



Pieter Jansz Saenredam
Dutch, 1597 - 1665

Church of Santa Maria della Febbre, Rome

1629

oil on panel

overall: 37.8 x 70.5 cm (14 7/8 x 27 3/4 in.)

framed: 51.4 x 84.4 x 5.7 cm (20 1/4 x 33 1/4 x 2 1/4 in.)

Inscription: lower center on paper attached to base of obelisk: P. Saenreda.fe. / Ao 1629

Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.34

ENTRY

A fascinating development in the Netherlands in the early seventeenth century was the appearance of city histories: books recounting the important events and personalities that had determined the character of the community and brought it fame. One of the most important city histories was Samuel Ampzing's *Beschryvinge ende lof der stad Haerlem in Holland*, published in Haarlem in 1628. Among the factors that inspired a justifiable sense of civic pride in Ampzing were the painters whose works brought glory to their native city even after their deaths, including Maerten van Heemskerck (Netherlandish, 1498 - 1574), Hendrick Goltzius (Dutch, 1558 - 1617), and Jan Pietersz Saenredam (Dutch, 1565 - 1607), Pieter Saenredam's father. Ampzing illustrated his book with prints related to Haarlem's history that were based on drawings by various contemporary artists, including Pieter Saenredam. Saenredam's designs, which are among his earliest works, range from maps depicting the history of the siege of Haarlem to a detailed rendering of the Town Hall beyond the Great Market Place [fig. 1]. As is

characteristic of Ampzing's approach, the Town Hall print provides more than just visual documentation of an important building: the poem inscribed beneath it stresses the building's historical and symbolic importance, both for Haarlem and for the Netherlands at large. [1]

Ampzing's book was but one manifestation of a broader need felt by the people of this newly formed country to trace their roots, to emphasize their cultural heritage, and to build a mythology that could define their place in history. Saenredam experienced this impulse keenly: throughout his career he carefully recorded, with annotated drawings and paintings of public buildings, both the world he saw around him and the one he could reconstruct from careful examination of physical and documentary evidence.

It must have been in large part because of this desire to immerse himself in his own heritage that Saenredam, at the very beginning of his career, turned so enthusiastically to Heemskerck's drawings of antiquities. *Church of Santa Maria della Febbre, Rome* is one of the most visible manifestations of Saenredam's interest in the earlier artist's work. Saenredam based his scene on a drawing from Heemskerck's famous Roman sketchbook, which was filled with images of antiquity that the Haarlem artist had executed in Italy almost a century before. [2] The sketchbook had remained in Haarlem and was at this time in the proud possession of one of the foremost painters of the day, Cornelis Cornelisz van Haarlem (1562–1638). [3] Saenredam probably had access to the sketchbook, which he would eventually acquire, possibly because of family connections to this important artist. [4]

As is evident later in Saenredam's life, from the contents of his large library, the artist had broad humanistic interests, ranging from the history and development of the Netherlands to the literature of antiquity. [5] Heemskerck's sketchbook provided him with a fascinating glimpse of Rome, a city he had never and would never visit. Studying the sketchbook also gave him an opportunity to learn from the earlier master's sense of line and composition, components of his own work that were of particular concern to him. Saenredam based at least four paintings on this sketchbook and executed them over a fifteen-year period. The earliest, *Church of Santa Maria della Febbre, Rome*, is dated 1629, while the last was painted in 1643. [6]

The drawing in the sketchbook that Saenredam took as his point of departure for his depiction of Santa Maria della Febbre [fig. 2] records a building complex

situated at the Vatican in the center of Rome. [7] In the foreground rises the Vatican obelisk (*agulia Sancti Petri*), distinguishable by the bronze ball at the top. [8] Behind the obelisk is the round structure of a second-century Roman mausoleum, which in the sixth century became known as the Church of San Andrea and later as Santa Maria della Febbre. After 1506 it was converted into the sacristy of Saint Peter's, a function it served until it was demolished in 1776. [9] Looming behind Santa Maria della Febbre is the towering structure of Saint Peter's, showing its state of construction in the 1530s. Visible here from the southeast are the huge pillar and coffered vault of the crossing as well as the coffered vault that connects to the façade of the sacristy. The irregularly shaped buildings to the right enclose chapels built along the southern aisle of Old Saint Peter's. One of these, Cappella del Coro, is located just to the right of the arched entrance to the complex. Its apse corresponds to the projecting circular shape of its roof. On the adjacent structure hangs a reminder of the pope's presence: the papal tiara displayed with ribbons from which are suspended two keys.

The drawing is a fascinating historical document, for it depicts a stage during the construction of Saint Peter's that has been difficult to reconstruct. By the time Saenredam laid eyes on the Heemskerck sketchbook, the situation had changed radically, not only through the construction of the imposing dome designed by Michelangelo, but also through the relocation of the obelisk to Saint Peter's Square. [10] Saenredam, however, made no effort to update the architecture or to represent the dynamic character of Rome. Quite to the contrary, he placed the buildings in a country setting and depicted foliage growing from the structures, as though Santa Maria della Febbre were an abandoned building or Saint Peter's an ancient ruin. He reinforced this feeling by modulating the surfaces of the buildings with subtle touches of pinks and oranges that suggest age.

