



Joachim Anthonisz Wtewael
Dutch, c. 1566 - 1638

Moses Striking the Rock

1624

oil on panel

overall: 44.6 x 66.7 cm (17 9/16 x 26 1/4 in.)

framed: 58.7 x 80.7 cm (23 1/8 x 31 3/4 in.)

Inscription: lower left, JO in ligature: JO Wtt / wael fecit / Anno.1624

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ENTRY

This highly evocative painting by Joachim Wtewael captures a dramatic miracle that was crucial to the successful outcome of the Israelites' strenuous voyage to the Promised Land. The people of Israel had grown disgruntled during their long exodus from Egypt because they had no water to drink. When Moses and his brother, the high priest Aaron, appealed to the Lord for help, Moses was told to take the rod he had used to part the waters of the Red Sea and strike the rock at Horeb, from which water would come out so "that the people may drink" (Exodus 17:6). "And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his rod twice, and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their cattle" (Numbers 20:11). Wtewael depicts the moment when Moses, accompanied by Aaron, has just struck the rock. The stream of water has already created deep pools from which the Israelites and their animals drink and refresh themselves.

Wtewael's emphasis in this exquisitely refined painting, however, is not on the miraculous nature of the event, but rather on the life-sustaining character of the water that Moses and Aaron have released. [1] Except for the agitated pose of a man in the background who directs a caravan to the pools of water, no one seems

in the least astounded by the miracle. A woman in the left foreground lies languidly on her side while her child sips contentedly from a small cup. Most of the Israelites are intent on scooping up water from the ground with pails and pitchers: two mothers, each grasping her child with one arm, hold dishes under the stream of water coming from the rock; others drink the refreshing liquid from hats, cups, and pitchers. Despite the array of elegantly and brightly clothed figures, the wide variety of animals, and the plethora of utensils in the setting, the mood is surprisingly quiet and subdued as man and beast alike pause to accept the goodness of God's bounty.

Traditionally, the water that poured from the rock and refreshed the Israelites was understood symbolically as the gift of God's salvation, salvation granted through the actions of their leader, Moses. The rock was likened to Christ, and the water that flowed from it was seen as the blood flowing from the wounds suffered at his Crucifixion. Thus the episode was typologically associated with the Eucharist and with Christ's forgiveness and man's redemption. [2]

The story also had specific significance to the Dutch, who often found historic parallels between their own history and biblical narratives, associating the tribulations of the early Jews with their own struggles for independence against Spanish domination. The leader of their revolt, William I, known as William the Silent, was likened to Moses in that he personified the identity of the nation yet also failed to reach the "promised land" he had envisioned. [3] Even before William's assassination in 1584, however, an association had been established between him and Moses, which became part of Dutch mythology. In 1581 Hendrick Goltzius (Dutch, 1558 - 1617) surrounded his portrait of the Prince of Orange with scenes from the life of Moses, including the pillars of clouds and fire, the burning bush, and the passage through the Red Sea [fig. 1]. The latter image, as with the miraculous scene depicted here by Wtewael, focused on the powerful symbolism of water in the Moses legend. For the Dutch, whose land was both nourished and protected by water, the imagery suggested that God's beneficence had guided their destiny just as it had that of the Israelites.

The allegorical associations contained in this work are consistent with Wtewael's own religious and political convictions. Although born a Catholic, Wtewael became a fervent Calvinist and firm advocate of the House of Orange. He felt strongly that the Dutch Republic, under the leadership of the House of Orange, ought to continue the struggle to fulfill William the Silent's original goal of a United Netherlands and should not accept the compromise solution manifested in the

Twelve-Year Truce of 1609, whereby the southern provinces would remain under Spanish domination. Wtewael expressed these concerns in both his art and his political activities. [4] As early as 1595 he designed a stained-glass window for the Cathedral of Gouda that depicted allegorically Holland's Chariot of Freedom of Conscience victorious over Spain and Idolatry. In 1605 he engraved a cycle of scenes of *Thronus Justitiae*, which depicted historical exempla of justice that had clear propagandistic overtones. Shortly after the Twelve-Year Truce was signed, Wtewael designed a series of political allegories that focused on many of the famous patriotic incidents in the Eighty Years' War, personified by the maid *Belgica*, an allegorical figure symbolizing a united Netherlands. Finally, in 1618 he participated in a revolt of Calvinist and Roman Catholic burghers against the domination of Arminian (also known as Remonstrant) officials in Utrecht's municipal government, which earned him a seat on the city council for the remainder of his life.

