

Source:

<https://mydailyartdisplay.wordpress.com/2011/01/27/judgement-of-cambyses-and-the-flaying-of-sisamnes-by-gerard-david/>



The Judgment of Cambyses and the Flaying of Sisamnes by Gerard David (1498)

Once again, I apologize to all of you who do not like the sight of blood as today's offering is not for the squeamish! My Daily Art Display painting for today is a diptych consisting of two oil on wood panel paintings, hinged together. The left panel painting is entitled *Judgement of Cambyses* and the right-hand panel is entitled *Flaying of Sisamnes*. The diptych painted in 1498 by Gerard David, the Netherlandish painter can be seen at the Groeninge Museum in Bruges.

The paintings are based on a story concerning the trial and execution of an unjust and corrupt judge, Sisamnes which occurred in the 6th BC. The great Greek historian Herodotus preserved for posterity the story of the harsh judgment of the Persian King Cambyses II, who reigned 529-522 B.C., against the corrupt judge Sisamnes. It is a story that for both its moral and its horror is not easily forgotten. The story is succinctly presented in the fifth book of Herodotus's *Histories*.

Sisamnes, Herodotus tells us, was a royal judge under the reign of King Cambyses II. Sisamnes accepted a bribe from a party in a lawsuit, and therefore rendered an unjust judgment. King Cambyses learned of the bribe, accused Sisamnes, and had him arrested and punished, but by no ordinary punishment. The punishment was as creative as it was cruel:

King Cambyses slit his throat and flayed off all his skin and he strung the chair, on which Sisamnes had used to sit to deliver his verdicts, with these thongs.

Cambyses's creativity did not stop there. To replace Judge Sisamnes whom he had killed and flayed, Cambyses appointed Sisamnes's son, Otanes, as the new judge. Cambyses warned Otanes to bear in mind the source of the leather of the bench upon which he would sit to hear evidence, deliberate, and deliver his decisions. Without doubt, King Cambyses's warning buttressed by the reupholstered seat left a lingering impression on his new judge.



Judgement of Cambyses by Gerard David

In 1498, Gerard David was commissioned by the aldermen of the town of Bruges to paint two panels depicting this ancient tale and the finished work was to hang in the chambers of the aldermen in the town hall. This was then a warning to the local magistrates, who would see the painting every day, that the town expected them to uphold their duty to render justice free of the corruption of outside financial interests. So that this 6th century BC story had any relevance to

15th century society, David used the technique known as “actualization”, in which his painting was representative of that period by having the characters dressed in 15th century Flemish clothing.



Burghers's Lodge

As was the case in yesterday’s painting, I would like you to focus on the details of the painting and by so doing, understand how David’s attempts to tell the story without the use of words. Look under the arch of the loggia. There we see Sisamnes’s crime taking place – that of a litigant or his servant handing over a purse of money to him as a payment for a bribe and this was the basis of the crime. Through the left-hand arch of the loggia we can see David’s depiction of the Burgher’s Lodge in Bruges. Above the judge’s bench where Sisamnes sits one can see the crests of Phillip the Handsome and his wife Joanna of Castille.

The bearded central character in the group who stand before Sisamnes is Cambyses, the accuser. Look how he seems to be counting on his fingers. This could well be him counting off the acts of Sisamnes’s bribery on his fingers as he angrily regales him with the accusations. One can see the concern on Sisamnes’s face as he realizes his fate has been sealed. One thing David had to achieve with this painting was to conjure up a hate for Sisamnes and he did this by giving him the likeness of Pieter Lanchals, a conspirator who betrayed the City of Bruges to Maximilian I of Austria in his dispute with the Council of Bruges. The group of people, some of which were portraits of the then Bruges aldermen, represented the fact that the whole town was witnessing Cambyses’s accusation. The man, wearing the red cap, on the left of the seated Sisamnes is the young Phillip the Handsome, the ruler of Burgundy and the Burgundian Netherlands.

The lozenge shaped medallions on either side of the judge’s bench illustrate scenes from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. On the left are Hercules and Delaneira, the wife he betrayed, and who then gave him a robe to wear which was soaked in the blood of the Centaur, which caused the flesh of Hercules to fall from his body. The crime perpetrated by Sisamnes was a betrayal of justice – a betrayal of the people of Bruges and the outcome of his punishment was going to be similar to that which happened to Hercules.

