

THE BAPTISM OF THE EUNUCH



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Figuur 1 Painting with frame



Figuur 2 Backside

THE BAPTISM OF THE EUNUCH, REMBRANDT

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Kunst-, religie en cultuurwetenschappen

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Universiteit van Amsterdam

The Baptism of the Eunuch, Rembrandt

1626, oil on panel

H 64.0 cm, VV 47.5 cm

Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht

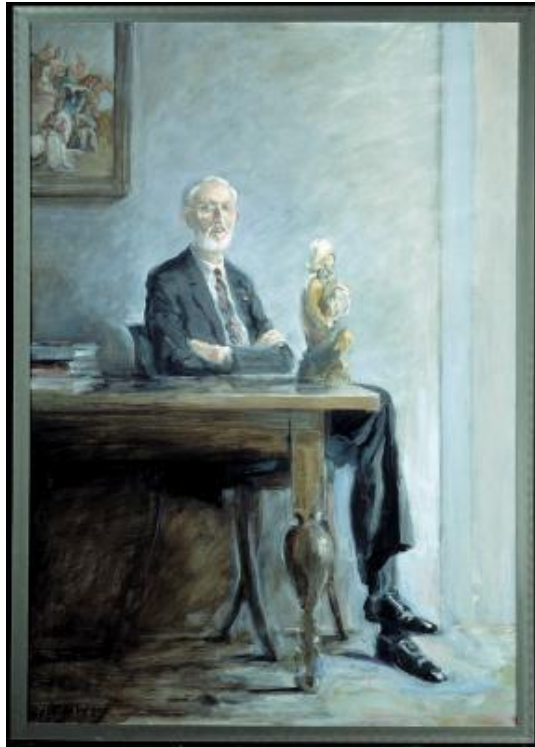


Figure 3 Henri Defoer (1936 -) Ernst van de Wetering (painter), 2004



Figure 5 Detail Philip



Figure 4 Detail Eunuch

INTRODUCTION

Suppose you are invited to someone's house to have some coffee around 11 a.m., a typical Dutch custom. It is the first time that you enter his or her house. You sit in the living room and talk to the hosts, exchanging polite phrases. Meanwhile – being a beginning art historian – you look around and see the collection of paintings and objects which the owners of the house have exhibited. No doubt you would see some portraits, landscapes, and small sculptures which may or may not be appealing to you from a historical or esthetical point of view.

You cannot stand up and walk over to the objects without being impolite, so you have to watch inconspicuously during the conversation. Would any painting or art object in the room be of special interest to you? Can you spot certain interesting paintings from a distance, not being able to investigate up close what you like to see? If not, then the probability of making history at an early stage in your career as art historian is gone when you leave the house. If you should succeed in selecting this promising object and the hosts lack the expertise to reveal adequate information and you are allowed to look more closely, then your chances of a promising career in art will significantly increase.

And this is what happened forty-four years ago with a painting that was discovered in a household in the Eastern part of the Netherlands. But the discoverer was not a beginning art historian but curator of the Aartsbisschoppelijk Museum in Utrecht, mr Henri Defoer (see Figure 3). He claims to have immediately spotted "*The Baptism of the Eunuch*" as an early Rembrandt. His opinion was soon to be supported by various Rembrandt specialists, among which some members of the Rembrandt Research Project. With financial help of the Rembrandtvereniging the Aartsbisschoppelijk Museum acquired this painting, which nowadays is on loan in the Rijksmuseum Het Catharijneconvent in Utrecht.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PAINTING: OBSERVATIONS

Suppose you have the opportunity to look more closely at this painting, which is unknown to you. How do you look, which details are of interest for you to understand the meaning, to establish the date, painter or the art historical context of this object of art?

What do we see

At a first glance two figures on the foreground draw the spectator's attention: a bald-headed, bearded, white male, who looks surprisingly young judging by his smooth facial skin, outstretching his hand above the head of a kneeling coloured man. However, his beard has many grey hairs which seems a bit contradictory to his pinkish smooth face, and is painted with fewer details than that of the kneeling man. The dress is rather simple: a light brown tunic and a pinkish red cloak. His head is slightly inclined, his eyes nearly closed as if in contemplation (Figure 5).