Wtewael's decision to paint this scene in 1624 may reflect an effort on his part to revitalize the allegorical connections between Moses and the House of Orange after the conclusion of the Truce in 1621, at a time when Prince Maurits and Prince Frederik Hendrik were renewing their military efforts against Spanish aggression. One may assume from the complexity of the scene and the refinement of the image that the painting was commissioned by, or at least was painted for, a specific patron. No surviving documents, however, elucidate this matter. [5]

Not much is known of Wtewael's working procedure, but in this instance a fragment of an elaborate preparatory drawing for the painting is preserved in the Albertina in Vienna [fig. 2]. [6] Surprisingly, given his penchant for reusing elements from his own works, none of the motifs in this richly varied painting appear to be exact quotations from his earlier images, although Lowenthal has identified close prototypes in a number of instances. [7] Lowenthal also suggests that Wtewael adapted the child in the lower left from a painting by Cornelis Cornelisz van Haarlem (Dutch, 1562 - 1638). [8]

Although Wtewael apparently derived his scene from careful readings of both biblical texts in which this story appears (Exodus 17:1–7 and Numbers 20:2–13), he carefully constructed his composition along mannerist principles outlined by Karel van Mander I (Netherlandish, 1548 - 1606) in *Den grondt der edel vrij schilderconst*, a long didactic poem on the rules of art that Van Mander published in his *Het schilder-boek* of 1604. [9] In the chapter entitled "Van der ordinantye ende inventy der historien" (On the Composition and Invention of History Pieces), Van

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century

Mander describes how the corners of the composition should be filled with large *repoussoir* figures, while the composition should be arranged in a circular fashion around a central focal point “in such a way that a number of figures encircle the focus of the story, which remains standing as the center of the picture.” The painting should also have variety: “a profusion of horses, dogs and other domestic animals, as well as beasts and birds of the forest; but it is particularly pleasing to behold fresh youths and beautiful maidens, old men, matrons, and children of all ages.” Finally, Van Mander recommends discreetly introducing witnesses who appear behind and to the side of the central event and comment upon it. In every respect Wtewael has followed Van Mander’s recommendations, enlivening them still further with striking colors and effective use of light and shade. [10] Particularly remarkable in this work is Wtewael’s delicate touch, seen in the way he has articulated the textures and people’s expressions. The surface shimmers with light and color, adding to the visual pleasure of the complex narrative unfolding before us. [11]

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

April 24, 2014

COMPARATIVE FIGURES

NOTES

- [1] This observation was first made by Christian Tümpel, “Die Reformation und die Kunst der Niederlande,” in *Luther und die Folgen für die Kunst*, ed. Werner Hofmann (Munich, 1983), 314.
- [2] Anne Walter Lowenthal, “Wtewael’s Moses and Dutch Mannerism,” *Studies in the History of Art* 6 (1974): 134–135.
- [3] For a full discussion of the symbolic relationships the Dutch felt between their history and the story of Moses see Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (New York, 1987), 87–101.
- [4] For Wtewael’s political attitudes see Elizabeth McGrath, “A Netherlandish History by Joachim Wtewael,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 38 (1975): 209–217.
- [5] Anne Walter Lowenthal, “Wtewael’s Moses and Dutch Mannerism,” *Studies*

in the History of Art 6 (1974): 135, speculates that the painting was commissioned for a “private chapel or a clandestine Catholic church.”

Because of Wtewael’s fervent Calvinist beliefs, however, it seems unlikely that he would have received a commission for such a location.

- [6] The drawing (inv. no. 8132) measures 9 3/4 x 12 in. (24.6 x 30.5 cm). It seems to have been trimmed on all sides; the four corners are all later additions.
- [7] Anne Walter Lowenthal, “Wtewael’s Moses and Dutch Mannerism,” *Studies in the History of Art* 6 (1974): 137–138.
- [8] Anne Walter Lowenthal, *Joachim Wtewael and Dutch Mannerism* (Doornspijk, 1986), 151.
- [9] The following English translations of this text are taken from Ben P. J. Broos, “Rembrandt and Lastman’s *Coriolanus*: The History Piece in 17th-Century Theory and Practice,” *Simiolus* 8 (1975–1976): 202–203.
- [10] Anne Walter Lowenthal, “Wtewael’s Moses and Dutch Mannerism,” *Studies in the History of Art* 6 (1974): 136, identifies compositional similarities between this work and Venetian paintings by Leandro Bassano (Italian, 1557 - 1622) and Jacopo Tintoretto (Venetian, 1518 or 1519 - 1594) that Wtewael might have seen when he was in Italy in the 1580s. These Venetian connections, however, seem more generic than specific.
- [11] I would like to thank Karen Lee Bowen for her assistance in compiling this entry.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support is a single member, horizontally grained oak panel, beveled on the back, with narrow, oak strips attached to edges.[1] Paint is applied over an exceedingly thin, smooth white ground in small, precise fluid strokes blended wet-into-wet, with slightly impasted highlights. A history of flaking has resulted in scattered small losses throughout the paint layer, particularly in the trees, distant and shadowed figures, and horse. Losses are inpainted and design elements are reinforced with later repaint. No major conservation has been carried out since acquisition.

