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Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century

Emanuel de Witte
Dutch, c. 1616 - 1691/1692

The Interior of the Oude Kerk, Amsterdam

c. 1660

oil on canvas
overall: 80.5 x 100 cm (31 11/16 x 39 3/8 in.)
framed: 122.6 x 141.1 x 7.3 cm (48 1/4 x 55 9/16 x 2 7/8 in.)
Patrons' Permanent Fund 2004.127.1

ENTRY

This large and boldly executed representation of the Oude Kerk in Amsterdam is one of Emanuel de Witte's most impressive architectural paintings.[1] From the viewer's low vantage point at the west end of the nave, the broad sweep of the church's spacious interior is both imposing and inviting. Tall cylindrical columns flanking the nave, and three enormous brass chandeliers hanging from the wooden vaulted ceiling recede in rhythmic patterns to the distant choir. Bands of light stream dramatically across the dimly lit interior, illuminating the columns and the arches they support, the dark gray stone floor, and two groups of figures within the nave: a pair of elderly gentlemen who are engaged in an emphatic discussion before an open tomb in the foreground, and a young mother who sits on a wooden bench nursing her child.

The Oude Kerk, the earliest parish church in Amsterdam, traces its origins to the early fourteenth century.[2] Initially it was a Catholic church consisting of a central nave and two aisles. By the mid-sixteenth century, however, its appearance had been greatly transformed through the addition of a large choir, transepts that

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reached to the height of the central nave, and multiple chapels. In the late sixteenth century it became a Protestant church. At that time the thirty-eight altarpieces that once graced its interior were removed, and whitewash was applied to the walls and stone columns lining the nave and apse. The stained-glass windows, however, were retained, as was the decorative painting on the wooden vaulted ceiling.

After De Witte moved to Amsterdam in the early 1650s, the Oude Kerk became one of his favorite subjects, not only because of the majesty of its large interior but also because of the important and dynamic role the church played in the lives of Amsterdam's citizens. The church was a center of communal life, where people of all ages, the devout and the would-be devout alike, felt free to enter and congregate, whether or not they were seeking spiritual guidance. De Witte relished in the depiction of that human presence, in all its variety, and in his paintings of the Oude Kerk one finds all types: top-hatted gentlemen talking animatedly with one another; parishioners sleeping unabashedly in church pews; quiet, obedient children as well as those playing hide-and-seek in the stalls; young women nursing; and older matrons listening intently to sermons. Dogs roam freely in De Witte's depictions of the Oude Kerk, sometimes behaving properly, sometimes not; in this instance, a dog is urinating on a column in the left foreground.[3]

For De Witte, the Oude Kerk was more than just a social milieu; it was also the site where one marked the defining moments in the cycle of life: birth and death. The Oude Kerk was, in fact, a sacred burial place, and this facet of its broad social and spiritual responsibility within the community was the focus of many of De Witte's paintings. In the National Gallery of Art's canvas, as in so many of De Witte's works, the artist juxtaposed a mother nursing a newborn child with an open tomb, presumably to symbolize life's journey as it unfolds within the framework of the Christian tradition.[4]

The imagery De Witte incorporated in the painting emphatically reinforces this message. In the dim recesses of the church, a funeral procession of gentlemen clad in somber black makes its way slowly along the north aisle to the nave where the freshly dug open tomb awaits.[5] The skull of the tomb's former occupant lies near the gravedigger's tools, emphasizing the finality of death, while other pictorial elements symbolically offer the promise of Christian salvation. The spade, with its T-shaped handle, stands vertically in the tomb's reddish-brown soil, a striking motif, meant to signify the cross on which Christ was crucified. At the same time, the heavy stone rolled back from the tomb provides a visual reminder of the biblical

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account of Christ's Resurrection.[6] Finally, to purify and simplify his composition and to enhance the universality of his message, De Witte eliminated the banners, plaques, and heraldic shields that hung from the nave's columns. He did not make this painting to commemorate a specific burial, but to comment upon the broader significance of this passage of life in Christian belief. The fact that De Witte oriented this grave in a north-south direction rather than on an east-west axis, as all graves in the church are actually oriented, reinforces the sense that his intention was not to depict an actual event, but rather to provide this scene with a broader allegorical statement about death.

