

Simeon Solomon's *Bacchus*

– A Missing Provenance –

by Peter Ogwen Jones

Provenance trails can be challenging at the best of times, none more so when artworks are coming up for sale at the major auction houses. A gap of well over half a century was what befell the charming 1867 watercolour by Simeon Solomon (1840-1905), entitled *Bacchus*. Solomon's adoption within the Pre-Raphaelite circles in the 1860s marked him out for future success. His Jewish heritage often informed his chosen early subjects, with Old Testament characters and stories dominating his pictorial themes, and he started exhibiting at London's Royal Academy, where he had begun his studies in 1856. He continued to exhibit there up until 1872, although the critical response to his work could be mixed, much like some members of the 'Brotherhood' – Rossetti, Millais and others.

His life and work had a distinctly bacchanalian quality, enlivened by the pursuit of homoerotic visions and fuelled by a Dionysian appetite for alcohol. So it was that in 1867 he painted his moody masterpiece *Bacchus*, a deified youth, scantily clad and with a melancholy, downcast facial expression. The following year it was exhibited in London's Dudley Gallery in their fourth watercolour show, and it was then that the provenance trail began its elusive journey, until publicly surfacing in 1969 at the Art Gallery of Ontario's 'The Sacred and Profane in Symbolist Art' Toronto show. Where had it been all that time?

Its earliest, currently-known documented ownership appears in a valuation for death duty purposes of Thomas Phillips Price (1844-1932), who had purchased the Marks Hall estate, near Coggeshall in 1898. His wealth had also led him into acquiring a significant art collection, including Solomon's *Bacchus*. When exactly he had purchased the painting remains unknown, although it may not have been long after its first public appearance at London's Dudley Gallery in 1868.

Curiously, after Price died in 1932 the *Bacchus* attribution, in the valuation by London's Knight, Frank & Rutley, was mis-attributed to the artist Solomon Joseph Solomon (1860-1927). The *Bacchus* is clearly dated 1867, when that painter was only seven years old! What exactly prompted this conspicuous 'error' may be more than similarity in names. In the early 1870s Simeon Solomon had been arrested in both London and again in Paris,

charged with the then 'crime' of homosexuality, which was not decriminalised in Britain until 1965. By the time he was in his sixties, alcoholism had conspired with his tattered reputation to bring his final downfall, dying in abject poverty in London's Saint Giles Workhouse in 1905.

Perhaps the Victorian stigma associated with Simeon Solomon lingered on into the early 20th-century, although the otherwise reputable company undertaking the 1932 valuation of the late T. P. Price's art collection should have been well aware of this glaring discrepancy, in spite of saying in their inventory, dated the 12th of August 1932, 'we have carefully examined the works of art' at Marks Hall.

During the Second World War, the ministry requisitioned Marks Hall for military purposes and Price's widow, May Elizabeth, was obliged to move into what became her dower house, a substantial property on the estate called 'Marygolds', and the art collection was moved in, including Solomon's *Bacchus*. In May of 1954, the ageing Mrs Price made her will, which included a valuable bequest of oil paintings to one of her executors from Newport in South Wales. She died in a nursing home in 1966.

The picture's next documented appearance was at an auction by the Essex firm, Surridge & Son, whose catalogue included lot 515, the *Bacchus*, accurately described this time as 'a gauche painting 20" x 15" by Simeon Solomon, "Bacchus", in a black and gilt frame'. However, shortly before the auction, scheduled for the end of July 1966, a burglary took place at the vacant 'Marygolds' and among the many items stolen were several of the paintings due to be inherited by the executor from South Wales, who was later financially compensated under the terms of Surridge's insurance claim. On the auction's second day of what was left of the late Mrs Price's possessions to be sold, the *Bacchus* watercolour painting went for a mere £6.

Such is the story of that missing provenance. Just three years after its acquisition by an unknown buyer at the Surridge auction, the *Bacchus* appeared as catalogue number 122 in the Canadian exhibition. The Marks Hall provenance was unknown to Christie's London auction house in 1993, when it appeared for sale as lot 91 and sold to the American entrepreneur and music executive, Seymour Stein, for the sum of £32,200. London's Sotheby's auction house next handled this painting's sale in July 2018, when it was sold

as lot 11 to a private buyer for a record £237,500, the published estimate being £60k to £80k. Sotheby's were also unaware of its early provenance at Marks Hall.