The coloured man (Figure 4) is wealthily dressed: the golden earring, a golden ring on his right hand, a white sleeveless long-haired fur coat, which almost completely covers the body, and a white belt. The loose end of this belt has three large knots, vaguely a reminder of the Franciscan vows. The hairs on the fur coat have been thickly painted; this impasto can be observed especially on the flap of the coat in the middle and on the back side on the right. Also the fabric of his doublet is rich: the sleeves are bi-coloured and have four, possibly golden, buttons.

The kneeling man looks into the distance, slightly upwards but not in the direction of the man close to him. His arms and hands are crossed, patiently undergoing the old man's gesture.



Figure 7 Kneeling servant



Figure 10 Standing servant with the bible



Figure 8 Dog drinking water



Figure 6 Water waves of the stream



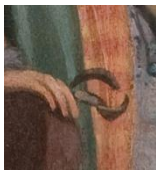
Figure 9 Three different faces?

Somewhat behind this man is another figure kneeling, also black and dressed in a beautifully decorated kaftan. (Figure 7). This decoration is painted along the bottom edge in small strokes against a blue band. He also wears a greenish blue cloak which is fixed to the kaftan with a golden(?) pin. He is holding a turban, consisting of at least two different straps: one light orange and the other with a greenish blue pattern. This may belong to the first-mentioned black person, although the colours of this turban are a better fit with the greenish blue cloak of this younger person. He is intensively looking to the scene in front of him.

The third coloured man is standing and is holding a large open-folded book (Figure 10). He is also dressed in a luxurious way: the blue kaftan has silver buckles and buttons. The tunic has large sleeves and a modest turban with a loose pink strap covers his head. He too is looking to the ritual in front of him.

On the foreground to the left a large dog (Figure 8) drinks water which proves that there is a small stream present in this picture. Small curly figures on the right side suggest the same, but in a less sophisticated way (Figure 6). The curls look as if they have been painted by using the back of a brush handle.

It seems to me that there is a striking resemblance between the three faces of the coloured people except the small beard of the fur coated person¹ (see Figure 9). Possibly the painter saw one coloured person – the face looks rather like a personalized portrait than as a template – and hesitated to deviate too much from this face, probably because of his unfamiliarity with African people.²



In the background three men are looking closely at what is happening: a coach-man, a co-rider and an armed rider, whose horse is hidden, except for its grey tail and part of its rear leg, visible below the neck of the second grey horse. Close to the right hand of the coach-man is an object, which is difficult to identify, but possibly something to attach the reins to. The charioteer and co-rider are respectively sitting and standing on a chariot with big wheels, of which only two out of four are visible. The horseman has a quiver hanging from his belt and also part of his bow or sword is sticking out. Presumably he is the guard for this travelling company.



In the background on the left a palm tree is depicted and on the right side one sees the outlines of a town, although the latter can easily be interpreted as rocks. The figures, the chariot and the horses form a compact group standing out against the sky, which is evenly lighted and colourless.

¹ Which is remarkable because Africans seldom have beards

² In 1661 Rembrandt made a portrait of two negroes, presenting a far more authentic "Moorish" physiognomy



1625 - 1629: initial	<i>R</i>	or monogram (short form)	<i>RL</i>
1629 - Jan. 1632: monogram (long form)			<i>RL.</i>
1632: monogram (l.f.) plus patronym			<i>RL - van Ryn</i>
Late 1632 - early 1633: first name			<i>Rembrant. f.</i>
1633 - 1669: first name plus "d"			<i>Rembrandt. f.</i>

Figure 11 Recognition of the signature

Acts 8:26-40

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. So he got up and went. Now there was an **Ethiopian** eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his **chariot**, he was **reading** the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go over to this chariot and join it.' So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' He replied, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: (Isaiah 53 7:8)

'Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
 and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
 so he does not open his mouth.
 In his humiliation justice was denied him.
 Who can describe his generation?
 For his life is taken away from the earth.'

