NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS
Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century

Gerbrand van den Eeckhout
Dutch, 1621 - 1674

The Levite at Gibeah

early 1640s

oil on canvas
overall: 96.5 x 121.9 cm (38 x 48 in.)
framed: 119.4 x 144.1 x 5.7 cm (47 x 56 3/4 x 2 1/4 in.)
Gift of Emile E. Wolf 1996.99.1

ENTRY

This painting depicts the Old Testament story of the Levite and his concubine (meaning a wife of inferior status) after they stopped to spend the night at the town of Gibeah. As described in Judges 19, a Levite from Ephraim had married a woman from Bethlehem, in Judah. After the couple quarreled, the concubine left her husband to return to her father's house. Four months later the Levite and a servant set off to retrieve her. When they arrived in Bethlehem, they were joyously received by both father and daughter and invited to spend several nights in the father's home. On their return journey to Ephraim, the Levite, his concubine, and the servant sought shelter in Gibeah, a town that belonged to the tribe of Benjamin, but no one would take them in. Van den Eeckhout has here depicted the moment when an aged field laborer, who lived in Gibeah but was from Ephraim, happened upon the travelers and offered them food and lodging, as well as feed for their donkeys.

This story, which begins with an act of charity, soon leads to a gruesome ending. That night, some men from Gibeah surrounded the field laborer's house and demanded that he turn the Levite over to them so that they could abuse him. The old man pleaded on his guest's behalf, and offered them instead either his virgin

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daughter or the Levite's concubine. Finally only the Levite's concubine was given over to the men, who raped her throughout the night. The next morning the concubine crawled back to the threshold of the field laborer's house, where she died. The Levite placed her defiled and lifeless body atop a donkey and returned home. There he cut her body into twelve pieces and sent one piece by messenger to each of the tribes of Israel. The tribes then rose up as one and massacred the Benjaminites (Judges 20).

The moral of this horrific story is difficult to fathom, other than as a condemnation of the evil men of Gibeah. However, in the *Statenbijbel*, the official Dutch translation of the Bible first published in 1637, blame for the atrocities at Gibeah is also placed on the actions of the Levite's concubine. This text asserts that before leaving the Levite, she had defiled her marriage by prostituting herself, hence her sad demise served as a warning against the sin of adultery.[1]

The *Statenbijbel* was not the only literary source for the story, however, and it is probable that Van den Eeckhout based his interpretation primarily on the more sympathetic account of the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus in *Antiquitates Judaicae*.[2] Like many Dutch artists, including Rembrandt van Rijn (Dutch, 1606 - 1669), Van den Eeckhout responded to Josephus' emphasis on personal relationships in Old Testament stories, which provided a human dimension not always found in the biblical accounts. In Josephus' text, the Levite's companion is described as a wife, not as a concubine, which gives her and the Levite more equal status. Josephus portrays her as a loving and comely young woman, someone unburdened by the specter of guilt stemming from the sin of adultery. In much the same way, Van den Eeckhout projects her as an innocent woman, sitting on the ground at the feet of her husband while affectionately leaning toward him and draping her arm across his leg. On her lap is a small dog, often seen as a symbol of fidelity, which she restrains by placing her thumb through its collar.

Whatever his literary source of inspiration, Van den Eeckhout chose to depict not the grisly aftermath of the story but rather the moment of the field laborer's selfless act of charity in offering to take in and feed the weary travelers. As Volker Manuth has emphasized, this aspect of the biblical story would have been seen as an exemplary expression of the Christian commandment to love one's neighbor.[3] Indeed, the account of the simple yet noble field laborer extending his hand to help the unfortunate belongs fully to the Works of Mercy tradition.

