally given as by Raibolini Francesco, but later attributed (though it is unrecorded who made this attribution) to the much more important Pietro Perugino. This is the attribution that currently stands and the one under which the work was exhibited in the 1960s.

Quite apart from the excellent first-hand research that has been done on the drawing collection, another notable point is the number of drawings for which provenance – and impressive provenance - is recorded. The fact that the works have been owned by distinguished collectors is an important indication of their pedigree (even if the works undergo reattribution) and a point which in itself confers value on the works.³⁷ To take just a few examples, Domenico Campagnola’s *Landscape with Castle and Watermill in the Foreground* [322] is recorded as having been owned by Pierre-Jean Mariette (1694-1774), Count Moritz von Fries (1777-1826), William Esdaile (1758-1837), and Edward Poynter (1836-1919), all of them extremely

discriminating collectors. The now disputed Claude Lorraine [277], given by Kitson to an “early 18th century follower”, passed through the hands of Thomas Lawrence (1769-1830), Benjamin West (1738-1820), William Esdaile, and Edward Poynter, while a non-disputed Claude [326] is recorded as having been owned by Jonathan Richardson senior (1665-1745), George Hibbert (1757-1837), Esdaile, and Poynter. A work attributed to Girolamo dai Leoni, *Christ Cleaning the Temple* [314], *appears* to bear the monogram of King Charles I, a fact that was proudly noted in the Michaelises’ first exhibition catalogue at the Michaelis School of Art.

Exhibiting the Lady Michaelis Collection

As noted above, it was mentioned by the Gallery in 1947 that the Lady Michaelis paintings that were sold off had never been exhibited up to that date. It is quite possible that they have never been exhibited since – and the situation is not very different for the collection as a whole. While the current curator of historical Western painting makes every effort to show the historical collections as much as possible, the pressure to devote Gallery space to more recent and South African works only increases. Occasionally, then, it has been possible to show some of the Lady Michaelis gifts, but in the eighty years since the painting and drawing collections were presented, they have never been exhibited as a whole.

Of course, a major obstacle has been concern about the authenticity of the works, and a fear that the Gallery would embarrass itself by exhibiting obvious ‘fakes’. But as this survey has shown, even the painting collection contains much that is not *fake*, but simply not of the major names originally given to it. But it has shown, too, that it *does* contain some major names – and that of the other works, much valuable reattribution work has been done, revealing a collection of historically interesting work of, largely, the 17th and 18th centuries. I would want to argue that much of this work is not only historically interesting but aesthetically valuable too, and that preoccupations about whether it is by ‘artist x’ or ‘studio of x’ often have little bearing on the latter issue, since major artists are well able to produce poor paintings and minor artists good ones, and since, as noted earlier, art practice was often, in any case, a highly collaborative exercise. But there is no doubt that, for better or worse, ‘major-name’ attributions have consequences for a collection’s monetary value.

The drawing collection, I have argued, contrasts with the painting collection in presenting far fewer doubts about authorship. It should present few doubts about quality also, comprising a large range of outstanding work by 16th to 18th century masters, major and minor. And yet here too, the exhibition history has been scant, and extraordinarily it only dates from 1962, thirty years after the receipt of the collection. Early in this year, 29 of the Lady Michaelis drawings were exhibited at the Gallery, the realisation of a project initiated by the-then deputy director, J. W. von Moltke. The press reported from the Gallery that two years of research “part of it in London and Europe” had preceded this exhibition,³⁸ and that the works had “never been exhibited before because they were not properly identified.”³⁹ It was noted that “for many years they have lain, almost forgotten, in a strongroom.”⁴⁰ And yet the ‘not properly identified’ argument was hardly the whole answer; many of the attributions for the drawings had, in fact, remained intact. It was more likely that the collection had suffered by association with the painting collection, and simply been labelled in the collective Gallery memory as ‘suspect’. Whatever the reason, it was a tragedy for a superb group of works on paper that might have enjoyed much earlier exposure – and much more in the years after 1962. But in these post 1960s years, with the exhibition pressures noted earlier, and the lack of a dedicated print and drawing room,⁴¹ the Lady Michaelis drawing collection⁴¹ has been little seen, or documented. No exhibition of the complete collection has been held, and while a “comprehensive and scholarly

catalogue” (Dubow 1962) was prepared for the 1962 exhibition, presumably by von Moltke, there is no longer any trace of it in the Gallery archives or library.