The eunuch asked Philip, 'About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?' Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to **some water**; and the eunuch said, 'Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?' He commanded the chariot to stop, and **both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.** When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

On the bottom right side is a kind of signature visible, but it is hard to read, because it is set in a shape sketched in brown that is worn away by cleaning. (see Figure 11 *Recognition of the signature*) But when I thicken the dark brown parts by the same colour, than an open R, L and 1626 appear. Members of the Rembrandt Research Project read the monograph slightly different: *RH 1626*.³ These initials were used by Rembrandt in 1626, although the R slightly deviates from the one shown in Figure 11.

What is depicted

In this stage of our analysis we do know the painter, but not yet what Rembrandt has depicted. Basically it is not a difficult task to grasp the main subject of this picture, looking at the main elements: an older man blessing or baptizing a coloured man, a chariot somewhere in a (sub)tropical surrounding. Consulting an iconographic lexicon⁴ reveals the truth of the depicted scene rather quickly because there is only one baptism with a Negro mentioned in the Bible: the apostle Philip, who baptizes an Ethiopian court official on his way to Gaza: Acts 8: 26-40. In brief the story goes as follows: (see full text on page 7):

While walking along the road from Jerusalem to Gaza, St. Philip is compelled by the spirit of God to accompany the passing entourage of the Treasurer of Ethiopia, a eunuch serving under Candace, Queen of Ethiopia. Philip joins them and the eunuch, sitting on a chariot and reading the prophecies of Isaiah, asks the apostle to explain the text. After a while they come to some water where Philip baptizes the eunuch on the court officials own request.

Rembrandt painted the moment that Apostle Philip baptizes the court official, but uses the preceding text to depict details like the chariot, the Moorish complexion of the Ethiopian, the book and the small water stream.

About the composition



Every person in the picture is focused on the baptism, even the brown horse is looking to Philip and the Eunuch. The group forms a curve around the baptism, thus enhancing theatrical effects by being an audience and at the same time by being actors who draw the viewers attention of this painting to the performance.

To show all elements and characters Rembrandt positioned the chariot and horses on a hillock, whereas the observer is standing downhill, thus suggesting a low viewpoint. Perspective ("houding", a seventeenth century art term for a harmonious balance of strong and weak colours, bringing about an apparent space⁵) has been realized by a careful gradation in colours and tones. In this early phase of his career

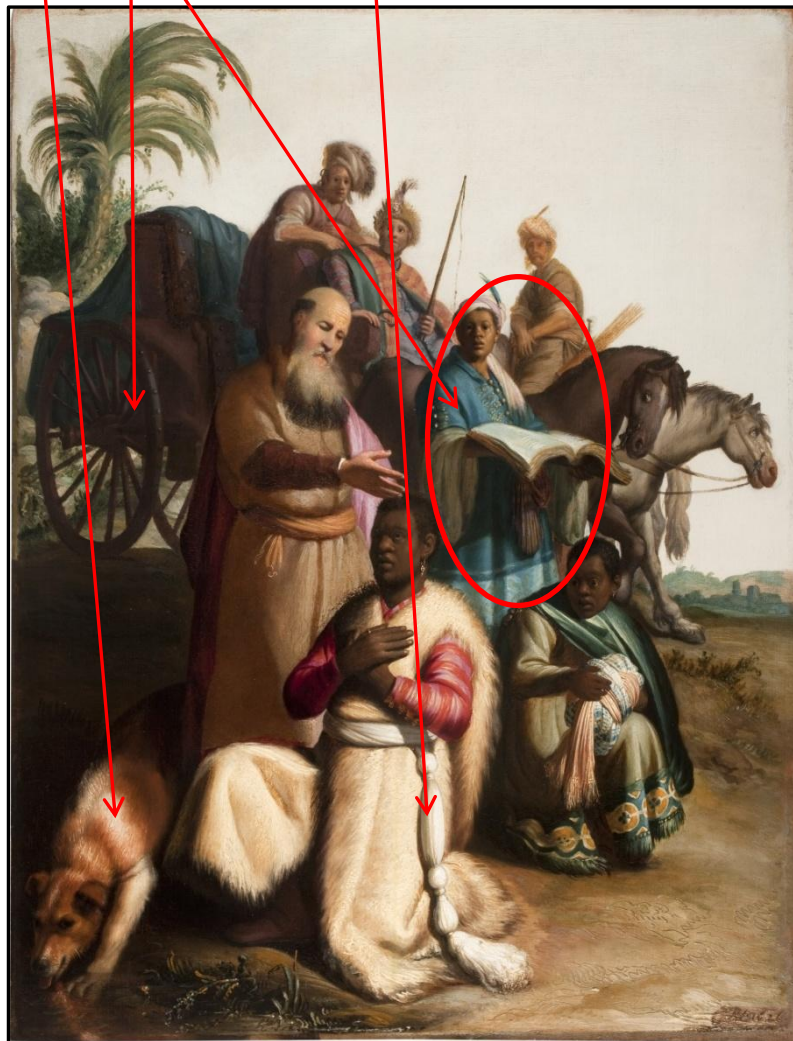
Rembrandt hardly made use of chiaroscuro effects: in the *Baptism* the light is spread evenly and the colours are bright, but without sharp contrasts. In this the young artist is profoundly indebted to his teacher Pieter Lastman (1583–1633), who was a leading painter of mythological and historical pictures and spent three years in Italy.⁶ Although Rembrandt seems to have only spent about half a year with Lastman around 1623, he fully absorbed the lessons of his master.