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The story of the Levite and his concubine was rarely depicted in Dutch art, and it is not certain what motivated Van den Eeckhout to paint this scene or when exactly he did so.[4] The earliest known dated depiction of the story was made in 1644 by Jan Victors (1619–c. 1676) [fig. 1], who, along with Van den Eeckhout, was a pupil of Rembrandt from the 1630s.[5] Victors' composition has been cited as the prototype for the National Gallery of Art painting as well as for Van den Eeckhout's other versions of the scene, particularly one in Berlin dated 1645 [fig. 2].[6] The composition of Van den Eeckhout's Berlin painting is in reverse of Victor's, yet both focus on the moment when the field laborer, with shovel in hand, stands before the Levite and his concubine and invites them to stay with him. In each instance, the Levite is shown seated before the closed door of a house, while his servant stands nearby attending the donkey. In 1658 Van den Eeckhout executed another version of the story that is compositionally similar, albeit in reverse, to the Berlin painting.

The essential compositional components of the Gallery's painting are similar to these works, but they differ enough to suggest that they derive from another pictorial source. For instance, the Washington painting gives greater pictorial weight to the aged field laborer's offer of assistance: he stands facing the viewer with an open gesture that is both compelling in its conviction and welcoming in its expansiveness. The figures, moreover, are situated in a landscape setting and not in front of a closed door of a house. The Gallery's scene is also more exotic, notably in the oriental character of the Levite's feathered turban and long cloak with embroidered trim. Stylistically, the painting is more fluidly executed, not only in the flowing rhythms of the folds in the costumes but also in the organic relationships of the figures to one another. These compositional and stylistic differences make it unlikely that Van den Eeckhout executed the Gallery's painting in the 1650s as has been proposed by recent scholars.[7]

It is more likely that the National Gallery of Art painting dates from the early 1640s, as Wolfgang Stechow already suggested in 1969. Stechow posited that the pictorial inspiration for this work might have been a lost prototype by Rembrandt's master Pieter Lastman (1583–1633).[8] Lastman died in 1633, and his legacy was particularly strong in Rembrandt's circle in the mid to late 1630s, the very years that Van den Eeckhout was training under the master.[9] This hypothesis is particularly compelling when one considers the painting's vivid coloration, the fluidity of the drapery folds, the exotic character of the landscape elements, and the pose of the aged laborer, all of which are strikingly similar to those found in Lastman's paintings.[10] These stylistic qualities thus strongly suggest that this work predates

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the Berlin painting of 1645, which seems to respond more directly to Victors' more restrained narrative approach than to that of Lastman. A date in the early 1640s also supports Werner Sumowski's identification of the servant as the young Van den Eeckhout himself, as is suggested by a comparison of this figure with the artist's drawn *Self-Portrait,* 1647 [fig. 3].[11]

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES

fig. 1 Jan Victors, *The Levite and his Concubine at Gibeah*, 1644, oil on canvas, Art Gallery of Ontario, In memory of Mr. Max Tanenbaum, Gift of Mrs. Max Tanenbaum, 1986, 86/307

fig. 2 Gerbrand van den Eeckhout, *The Levite and His Concubine with the Field Laborer in Gibeah*, 1645, oil on canvas, Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin. Photo: bpk, Berlin / Staatliche Museen, Berlin / Jörg P. Anders / Art Resource, NY

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fig. 3 Gerbrand van den Eeckhout, *Self-Portrait*, 1647, black chalk, Frits Lugt Collection, Institut Néerlandais, Paris

NOTES

[1] See Volker Manuth, "The Levite and His Concubine," trans. Elizabeth Clegg, *Hoogsteder-Naumann Mercury*, no. 6 (1987): 21, 24 n. 35. Manuth notes that the Utrecht theologian Franciscus Burmanus (1628–1679), in his exegesis of the story, published in Utrecht in 1675, wrote: "and she having sinned with whoring and adultery, God did punish her right unto death."