In conclusion, to return to the main issue for the Gallery with respect to the collection as a whole, the concern is that the Gallery’s reputation would be fatally compromised if it were to exhibit a group of paintings with attributions that were dubious or downright false – and that short of subjecting the entire painting collection to expensive testing, these attributions cannot be seriously revised. The latter is certainly true, but it is unclear why it is not worth doing. However, as this study has shown, the Dutch and Flemish 17th century paintings have already received scholarly attention and some useful reattributions so future research and funds might be dedicated to the fairly small other group which still await analysis.

A final point to make, however, is that even if, in a worst-case scenario, all or most of the currently questionable paintings turned out to be fakes or forgeries, as opposed to works produced in good faith by contemporaries or near contemporaries of the artist – and the ‘majority fakes’ scenario is a highly unlikely one – the Lady Michaelis collection would arguably still possess exhibitionary potential. A interesting recent intellectual development in the art world is the new interest in forgeries and fakes, and a refreshing readiness on the part of the major galleries to admit that they own some, and even that the subject is of historical and artistic interest. This is giving rise to a sudden spate of exhibitions on the theme, perhaps the most striking being the London National Gallery’s ‘Close Examination: Fakes, Mistakes and Discoveries’ (30 June- 12 September 2010), but others including the Victoria and Albert’s ‘The Metropolitan Police Service’s Investigation of Fakes and Forgeries’ (23 Jan- 7 Feb 2010) and the Royal Ontario Museum’s ‘Fakes and forgeries: Yesterday and Today’ (9 Jan- 4 April 2010). Listening to the London National Gallery’s director Nicholas Penny on the theme of fakes (Akbar 2009), one can find oneself wondering what all the fuss is about. “It’s not a bad idea to have duds and fakes...I wish we had more fakes, I’m not worried about the reputation of the institution. It’s important to know how clever forgers can be. The National Gallery is a place where we show great masterpieces but it’s also a place where you can study the history of art. It would be very naïve for people to think it’s (the possession of fakes) something we should be ashamed of, or something that we should get rid of.” He adds that while he was director of the National Gallery in Washington, the Gallery had “deliberately acquired” forgeries.⁴²

These are surprising claims, and perhaps there is an element of ‘protesting too much’ in them, but on the whole it is a welcome new development and one that, pushed far enough, might lead to a radical rethink of the whole question of ‘originality’ in art, and its relation to monetary and aesthetic value. In the meantime, however, it surely puts into perspective some of the anxieties over the Lady Michaelis collection, and raises the possibility that all the authentication issues raised by this collection do not pose a bar to the collection’s being exhibited. This study has tried to show that not only are questions concerning authenticity remarkably complex and prone to error, but that the quest for the authentic, original work by a major master needs to be differentiated from the quest for artistic quality, with consequences for what counts as ‘museum quality’ work. It is partly because of doubts about how we decide upon the latter that art history has adopted a far more inclusive attitude to the canon in recent years, and art museums likewise. While debates rage over questions of quality or aesthetic value, a more fruitful enterprise has been the focus upon works and collections that are historically interesting, even where this interest arises from the knowledge that a work might be fake. I have argued that the Lady Michaelis collection of works on paper is of outstanding quality, while the painting collection likewise contains some excellent known works, probably some others of great interest that have not yet been identified, many works by interesting lesser masters of the 17th century in particular, plus *a few* that are perhaps deliberate fakes or forgeries. But

then all galleries have fakes and forgeries, and in a new art world in which historical interest increasingly gains prominence over concerns about aesthetic value and purity of authorship, these too have their place on the gallery wall.