³ Bruyn, J., Wetering, E. v. d., Rembrandt Harmenszoon van, R. en Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project., *A corpus of Rembrandt paintings*, The Hague ; Boston Dordrecht 1982, p. 99.

⁴ For instance, J.Hall, *Dictionary of subjects and symbols in art*, London 1979 Rev. p. 88

⁵ The concept of *Houding* is rather complex, see Taylor, P., 'The concept of Houding in Dutch Art Theory', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtold Institutes* Nr. 55 (1992), pp.210-232

⁶ See also Stechow, W., 'Some Observations on Rembrandt and Lastman', *Oud-Holland* Nr. 84(2-3) (1969), pp. 148-162



From Lastman he learned the importance of painting lofty subjects in a broad format with careful attention to the ancient costumes, dramatic gestures, and compositional groupings of the full-length figures.



Figure 14 Christ Driving the Money Changers from the Temple, Rembrandt (1626)



Figure 14 Stoning of St Stephen, Rembrandt, 1625, Oil on canvas 89 cm x 123 cm

The earliest works of Rembrandt, including “Stoning of Saint Stephen” (1625), “Balaam and the ass” (1626), and “Christ Driving the Money Changers from the Temple” (1626), clearly derive closely from both the themes and the pictorial formulas of Lastman.

“The Baptism of the Eunuch” had already been painted four times by Lastman⁷. Especially the last one painted in 1623 (see Figure 12) inspired Rembrandt’s version of the scene described in Acts 8. He transposed his painting into a vertical format, but retains most of the same elements, such as the wheels of the chariot, the servant with the Bible, the dog, the knots on the belt, the kneeling Eunuch crossing his arms. Rembrandt’s composition, however, is condensed into a tighter, more dramatically lighted mass.

But there are also differences such as the palm tree instead of an oak tree in Lastman’s version, and the rocky background disappearing in Rembrandt’s picture, thus drawing more attention to the main subject. Also the dog is functional in Rembrandt’s painting: he is drinking and ‘proves’ the existence of water. Lastman doesn’t need such a demonstration because he painted a river with a waterfall.

Another possible interesting influence on this particular painting is that of a brilliant artist, Jan Lievens, Rembrandt’s colleague and competitor, although 15 months younger. They knew each other, may have shared a studio in Leiden early on, definitely shared models and indeed modelled for each other. Dufoer suggests⁸ that the face of the co-driver is a portrait of Jan Lievens and so is that of the harp player in *The musical Allegory* (1626) also by Rembrandt (see Figure 16 Lievens portrait in “The Baptism”, page 11). This comparison is convincing although the co-driver is more difficult to recognize because, being a small background figure (3,5 cm), his face is less detailed. Whether or not the portraits of Lievens resemble the face of the *Baptism* and/or the *Allegory* is not an easy question to answer. Dufoer sees the similarity in the long small nose, the pointed chin and the small mouth.