[2] Flavius Josephus, *Antiquitates Judaicae, Books IV–VI,* trans. H. St. J. Thackeray and Ralph Marcus (Cambridge, MA, 1934; reprint, 1998), Book V, 223–229, lines 136–149. See Christian Tümpel, "De receptie van de 'Joodse Oudheden' van Flavius Josephus in de Nederlandse historieschilderkunst," in Christian Tümpel and Jacqueline Boonen, *Het Oude Testament in de schilderkunst van de gouden eeuw* (Amsterdam, 1991), 194–206.

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[3] Volker Manuth, “The Levite and His Concubine,” trans. Elizabeth Clegg, *Hoogsteder-Naumann Mercury*, no. 6 (1987), 21–22. As noted in Matthew 25:35, such acts of charity will be rewarded on Judgment Day.

[4] See Judith van Gent and Gabriël Pastoor, “Het tijdperk van de rechters,” in Christian Tümpel and Jacqueline Boonen, *Het Oude Testament in de schilderkunst van de gouden eeuw* (Amsterdam, 1991), 82–83.

[5] See Volker Manuth, “The Levite and His Concubine,” trans. Elizabeth Clegg, *Hoogsteder-Naumann Mercury*, no. 6 (1987): 14–16. Rembrandt does not seem to have made a painting of this story, although he may have made drawings of the subject in the 1640s; see Otto Benesch, *The Drawings of Rembrandt: A Critical and Chronological Catalogue*, 6 vols. (London, 1954–1957; reprint, and enlarged by Eva Benesch, 1973), 3: nos. 554 and 614, which are in the British Museum, London, and the Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt. Aside from Victors (see Volker Manuth, “The Levite and His Concubine,” 18, fig. 9, also shown in Debra Miller, “Jan Victors [1619–76],” PhD diss. [University of Delaware, 1985], 433, no. 66). Manuth also notes that the Amsterdam painter Rombout van Troyen (c. 1605–1650) depicted this subject in a painting dated 1644 (Paris, Musée du Louvre) (see Volker Manuth, “The Levite and His Concubine,” 13, fig. 2).

[6] See Volker Manuth, “The Levite and His Concubine,” trans. Elizabeth Clegg, *Hoogsteder-Naumann Mercury*, no. 6 (1987): 18. See also, however, Irene Geismeier, *Holländische und flämische Gemälde des siebenzehnten Jahrhunderts im Bode-Museum* (Berlin, 1976), 30–31, no. 1771, who notes the compositional similarities of the Berlin painting with Domenico Feti’s painting *Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard*, 1622, Gemäldegalerie, Dresden. She suggests that Van den Eeckhout may have seen Feti’s painting in Brussels, where it was in the collection of Leopold Wilhelm. Her suggestion is based on the observations of N. J. Romanov, “The Subject of One of Van den Eeckhout’s Pictures,” *Art in America* 21, no.1 (December 1932–1933): 75, who connected the Feti composition to Van den Eeckhout’s later painting of the same subject in the Pushkin Museum, Moscow. See Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 vols. (Landau in der Pfalz, 1983), 2: no. 426.

[7] Van den Eeckhout’s 1658 version of the subject is in the Pushkin Museum, Moscow. See Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 vols. (Landau in der Pfalz, 1983), 2: no. 426. Both Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 2: 425, and Volker Manuth, “The Levite and His Concubine,” trans. Elizabeth Clegg, *Hoogsteder-Naumann Mercury*, no. 6 (1987): 18, date the National Gallery of Art painting to the late 1650s. Stylistically, however, these two works are quite different and could not have been executed in the same time period. The Pushkin painting has a greater sense of three-dimensionality and visual complexity than does the Gallery’s painting. Note, in particular, the way folds in the drapery are more

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carefully articulated because Van den Eeckhout modeled the figures with discrete patterns of light and dark.

[8] Wolfgang Stechow, "Some Observations on Rembrandt and Lastman," *Oud Holland* 84, nos. 2–3 (1969): 151, 156, fig. 10. Stechow cites, as a close visual comparison, Lastman's painting *Laban Searching for His Idols*, 1622, in the museum in Boulogne-sur-Mer.