The medallion on the right shows the god Apollo and the satyr Marsyas, who in the contest between them, the terms stated that the winner could treat the defeated party any way he wanted. Since the contest was judged by the Muses, Marsyas naturally lost and was flayed alive in a cave near Celaenae for his challenge of a god. Marsyas was the symbol of hypocrisy. David’s addition of this medallion was presumably a reminder of that salutary tale and that justice, which Sisamnes dabbled with, was a gift of the Gods, a gift to the public and his acceptance of a bribe

to change the course of justice was a sin against his people as justice did not belong to him, it belonged to the people.



Sisamnes by Gerard David

The Flaying of

The right-hand panel of the diptych illustrates the fate of Sisamnes after being convicted of bribery. The punishment was brutal, and yet not uncommon in the fifteenth century, that of flaying. David's portrayal of the flaying is graphic and shocking. We see Sisamnes lying naked on a table, his judicial red robes cast aside on the ground below. One can quite clearly see the grimace of excruciating pain on Sisamnes's contorted face as the four flayers busy themselves methodically with the gruesome task at hand. The skin of the body is carefully removed as it will be turned into leather strips to be used as upholstery for the judge's chair.



Otanes seated on judge's chair

Look in the background and one can see seated on the judge's chair, which is draped with flayed skin, Otanes, who is the son of the dying Sisamnes and who Cambryses has appointed to succeed his father. According to the book *Gesta Romanorum*, the Latin book of anecdotes and tales, Cambryses said to Otana on making him a judge:

“You will sit, to administer justice, upon the skin of your delinquent father: should any one incite you to do evil, remember his fate. Look down upon your father's skin, lest his fate befall you”

Those words were also meant to act as a deterrent to all future magistrates of Bruges, who may foolishly consider repeating the sins of Sisamnes. The paintings reminded them in a most abhorrent way that they needed to be mindful that any betrayal of the trust given to them would be severely dealt with.

These two paintings, although gruesome, are rich in color and detail and worthy of a place in My Daily Art Display.

Source: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-man-gets-under-judges-skin-with-image-of-judicial-flaying/29985028.html>

Russian Man Gets Under Judge's Skin with Image of Judicial Flaying

A judge in southern Russia halted proceedings in a case late last month to hold a special hearing to discuss a 1488 Dutch Renaissance painting.

The painting in question, *The Judgment Of Cambyses* by Gerard David, depicts in graphic detail an executioner flaying alive the corrupt Persian judge Sisamnes. The painting is also known by the title *The Flaying Of The Corrupt Judge*.

According to Greek historian Herodotus, Persian Emperor Cambyses II ordered Sisamnes skinned alive for delivering an unjust verdict after accepting a bribe. He further ordered that the unfortunate judge's skin be used to upholster the chair from which his successor -- Sisamnes's son -- would hear future cases. A small vignette in the upper right-hand corner of David's painting shows the son dispensing justice in the macabre chair.

Apparently, Krasnodar regional Appellate Court Judge Andrei Garbovsky was a bit taken aback when a creditor in a bankruptcy case, Stanislav Golubyov, sent the court some documents in an envelope decorated with an image of David's gruesome painting.

According to a document posted on the court's website, "the court believes that this circumstance demands an explanation from S.V. Golubyov, including determining whether it was a display of disrespect to the court and consideration of whether there are grounds for imposing a fine...."

A hearing on the matter was held on June 5, at which Garbovsky determined that there was no intent to disrespect the court on Golubyov's part. According to Interfax, Golubyov did not appear at the hearing but sent a written apology (presumably in a different envelope) and explained that the envelope with the painting on it had come from the office of his lawyer, Aleksei Avanesyan.

Avanesyan attended the hearing and told the court that the painting was not, in and of itself, offensive.

Lawyers for the firm undergoing bankruptcy, Sochi-Absolyut, argued that Golubyov should be fined for violating the intellectual-property rights of the artist (who died in 1523) or of the Groeninge Museum in Bruges, Belgium, where the painting hangs today.

The judge proclaimed the matter closed.

Nonetheless, David's painting has a history of being used to send political messages. It was originally commissioned by the authorities of Bruges to hang in the town hall in a bid to foster honesty among officials.

In 2012, supporters of former Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko unfurled a large poster of the painting at a hearing where she was appealing a seven-year prison term for alleged corruption. The unamused judge ordered the poster removed and threatened to have the protesters expelled as well.

In December 2012, protesters brought a reproduction of the same painting to Moscow's Zamoskvoretsky district court just days after a judge sentenced Maksim Luzyanin to 4 1/2 years in prison for participating in the May 2012 Bolotnaya Square protest against Vladimir Putin's return to the Kremlin for a third presidential term.

Activists Sergei Davidis and Maria Arkhipova were detained while trying to present the painting to Judge Andrei Fedin.