⁷ In 1608 37 x 56 cm, oil on panel, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen Berlin; in 1614 oil on panel, 85 x 115 cm, Alte Pinakothek, München; in 1615/20, oil on panel, Fondation Custodia Paris; in 1623 oil on panel, 85 x 115 cm, Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe.

⁸ Defoer, H. L. M., ‘Rembrandt van Rijn, De Doop van de Kamerling’, *Oud-Holland* Nr. 91 1,2 (1977), pp. 17- 19.



Co-driver Baptism 1626,
Rembrandt



Harp player in *Musical Allegory* 1626,
Rembrandt



Jan Lievens - *Self-Portrait*,
ca. 1629-1630. Oil on panel
16 9/16 x 13 in. - Private collection



Lievens portrait,
Vorsterman



Lievens

Figure 16 Lievens portrait in "The Baptism"



**Figure 17 Jacob anointing the stone at Beth-El, Lievens,
1625/26. Etch 200 x 160 mm Rijksmuseum Amsterdam**

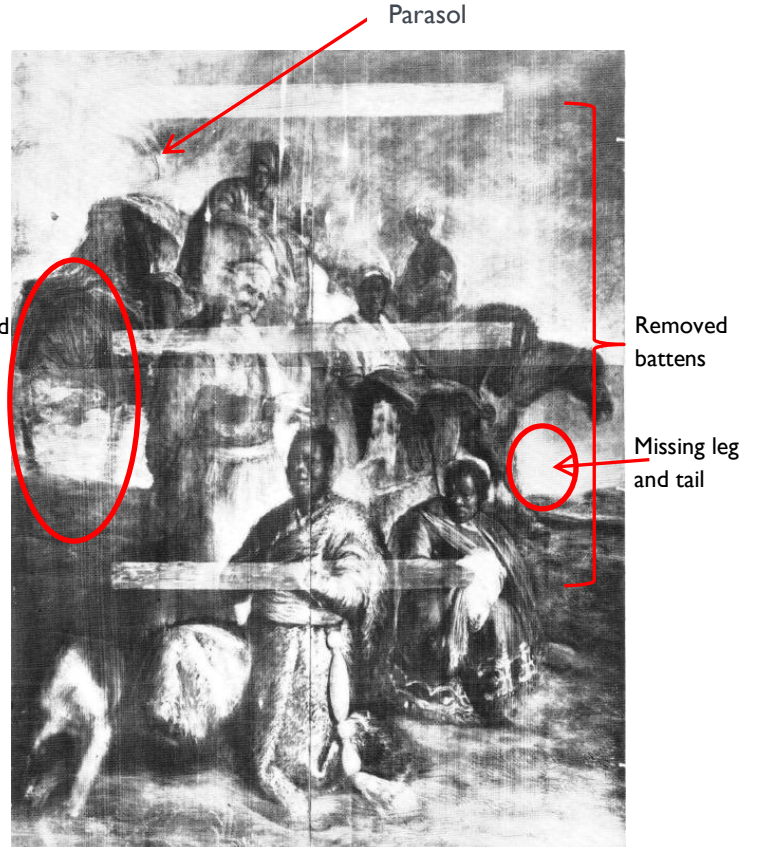


Figure 15 X-ray "Baptism" 1976

Another demonstration of the influence of Lievens on Rembrandt or the other way around is an etch, made by Lievens of *Jacob anointing the stone at Beth-El*. (see Figure 17). The kneeling Jacob resembles the posture of the Eunuch of Rembrandt's painting.

Symbolism in the Baptism of the Eunuch

Several authors mention symbolic elements in *The Baptism of the Eunuch*: Schama points out that Rembrandt knew that the Palm tree was a symbol for Resurrection⁹ (victory over death through the union with Christ). Palm fronds were laid on the path walked by Christ as he entered Jerusalem. He as well as the Rembrandt Research Project¹⁰ also consider the snow-white fur coat metaphorically: as a second life after baptism contrasting the black skin: Philip washes the black Ethiopian, dispelling the colour. Others¹¹ believe that Rembrandt used the white fur coat to indicate the eunuch's high status, because in Rembrandt's time only the rich could afford such a costly coat. But all together, in Christianity there is a connection between resurrection and baptism: both are associated with a new second life and possibly Rembrandt was aware of this.¹² Also the belt could have a special significance: the believer girds himself with virtue and Tümpel and Schatborn see "the dog not only as decorative motif but also as representative of all creatures unable to understand this sacred event they are witnessing."¹³ This could be the case for Lastman's painting and possibly Rembrandt knew the original meaning, but he added something to it: the drinking activity of the dog.