ENDS (Words 770)

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***Bacchus* by Simeon Solomon 1867** (Private collection since Sotheby's sale in 2018).

Image source: Wikimedia Commons.

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Knight, Frank & Rutley.
LONDON.

20 Hanover Square.
W.1.

18th August, 1932.

Dear Sirs,

IN THE ESTATE OF THE LATE T. PHILLIPS PRICE.

We have carefully examined the WORKS OF ART,
FURNITURE, AND GENERAL CONTENTS OF MARKS HALL, COGGESHALL, ESSEX
and have selected therefrom such items as in our opinion
are intended to be covered by the special clauses in the
Finance Act 1909/10 and valued by us as under:-

PICTURES.

R. WILSON. → The Castle of St. Angelo, Rome, and The Colosseum, 14" x 19". A pair.	£100: 0: 0
SIR THOMAS LAWRENCE P.R.A.- Portrait of a gentleman, half-length, head half turned to the left, dark curly hair. 30" x 25"	100: 0: 0
ENGLISH SCHOOL - Portrait of a lady, half-length with décolleté dress and fair curly hair. 29" x 24"	70: 0: 0
PANNINI - Colonnade with figures	25: 0: 0
PANNINI - Roman ruin with figures, about 36"x28"	30: 0: 0
FRANCIA BIGIO - Madonna and child 33" x 26"	35: 0: 0
EARLY ITALIAN SCHOOL - Ecce Homo, panel 12" x 10½"	35: 0: 0
EARLY ENGLISH SCHOOL - Portrait of Robert Honywood, died 1576 and portrait of a lady age 70; panels in one frame. 29" x 23"	50: 0: 0
SCHOOL OF LEONARDO DA VINCI - Madonna and Child and an aged woman. 23" x 18"	30: 0: 0
Carried forward	<u>30: 0: 0</u>
	£475: 0: 0

H. HARRIS BROWN 1910 - Portrait of
the deceased, 34" x 27".

ROMNEY - Lady Hamilton, 23" x 17½".

SOLOMAN J. SOLOMAN 1867 - Bacchus, 19½" x
14½"; water colour.

Valuation of the Thomas Phillips Price collection at Marks Hall in 1932.

Image source: Essex Record Office (County Archives), Chelmsford, UK.

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By direction of Mrs. M. E. Phillips-Price

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57 East Street
Coggeshall
Telephone 204 (2 lines)

30 High Street
Halstead
Telephone 2491

Oil Paintings, Pictures and Engravings Continued

- 49 511. A 19th century oval silk work picture 8" x 7", 'Mrs. Siddons', in gilt frame and a 19th century water colour of 'Hieronymi', 8" x 5½" in black and gilt frame.
- 45 512. A framed and glazed engraving and a coloured drawing of Marks Hall Mansion.
- 48 513. An early 17th century Italian school oil painting on canvas 22" x 18", 'The Virgin Mary with Orb', in ornamental gilt frame.
- 490 514. A fine 18th century oil painting on canvas 24" x 18", 'Girl in White Dress with Basket of Flowers', in gilt frame.
- 26 515. A Gauche painting 20" x 15" by Simeon Solomon, 'Bacchus', in black and gilt frame.
- 40 516. A pair of 17th century Italian school oil paintings on copper in carved gilt frames 9" x 7" 'Virgin and Child' and 'Christ Holding Orb'.

Sale catalogue of the auction of the estate of the late Mrs M. E. Price 1966.

Image source: Coggeshall Museum, Essex, UK.

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Engraving of Marks Hall by W. Bartlett 1831.

Image Source: *The History and Topography of Essex* by Thomas Wright,
published in 1831.

(Book downloaded from the Internet Archive.org and image extracted).



Thomas Phillips Price with his wife May Elizabeth in the grounds of Marks Hall, Essex, circa 1930.

Image Source: Marks Hall archive (UK registered charity 256700)

Website: markshall.org.uk/about-us/our-story/