It would seem that Saenredam, given his humanistic leanings, would have recognized the buildings in Heemskerck's drawings. Nevertheless, it is telling that he did not paint the circular roof defining the apse of the Cappella del Coro, which is clearly delineated in the drawing. Such an omission indicates that he was unaware of the character of that building. That he did not follow Heemskerck's design slavishly is also evident from Infrared Reflectography, which reveals the initial Underdrawing [fig. 3]. As it turns out, Saenredam made a number of adjustments in his composition, from eliminating windows to changing the perspective of the round structure of Santa Maria della Febbre itself. The pattern of changes suggests that he was interested in simplifying the structure and flattening

the image.

One senses that Saenredam saw in Heemskerck's stark drawing images of architecture he associated with antiquity. Saenredam apparently sought to emphasize the ancient venerability of the architectural setting while at the same time suggesting the continuity of the Catholic presence in Italy through the staffage figures and the papal tiara attached to the wall of one of the buildings. This approach seems to be a visual counterpart to the literary historicizing to which he had been exposed through his involvement in Ampzing's *Beschryvinge ende lof der stad Haerlem in Holland*. The evocative power that this painting thus assumes makes it one of the most fascinating of Saenredam's early works.

One unresolved issue is whether the staffage figures—the cardinal riding in a horse-drawn wagon and the two accompanying gentlemen dressed in seventeenth-century costumes—were actually executed by Saenredam or by Pieter Jansz Post (Netherlandish, 1608 - 1669), an artist-architect who joined the Saint Luke's Guild in Haarlem in 1628. [11] Although the figures in this work are not inconsistent with Post's style, an attribution to him must remain tenuous since his first known dated paintings are not until 1631. [12] That a relationship between Post and Saenredam existed seems probable because of the broad, simplified character of the distant landscape, which is consistent with Post's work of the early 1630s.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Pieter Jansz Saenredam, plate from Samuel Ampzing, *Beschryvinge ende lof der stad Haerlem in Holland*, Haarlem, 1628



fig. 2 Maerten van Heemskerck, *Santa Maria della Febbre*, c. 1532, pen and ink, 79 D 2, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Kupferstichkabinett. Photo: bpk, Berlin / Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen, Berlin / Volker-H. Schneider / Art Resource, NY



fig. 3 Detail, infrared reflectogram, Pieter Jansz Saenredam, *Church of Santa Maria della Febbre, Rome*, 1629, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Samuel H. Kress Collection, 1961.9.34

NOTES

- [1] The poem emphasizes both the historical importance of the Town Hall as the palace and home of Willem II, Duke of Holland, and the honor it had brought to the city as a symbol of justice. The poem ends with a broad statement on the importance of justice as a foundation for the country.
- [2] See Christian Hülsen and Hermann Egger, *Die römischen Skizzenbücher von Marten van Heemskerck im königlichen Kupferstichkabinett zu Berlin* (Berlin, 1913–1916; reprint, 1975). Heemskerck was in Rome between 1532 and 1536. Not all of the drawings in this sketchbook are now believed to be by Heemskerck. At least two other hands have been identified. See, in particular, Ilja M. Veldman, “Heemskercks Romeinse tekeningen en ‘Anonymus B,’” *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 38 (1987): 369–382.
- [3] When Cornelis Cornelisz van Haarlem died in 1638, he had in his estate “het treffelyck getekent boeckie van Mr. Maertyn Heemskerck nae alle de fraiste antique van Roma.” See Abraham Bredius, *Künstler-Inventare . . .*, 8 vols. (The Hague, 1915–1922), 7:83; and Gary Schwartz, Marten Jan Bok, and Loekie Schwartz, *Pieter Saenredam: The Painter and His Time* (New York, 1990), 324 n. 26.
- [4] For a discussion of the relationship of Cornelis Cornelisz van Haarlem to

Saenredam, see Gary Schwartz, Marten Jan Bok, and Loekie Schwartz, *Pieter Saenredam: The Painter and His Time* (New York, 1990), 23. That Saenredam eventually acquired the drawings seems probable given the announcement for the sale of his collection of graphic art after his death in 1669, which included “many drawings by Maerten van Heemskerck . . . made . . . from life in Italy.” For a hypothesis on how this acquisition came about, see Schwartz, Bok, and Schwartz, *Pieter Saenredam: The Painter and His Time*, 185.