TECHNICAL ASPECTS

Looking at the painting in the Catharijneconvent one can see the curve of two planks at the bottom: thick at the middle and bent backwards on the left and right side (see also Figure 15). Using side light, the surface seems smooth except for the hairy sides of the fur coat which have been thickly painted (*impasto* or *kennelikhed*). Rembrandt's work was recently restored in 2010 and I had the opportunity to read the restoration report. The panel has been made with two oak planks, 5 to 10 mm thick, 63,5 cm high and 48 cm wide. When the painting was discovered three battens were glued to hold the join together (see Figure 15). These have been removed, because they caused more problems by damaging the painted surface. The ground layer is light yellow and there are traces of the brown under painting. The upper layers were prepared with very fine paint particles, consisting of eight pigments only.

Main retouches have been applied in the past around the palm tree and the vertical join of the two planks: the gap - due to bending of the two planks - had to be filled and in-painted. Also Philip's head has suffered quite badly and is heavily retouched, which accounts for the smooth appearance of his face. The main task of the 2010 restoration was to remove the old varnish and to apply a fresh one.

Also interesting is the information, resulting from of the X-ray made in 1976. As the painting progressed, Rembrandt made some changes such as the wheel of the chariot, originally painted larger, the addition of the tail and hind leg of the armed man's horse and the fact that under the palm tree a shadow of a parasol was visible (see Figure 15).

⁹ Schama, S., *Rembrandt's eyes*, Amsterdam 1999 p. 235.

¹⁰ Bruyn, J., Wetering, E. v. d., Rembrandt Harmenszoon van, R. en Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project., *A corpus of Rembrandt paintings*, The Hague ; Boston Dordrecht 1982 p. 103.

¹¹ Tümpel, A. en Schatborn, P., Pieter Lastman: The man who taught Rembrandt, Zwolle 1991 p. 59.

¹² See the Bible Rom 6:4 "We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life."

¹³ Tümpel, A. en Schatborn, P., Pieter Lastman: The man who taught Rembrandt, Zwolle 1991 p. 58.



Figure 20 Philip the Evangelist preaching the Gospel in Samaria“, workshop of Dirck Crabeth 1559
Stained-glass 24 (detail) in the Sint Janskerk at Gouda



Figure 21 The Apostle Philip Teaching the Minister of the Ethiopian Queen, fresco Monastery Decani – 1327, Kosovo



Figure 18 Abraham Bloemaert, Baptism of the Eunuch. 1620-25; oil on canvas, Abraham 219,0 x 153,6 cm. Centraal Museum, Utrecht.



Figure 19 The Baptism of Queen Candace's Eunuch Andries and Jan Both, ca. 1640
212 x 155 cm Prado



Figure 22 The Baptism of the Eunuch, Aelbert Cuyp, c. 1642, 42 1/2 x 59 1/2 in. The Menil Collection, Houston

CONTEXT AND COMMENTS

Depiction of the *Baptism of the Eunuch* before 1600

The theme of the Eunuch Baptism was less depicted in the years before the Reformation and during the beginning of this Protestant movement as well. An early example is the fresco in the Monastery Decani in Kosovo (Figure 21) and another (catholic) depiction of the theme can be found in Gouda, where part of stained-glass window number 24 in the Sint Janskerk is dedicated to Philip and the Eunuch (1559). Also Lambert Sustris painted (on canvas) the same subject in 1550. Philips Galle made a series of prints after a design by Maerten van Heemskerck about the Acts of the Apostles, one being the baptism of the Eunuch. Possibly Lastman knew this engraving and some elements, such as the chariot, the tree and the number of the travelling company, coincide with his paintings.