De Witte painted more than twenty views of the interior of the Oude Kerk, which range from quite accurate representations to fanciful re-creations of its architectural character.[7] In this instance, he elongated the columns, adjusted the position of piers and church furniture, and widened the nave to enhance the dynamic quality of the scene. He also altered the character of the light streaming into the building through the windows. In other paintings of the nave De Witte allowed light to shine through the apse windows and carefully rendered the design and color of their stained-glass panels [fig. 1].[8] Here, however, he darkened the apse windows to give the scene a somber character appropriate to the solemnity of the funeral procession. He indicated, with broad touches of the brush, the glowing reds and deep oranges of the stained glass, but allowed no light to shine through them. At the same time he eliminated a stained-glass panel in the middle of the large window in the south transept to provide a light-filled, unobstructed vista to the city rooftops beyond the window's leaded panes.[9] Indeed, De Witte imaginatively controlled the lighting throughout the composition for dramatic effect. Light passing through the windows at the right, for example, strikes the arches on the south side of the nave in a consistent fashion, whereas only one column on the north side of the nave is brightly illuminated.

Arnold Houbraken indicated that De Witte made numerous drawings of architectural interiors in preparation for his paintings, although none are known today.[10] He must also have made figure studies that he then used to populate his interiors. The seated woman breast-feeding her baby, for example, appears often in his works, as do the two gentlemen (and their dog) in animated conversation (see [fig. 2]). Whatever his visual sources, De Witte freely adapted them to impart both mood and narrative content to his architectural paintings. In this ability he had no equal, as Houbraken rightly attests.[11]

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES

fig. 1 Emanuel de Witte, *Interior of the Oude Kerk, Amsterdam, with Townsfolk Gathered for a Service*, c. 1660–1665, oil on canvas, Eijk and Rose-Marie van Otterloo Collection

fig. 2 Emanuel de Witte, *The Oude Kerk, Amsterdam*, 1659, oil on canvas, Kunsthalle Hamburg. Photo: bpk, Berlin / Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg / Elke Walford / Art Resource, NY

NOTES

[1] I would like to thank Molli Kuenstner for her extensive research on this painting.

[2] The church, dedicated to Saint Nicholas, was built on the foundations of a small, thirteenth-century, wooden chapel and cemetery. See H. Janse, *De Oude Kerk te Amsterdam: Bouwgeschiedenis en restauratie* (Zwolle, 2004), for the history of the construction of the Oude Kerk.

[3] The dog had been painted out when the painting was illustrated in Ilse Manke, *Emanuel de Witte, 1617–1692* (Amsterdam, 1963), no. 65.

[4] This theme has been discussed by, among others, Timothy Trent Blade, “Two Interior Views of the Old Church in Delft,” *Museum Studies* 6 (Art Institute of Chicago) (1971): 34–50; and Beverly Heisner, “Mortality and Faith: The Figural Motifs within Emanuel de Witte’s Dutch Church Interiors,” *Studies in Iconography* 6 (1980): 107–122. The interpretation of the mother nursing her child as a symbol of charity, as is sometimes found in the literature (see Timothy Trent Blade, “Two Interior Views,” 34–50), is not convincing, partially because of the context in which these figures appear,

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but partially also because Charity (*caritas*) traditionally is shown nursing two infants.

[5] De Witte included many of the same elements (the nursing mother, the open tomb, and the funeral procession) in his *Oude Kerk in Amsterdam,* c. 1655, oil on panel, Musée des Beaux Arts, Strasbourg. See Ilse Manke, *Emanuel de Witte, 1617–1692* (Amsterdam, 1963), no. 66.

[6] The gravestone in De Witte's painting is located at the site of the grave marked with the number 19 in the Oude Kerk.