- [5] The contents of his library are described in the catalog for the sale of his collection, which was held on April 20, 1677. The catalog, discovered by Bert van Selm, has been analyzed, in part, by Gary Schwartz, Marten Jan Bok, and Loekie Schwartz, *Pieter Saenredam: The Painter and His Time* (New York, 1990), 181–187.
- [6] The other paintings based on this sketchbook are: *The Colosseum, Rome*, signed and dated 1631 (Girardet Collection, Kettwig-Ruhr); *View from the Aracoeli, Rome, towards the Colosseum in the South*, signed and dated 1633 (formerly Musée des Beaux-Arts, Orleans, but destroyed in 1940); and *Portico of the Pantheon, Rome*, signed and dated 1643 (private collection). These paintings are included in Gary Schwartz, Marten Jan Bok, and Loekie Schwartz, *Pieter Saenredam: The Painter and His Time* (New York, 1990) as, respectively, cat. nos. 114, 113, and 112.
- [7] The first art historian to connect the painting with the drawing, which is fol. 72r in the sketchbook, was J. Q. van Regeteren Altena, “Saenredam Archeoloog,” *Oud-Holland* 48 (1931): 1–3. He argued, on the basis of this information, that Saenredam had never traveled to Italy. Ilja M. Veldman, “Heemskercks Romeinse tekeningen en ‘Anonymus B,’” *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 38 (1987): 369–382, attributed the drawing in the Heemskerck sketchbook to another, anonymous hand. For the purposes of this entry the designation “Heemskerck” will be used when referring to this drawing.
- [8] The following description of the buildings is based largely on Christian Hülsen and Hermann Egger, *Die römischen Skizzenbücher von Marten van Heemskerck im königlichen Kupferstichkabinett zu Berlin* (Berlin, 1913–1916), 7 (from the description of the plates in the second volume).
- [9] This information has been gleaned from Horst W. Janson, *The Sculpture of Donatello: Incorporating the Notes and Photos of the Late Jenö Lányi* (Princeton, 1963), 97.
- [10] For a depiction of the site from a similar point of view in the early 1580s, showing the dome under construction, see Henry A. Millon, *Michelangelo Architect: The Façade of San Lorenzo and the Drum and Dome of St. Peter’s* (Milan, 1988), 101, fig. E.
- [11] Sturla J. Gudlaugsson, “Aanvullingen omtrent Pieter Post’s werkzaamheid

als schilder," *Oud-Holland* 69 (1954): 59–71.

[12] *Mauritshuis: Hollandse schilderkunst—landschappen 17de eeuw* (The Hague, 1980), 77–79, nos. 765–766.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support is a beveled, horizontally grained oak panel with a slight concave warp.[1] Narrow oak strips, possibly original, are attached to the edges. The vertical strips are sawn at regularly spaced intervals to counteract splitting of the wood. Neither the smooth, thin, white ground layer nor the paint extends onto the strips. Infrared reflectography at 1.5 to 1.8 microns reveals a loosely executed underdrawing that delineates the church architecture.[2] Minor changes in two of the windows and some architectural details are visible between the drawn and painted stages.

Paint, applied thinly with small brushes, leaves both the wood grain and the individual brushstrokes plainly visible. The sky was laid in first, followed by the buildings, with the figures painted over the completed background, in an economical technique employing opaque wet-into-wet layering and thin scumbles and glazes. Figures and landscape were handled similarly and appear contemporaneous.

Abrasion is minimal. Discolored inpainting covers small losses found primarily along the bottom edge, in the church architecture, and in the sky. In a selective cleaning, prior to acquisition, a layer of discolored, aged varnish was left over the dark foreground in the lower left and over a clump of bushes rising from the building at the left. The painting has not been treated since its acquisition.

[1] Dendrochronology provides a felling date between 1627 and 1634.

Dendrochronology was performed by Dr. Peter Klein, Universität Hamburg (see report dated January 7, 1987, in NGA Conservation department files).

[2] Infrared reflectography was performed with a Santa Barbara focal plane array InSb camera fitted with an H astronomy filter.

PROVENANCE

Friedrich, king of Prussia.[1] (sale, Frederik Muller and Co., Amsterdam, 25 November 1924, no. 60); Anton W.M. Mensing [1866-1936], Amsterdam;[2] (his estate sale, Frederik Muller and Co., Amsterdam, 15 November 1938, no. 96); (D.A. Hoogendijk, Amsterdam); J.A.G. Sandberg, Wassenaar, in 1950; private collection, The Netherlands; (D.A. Hoogendijk, Amsterdam), by 1953; (Frederick A. Stern, Inc., New York); sold 1954 to the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, New York;[3] gift 1961 to NGA.

[1] This information is in the 1924 sale catalogue; it has not yet been determined which of the Prussian kings by this name owned the painting. There are two seals on the reverse of the panel, but neither has a legible imprint.

[2] An annotated copy of the 1924 sale catalogue cites Huber as the buyer. If this is true, he may well have been acting as an agent for Mensing.

[3] See The Kress Collection Digital Archive,
<https://kress.nga.gov/Detail/objects/530>.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1937 Pieter Jansz. Saenredam 1597-1665, Museum Boymans, Rotterdam;
Museum Fodor, Amsterdam, 1937-1938, no. 1.

1950 Le Paysage Hollandais au XVIIe Siècle, Orangerie des Tuileries, Paris, 1950,
no. 82.

1950 Tentoonstelling Kunstbezit van Oud-Alumni der Leidse Universiteit,
Stedelijk Museum Lakenhal, Leiden, 1950, no. 47.

1961 Pieter Jansz. Saenredam, Centraal Museum, Utrecht, 1961, no. 111.

1998 A Collector's Cabinet, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1998, no. 51.

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