Figure 23 Philip baptises the Eunuch, Fe: Galle, Philips, inv. Maerten van Heemskerck, 1575 engraving; IV/VI, 195 mm x 269 mm, Prentenkabinet Museum Boijmans van Beuningen Rotterdam

Baptism of the Eunuch in the seventeenth century

The biblical scene of the Baptism became popular in the Dutch Republic during the early decades of the seventeenth century. Besides Pieter Lastman, there are many more examples such as Abraham Bloemaert, Rombout van Troyen (1630), Andries and Jan Both (1640), Aelbert Cuyt (1642), David Colijns, Herman Nauwicx (1641) and Salomon Koninck. The reason for this growing popularity is the Calvinistic notion that those who embrace the Christian faith as adults are not allowed baptism unless they first have faith and repentance. Baptism, according to Calvin (1509-1564), accomplishes three things: assurance, union with Christ, and adoption. These blessings are objectively present in



Figure 24 REMBRANDT. The Baptism of the Eunuch. Jan van Vliet 1631 Etch 58.7 x 49cm. Copy of a lost Rembrandt painting privately owned Amsterdam



Figure 25 Rembrandt, The baptism of the eunuch, ca. 1635, Munich, Graphische Sammlung



Figure 26 The Baptism of the Eunuch, Rembrandt f. 1641 , etch 178 x 214 mm, Rijksprentenkabinet Amsterdam

the sacrament and are subjectively received by faith.¹⁴ This belief was against the Roman Catholic view stating that without baptism, salvation is attainable by none. The Dutch Reformed Church specifically laid down the Calvinistic viewpoint in various synods during the last quarter of the sixteenth century.

Other Eunuch Baptisms by Rembrandt

The theme inspired Rembrandt several times: Jan Gillisz van Vliet (1600/10 – 1668), associate of Rembrandt, made a print in 1631 after a lost painting of Rembrandt (Figure 24). In 1635 Rembrandt sketched the same theme, varying slightly his composition by mirroring Philip and the Eunuch (Figure 25). A few years later Rembrandt produced an etch, retaining basically the same composition, but with a drastic change in the figures (Figure 26).

These works have one element in common: a prominent role for the armed horse man, whereas the remaining members of the group are much more placed in the background (except for the turban carrying servant in Rembrandt's etch). Also the palm tree disappears, which possibly demonstrates that Rembrandt did not adhere much importance to its symbolic meaning.

EPILOGUE

One of the reasons that *The Baptism of the Eunuch* was discovered so late was the difficulty that this early work is not commonly associated with Rembrandt's style, developed from 1629 and onwards. Only experts, who are familiar with his paintings around 1626-1628, recognize the stylistic similarities of this picture. Even after the discovery not every art historian is convinced of the quality of *The Baptism*. Simon Schama is rather harsh in his judgment: "*Landscape is sketchy, the horse wooden, the composition banal the upright panel lacks elegance*".¹⁵ Gary Schwartz's famous book "*De grote Rembrandt*" in 2006 does not mention this painting at all. Also the Rembrandt Research Project remarks rather thriftily: *unsure handling of spatial relationships and lack of coordination in the colour scheme*¹⁶

Five years ago, as a beginning student in art history, I visited the Catharijneconvent in great anticipation of the only Rembrandt present in this museum. When I saw the painting I was disappointed. Exactly this reaction is the reason to select *The Baptism* for this essay, having learned a lot in the past five years about painting and particularly in this course about looking at paintings. This looking helped me a lot in understanding what Rembrandt tried to achieve but could not realize as a 20 year old youngster. His master's hand was still too strong and his ideas – stark contrasting light and realistic dramatizing effects - were not yet fully worked out. And that makes *The Baptism of the Eunuch* worthwhile to analyse: the struggle with composition and colours. Is it not that what the art of painting is about and separates the common artist from the master?

¹⁴ Calvin on baptism, penance, and absolution by rich lusk, <http://www.hornes.org/theologia/rich-lusk/calvin-on-baptism-penance-absolution>

¹⁵ Schama, S., *Rembrandt's eyes*, Amsterdam 1999, p. 235.

¹⁶ Bruyn, J., Wetering, E. v. d., Rembrandt Harmenszoon van, R. en Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project., *A corpus of Rembrandt paintings*, The Hague ; Boston Dordrecht 1982, p. 103.

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