Notes

1. See Secret (1979) for the argument that Berenson shifted from scrupulous connoisseur to over-optimistic one when he moved from the employment of watchful collector Isabella Stewart Gardner to employment in the profit-hungry world of dealer Duveen .
2. After Lane's early death, it ended up with much of his collection in a bequest to the National Gallery of Ireland where for many years it was catalogued as a Rembrandt, until its recent demotion to 'studio of Rembrandt'.
3. *Cape Times* 6/12/19, South African National Gallery (SANG) Newscuttings Books, SANG library. All references to press reports hereafter derive from this SANG source.
4. I am not wishing to claim, however, that this is a first-rate collection by the standards of the world's major galleries. Clearly it is not. But still, it has arguably received more than its fair share of negative press.
5. The catalogue lists 122 works, but in the Foreword Max Michaelis also mentions 189 drawings and 30 contemporary Sèvres porcelains as if they are available for viewing too ("189 old drawings, one of which bears the initials of King Charles I, as coming from his collection, a great number of bronzes and works of art generally, are from our own collection. The 30 objets d'art are the works of artists attached to the manufacture of Sevres...").
6. Available at SANG library, Catalogues – Box 7.
7. All quotes from the Foreword (unpaginated) by Max Michaelis of *The Michaelis Loan Collection of Paintings, Drawing and Craft Work*.
8. See deed of loan in Lady Michaelis file 2/2/1/11, SANG archive.
9. SANG Board minutes, 31/7/30, SANG archive.
10. 'Art sensation in Cape Town', *Argus* 25/2/33.
11. These claims of Goodman's were strongly refuted by Mr Chart, business adviser to Max Michaelis, shortly after they appeared in the press. See 'The Michaelis pictures', *Argus* 10/4/33.
12. 'Art sensation in Cape Town', *Argus* 25/2/33.
13. 'Question of the attributions', *Cape Times* 28/2/33.
14. 'The Michaelis gift: replies to Mr Gwelo Goodman' *Cape Times* 28/2/33.
15. 'Mr Goodman's "morning hate"', *Argus* 25/2/33.
16. 'Lady Phillips and the last collection', *Argus* 28/2/33.
17. Letter from A. de Pass, 'The Michaelis gift', *Argus* 28/2/33.
18. See 6/11/32 Deed of Donation, in 2/2/1/11.
19. SANG Board minutes for 25/3/33, SANG archive.
20. Memo from P. Thatcher to Secretary of Interior, 4/5/34, in 2/2/1/11, SANG archive.
21. Memo from Board of Trustees, 16/1/35, in 2/2/1/11, SANG archive.
22. Ibid.
23. 'Mr Goodman's "morning hate"', *Argus* 25/2/33.
24. 'Sale of works in art gallery', *Argus* 19/9/47.
25. National Gallery weeding out', *Argus* 4/4/47.
26. 'Sold gallery pictures "not up to standard"', *Cape Times* 5/4/47.
27. Memo from Board of Trustees, 16/1/35, in 2/2/1/11, SANG archive.
28. Letter from Secretary to the Trustees to LM, 4/4/48, 2/2/1/11, SANG archive.
29. Numbers in square brackets hereafter are the SANG accession numbers.
30. Having secured the eight Lady Michaelis works sold to Krook, the trustees decided to try to retrieve as many other of the 1947 sold works as possible, but as the Gallery's Annual Report for 1947/8 revealed, only twenty-five of them could be recovered. The cost of this recovery was £5681. Overall, then, one hundred and sixteen works had *not* been recovered, and the recovery proceedings had caused the Gallery to make a net loss from the sales, of £4481. Since this was almost as much as the entire annual Gallery funds (of £4700) for 1947, the Gallery was now in financial crisis. The situation was not helped by the fact that, in response to the sales crisis, the City Council of Cape Town suspended their grant to the Gallery for the period 1947-8.
31. See Gallery files on individual works in permanent collection, SANG archive, for this and all following notes.

32. Carman's checklist was compiled with the aid of RKD connoisseurs such as R. E. O. Ekkart, M. C. Kinkelder, G. Kotting, F. G. Meijer and C. J. A Wansink, but it is not clear whether they were able to study the works in the original. I have been unable to clarify this point.
33. Philip Pouncey (1910-90) was Assistant Keeper at London's National Gallery from 1934 to 1939. During the 40s and 50s, he was at the British Museum where he helped catalogue the Italian print collection. From 1966 to 1983 he was a director of Sotheby's and in 1975 was made an Honorary Keeper of Italian Drawings at the British Museum.
34. Nicholas Turner was Deputy Keeper of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum from 1974-94, then Curator of Drawings at the J. Paul Getty Museum, L. A. (1994-8).
35. A note of caution however is that Eric Hebborn, forger of Old Master drawings, argues for the occasional fallibility of both Turner and Pouncey, as well as many other connoisseurs, with regard to attributions in this field. (Hebborn 1992)
36. For this and all other notes on the works on paper, see Gallery files stored in print and drawing room, SANG.
37. This is, of course, assuming that the collector's marks and other provenance evidence is genuine. Eric Hebborn's account of his successful life as a forger of Old Master drawings includes more than one reference to just how dazzlingly easy it is to forge collector's marks, as well as the drawings they claim to authenticate. (Hebborn 1992)
38. "'Forgotten'" drawings to be exhibited', *Cape Times* 16/3/62.
39. 'Old drawings on view for the first time', *Cape Times* 28/3/62.
40. "'Forgotten'" drawings to be exhibited', *Cape Times* 16/3/62.
41. The 1962 exhibition is recorded as being shown in the Print Room, but Neville Dubow's argument (Dubow 1962) that it 'deserves to be extended' for other such exhibitions reveals that even then it was not a permanent fixture.

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