

Reconstructing Stella: Investigating the Materials and Context of *Louis XIII and Richelieu*

Graham Larkin

Over fifty years ago, the Harvard Fine Arts Department offered graduate students a course in the Fogg Museum on “Problems of Attribution in the Light of Recent Developments in the Technical Study of Paintings.” The course was mainly concerned with settling issues of attribution through the interpretation of X-rays. A very different set of historical concerns and visual technologies guided my own recent collaboration with the staff of the Fogg’s Straus Center for Conservation. The object of our analysis was a painting in the Museum’s collection, Jacques Stella’s *Liberality of Louis XIII and Cardinal Richelieu*. This allegorical portrait, showing the French king in the guise of the Roman emperor Titus, was produced around 1639 to adorn the chimneypiece of the Cabinet du Roi at the château of Richelieu, a room that also contained major paintings by Andrea Mantegna and Nicolas Poussin. When the Straus Center staff and I began our technical analysis in September 1997, there were several unanswered questions relating to the early history of the Fogg Stella. Because the château had been demolished shortly after the



Graham Larkin reports on the technical examination of Jacques Stella’s *Liberality of Louis XIII and Cardinal Richelieu* during a Mellon Research Fellowship Colloquium held on March 30 in the Straus Center for Conservation.

French Revolution, we were eager to find material evidence to add to the documentation of the original setting. In addition, we had no evidence about the work’s state or location between the mid-eighteenth century (when a different portrait was

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recorded as hanging in its place) and its rediscovery thirty years ago.

X-rays and cleaning of surrounding overpaint revealed that the painting had undergone a series of dramatic transformations. In Stella's day it had been an oval canvas on an oval stretcher. Around the first half of the eighteenth century (when the work was evidently removed from the chimneypiece), the canvas was cropped at the top, attached to a rectangular canvas, and transformed into a variant composition by means of painted additions to the newly formed corner areas. Later the work was again transformed when the

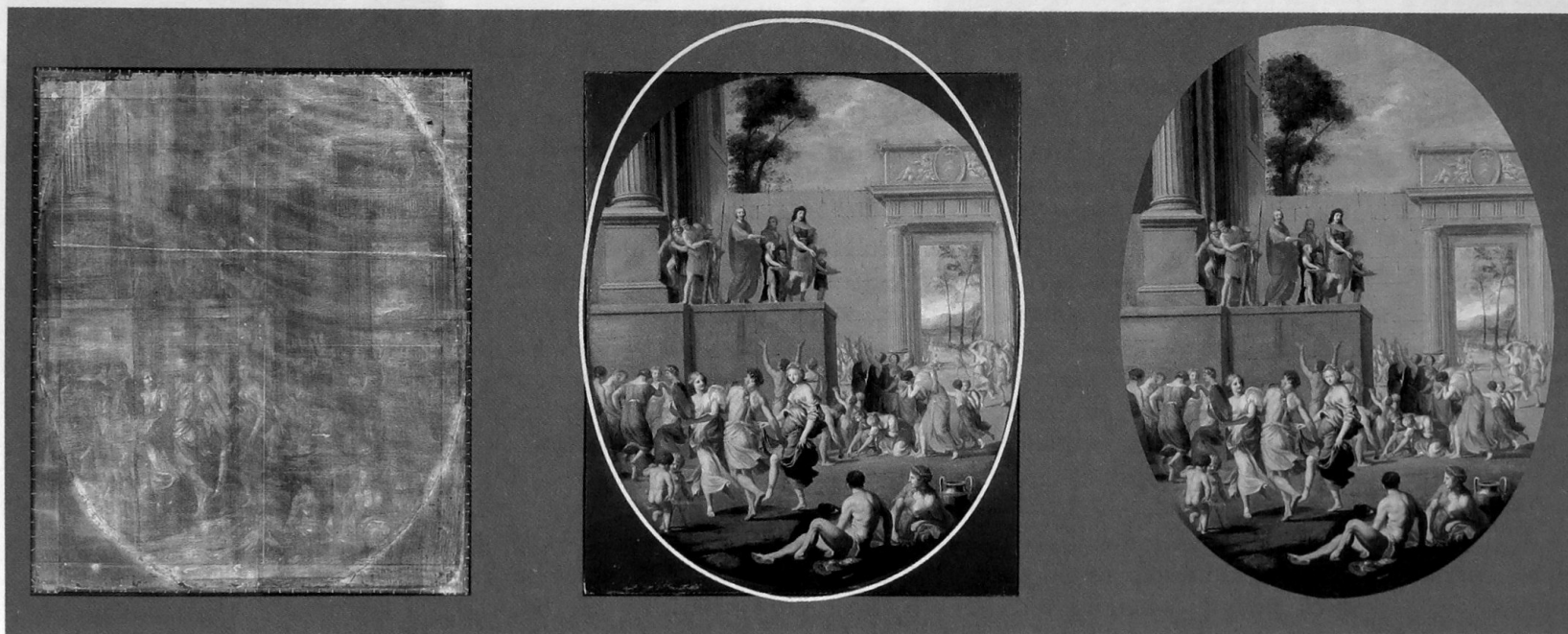
additions were overpainted, and the composition was reworked into a reduced oval format. By integrating and manipulating scanned photographs, we have been able to explore this complicated history and share our findings with a community of art historians, conservators, conservation scientists, curators, and museum administrators. Overlays of X-rays and natural light photographs, along with a computer-generated reconstruction of the painting's format before the cropping and reworking, have proven especially useful in this extended dialogue. At present we are focusing on the implications of the

new discoveries for future restoration and display.

My research into the Fogg Stella continued beyond the end of my internship. This past summer I investigated surviving period interiors and other paintings made for the Cabinet du Roi; in the coming months I will use Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator software to produce color reconstructions of the room's original appearance. This research will be carried out in collaboration with the Straus Center staff, who are renowned for their creative application of digital imaging technologies to the analysis of artworks. Through work in the Center,

I have learned that these technologies can function both as powerful interpretive tools and as an effective means of sharing findings with different audiences. Just as the advent of word processors profoundly altered the ways in which people write, expository imaging can now help us to communicate without words. □

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Left: Digitally assembled X-radiograph indicating remaining portion of original oval canvas.

Center: Painting before cleaning, with white line indicating edges of original oval canvas.

Right: Author's reconstruction, in Adobe Photoshop software, of original format.