[7] For these paintings, see Ilse Manke, *Emanuel de Witte, 1617–1692* (Amsterdam, 1963).

[8] For an analysis of the subjects of these apse windows, which were donated to the Oude Kerk by King Philip II of Spain, see Wim de Groot, "Bloei en teloorgang van de Bourgondisch-Habsburgse glazen in de Oude Kerk van Amsterdam," *Amstelodamum: Maandblad voor de kennis van Amsterdam* 92, no. 6 (November–December 2005): 17–32.

[9] The stained-glass panel on this window indicated the names and family crests of Amsterdam burgomasters. For an image of its probable appearance at this time, see De Witte's *Interior of the Oude Kerk, Amsterdam, with Townsfolk Gathered for a Service* (fig. 1).

[10] Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen*, 3 vols. (The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1976), 1:283: "De meeste Kerken binnen Amsterdam heeft hy van binnen op verscheiden wyze naar't leven afgeteekent, geschildert, met Predikstoel, Orgel, Heere- en gemeene gestoelten, Grafsteden en andere daar vercierseen, zoo dat dezelve te kennen zyn."

[11] Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen*, 3 vols. (The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1976), 1:283: "Dog hy begaf zig naderhand geheel met'er woon tot Amsterdam, en tot het schilderen van Kerkjes, waar in niemant hem gelyk was, zoo ten opzigt van de geregelde bouwkonst, geestighe verkiezinge van lichten, als welgemaakete beeldjes."

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support is a coarse, open-weave fabric that has been lined. The tacking margins are no longer extant, but cusping is present on all four sides of the painting, indicating that it probably retains its original dimensions. The fabric was prepared with a double ground. The lower layer is red and the top layer is dark gray, both are rather thick. Infrared reflectography at 1.5 – 1.7 microns[1] revealed

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some preliminary drawing in the architectural elements. De Witte carefully layered his brushstrokes to allow the lower layers to show through the upper ones.

The painting has some small losses and minor abrasion, but overall it is in good condition. The fine overall crackle pattern is most visible in the white columns. The crackle in this area has been minimized with inpainting. The gold at the ends of the vaulted ceiling ribs may be restoration.

[1] Infrared reflectography was performed using a FLIR Indigo/Alpha VisGaAs camera.

PROVENANCE

(Sale, Philippus van der Schley et al. at Arnoldus Dankmeyer & Son, Amsterdam, 14-15 August 1793, no. 215); Fouquet, Amsterdam; (sale, Philippus van der Schley et al. at Huis van Trip, Amsterdam, 7-8 May 1804, no. 194). E.W. Walker;[1] (sale, Christie, Manson & Woods, London, 10 April 1883, no. 123); Lesser.[2] John Femor-Hesketh, Towcaster, Northamptonshire. (Mortimer Brandt, New York), by 1951/1952 until at least 1963. (Noortman & Brod, New York), by 1981. Saul P. and Gayfryd Steinberg, New York; (sale, Christie, Manson & Woods, New York, 12 January 1996, no. 197); private collection, New York; purchased 17 November 2004 through (Gurr-Johns, London) by NGA.

[1] E.W. Walker is the vendor's name originally written under stock number 332R in Christie's daybook for the 1883 sale, but it is crossed out and "Miss Maples" is written above it, so it is not certain who the seller was. This information was kindly supplied by Marijke Booth of Christie's Archives Department (e-mail of 13 December 2005, in NGA curatorial files).

[2] The name of the buyer, originally given to the NGA as "Legge," was kindly corrected by Marijke Booth of Christie's Archives Department (e-mail of 8 December 2005, in NGA curatorial files).

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EXHIBITION HISTORY

1981 Inaugural Exhibition of Fine Paintings and Drawings, Noortman & Brod, New York, 1981, no. 15, repro.

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2005 Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr. "Emanuel de Witte: 'The Interior of the Oude Kerk, Amsterdam.'" *National Gallery of Art Bulletin*, no. 33 (2005): 18, repro.

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