[9] Rembrandt owned a number of paintings by Lastman as well as portfolios with pen and chalk sketches. See Walter L. Strauss and Marjon van der Meulen, *The Rembrandt Documents* (New York, 1979), 1656/12, fol. 30, 353; 1656/12, fol. 32, 361; 1656/12, fol. 36, 377; 1660/1, 455; and 1662/6, 500.

[10] The laborer's gesturing pose, with outstretched hand, is one frequently found in Lastman's works; see, for example, the figure of Jesus in *Christ and the Woman of Canaan*, 1617, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

[11] Sumowski made this suggestion in *Rembrandt and His Pupils* (Montreal, 1969), 84, no. 48, although he later retreated from it in Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 vols. (Landau in der Pfalz, 1983), 2:732, no. 425, probably because at that point he dated the painting to the late 1650s.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The original support consists of a plain-weave, medium-weight fabric. It has been adhered to a coarser, heavier weight fabric and subsequently loose lined to a third piece of fabric. The painting was somewhat crooked on the auxiliary fabric when it was lined, therefore for the painting to be viewed straight, the current stretcher had to be made slightly larger than the dimensions of the painting, resulting in an uneven border of exposed lining fabric. The tacking margins have been removed, but even though there is no sign of cusping, compositionally the painting does not appear to have been reduced in size. The support was prepared with a double ground consisting of a red layer followed by a gray one. The gray ground appears to be intermittently incorporated into the composition of the painting. The paint was applied with a wet-over-dry technique. The background landscape is thinly painted overall, while the figures and drapery are thickly painted as if executed with a heavily loaded brush, with slight impasto in the white highlights.

X-radiographs reveal the presence of numerous old tears, losses, and damages in the fabric. A fabric insert exists in the proper right arm of the figure on the far left and above the shoulder of the dog on the far left of the painting. A complex, cross-

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shaped, branched tear is located across the far left figure's proper right knee and extends into the dog's back. Additional smaller tears are above and to the proper left of the far left figure's head and in the upper center portion of the painting. The paint and ground layers have suffered scattered losses and numerous areas of abrasion. The worst areas of abrasion are located throughout the sky and in the hind legs of the central donkey. The painting was treated in 2009–2011, at which time the loose lining and stretcher were replaced, and discolored varnish and inpainting were removed. During this treatment the abraded areas were inpainted and missing glazes in the sky were replaced.

PROVENANCE

Art market, New York, 1960s;[1] purchased by Emile E. Wolf [1899-1996], New York; gift 1996 to NGA.

[1] In a letter to Arthur Wheelock (15 January 1987, in NGA curatorial files), Emile E. Wolf writes that "Park Bernet sold it as anonynme [*sic*]," which might indicate he purchased the painting at an auction. Many Parke-Bernet sale catalogues for the 1960s have been checked, but as yet an auction that included the painting has not been identified.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1969 Rembrandt and His Pupils, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts; Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 1969, no. 48.

1982 The Discovery of the Everyday: Seventeenth-Century Dutch Paintings from the Wolf Collection, Chrysler Museum, Norfolk; Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence; Tampa Museum, 1982-1983, no. 11, repro.

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1969 Rifkin, Benjamin A. "Rembrandt and His Circle, Part II." *Art News* 68 (6 October 1969): 33.

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1969 Stechow, Wolfgang. "Some Observations on Rembrandt and Lastman." *Oud Holland* 84, no. 1-4 (1969): 156, fig. 9.

1982 Robinson, Franklin W. *The Discovery of the everyday: seventeenth century Dutch paintings from the Wolf Collection*. Exh. cat. Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, Virginia; Tampa Museum; Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design. Norfolk, 1982: no. 11, color repro.

1983 Sumowski, Werner. *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler in vier Bänden*. 6 vols. Landau, 1983: 2:732, 788, no. 425, repro.

1987 Manuth, Volker. "The Levite and His Concubine." *Hoogsteder-Naumann Mercury* 6 (1987): 18.

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