[1] The wood was identified as oak by Dr. Peter Klein, Universität Hamburg, but he was unable to date the panel using dendrochronology (see report dated October 29, 1987, in NGA Conservation department files).

PROVENANCE

(Sale, Foster, London, 29 November 1833, no. 29, as by J. de Wael); Thomas Chawner, Esq. [d. 1851], London and Addlestone, near Chertsey, Surrey; (his estate sale, Foster, London, 16 June 1852, no. 97); Chance.[1] H. Charles Erhardt, Esq., London, by 1892; (sale, Christie, Manson & Woods, London, 19-22 June 1931, no. 273, as by J.B. de Wael); "Leffer" or "Lepper."[2] Francis Howard, Esq., Dorking, by 1955; (sale, Christie, Manson & Woods, London, 25 November 1955, no. 52, as by J.B. de Wael); (Arcade Gallery, London); sold to Vincent Korda, London; repurchased 1967 by (Arcade Gallery, London);[3] sold 1967 to (Edward Speelman, London);[4] purchased 31 January 1972 by NGA.

[1] Burton Fredericksen (letter of 2 January 2003 and e-mail of 17 July 2003, in NGA curatorial files) has kindly provided the information about the Foster sales of 1833 and 1852, and the buyers at each sale, Thomas Chawner and "Chance." A label on the back of the painting, which reads "J. de Wael / 29 Moses striking the Rock," matches the information from the 1833 sale catalogue.

[2] Christie's in London no longer has its records from 1931 and thus was not able to help clarify the buyer's name. See correspondence from 25 September 1986 and 7 November 1986, in NGA curatorial files.

[3] The Arcade Gallery, in a letter of 3 March 1987 in NGA curatorial files, says that they sold the painting "almost immediately" to Korda after they purchased it at the 1955 sale, repurchased it in 1967, and then sold it during the exhibition in November and December of the same year, in which the painting appeared.

[4] A letter from Anthony Speelman of 23 January 1987, in NGA curatorial files, indicates that the Edward Speelman firm had bought *Moses Striking the Rock* from Vincent Korda prior to their selling it to the National Gallery of Art.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1892 A Loan Exhibition of Pictures, Art Gallery of the Corporation of London, Guildhall, 1892, no. 99, as by Jan Baptist de Wael.

1967 Recent Acquisitions: Mannerist and Baroque Paintings, Arcade Gallery, London, 1967, no. 23.

1980 Gods, Saints and Heroes: Dutch Painting in the Age of Rembrandt, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Detroit Institute of Arts; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, 1980, fig. 1 (shown only in Washington).

1998 A Collector's Cabinet, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1998, no. 66.

2000 Landscape of the Bible: Sacred Scenes in European Master Paintings, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 2000-2001, no. 13, repro.

2015 Pleasure and Piety: The Art of Joachim Wtewael (1566-1638), Centraal Museum, Utrecht; National Gallery of Art, Washington; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2015-2016,

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- 1974 Lowenthal, Anne Walter. "Wtewael's Moses and Dutch Mannerism." *Studies in the History of Art* 6 (1974): 124-141, fig. 1.
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- 1984 Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr. *Dutch Painting in the National Gallery of Art*. Washington, D.C., 1984: 5, 8, 9, repro.
- 1985 Bosque, Andrée de. *Mythologie et Maniérisme aux Pays-Bas, 1570–1630: Peinture, dessins*. Antwerp, 1985: 94, 95, repro.
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- 1985 Waterhouse, Ellis K. *Around 1610: The Onset of the Baroque*. Exh. cat. Matthiesen Fine Art, London, 1985: 90.
- 1986 Lowenthal, Anne Walter. *Joachim Wtewael and Dutch Mannerism*. Doornspijk, 1986: 41, 50-51, 55, cat. A-88, 151-152, color pl. 22.
- 1986 Sutton, Peter C. *A Guide to Dutch Art in America*. Washington and Grand Rapids, 1986: 454.
- 1986 Wansink, Christina J. A. "A 'Mercury, Argus and Io' from Utrecht." *Hoogsteder-Naumann Mercury 4* (1986): 3, 4, fig. 2.
- 1992 National Gallery of Art. *National Gallery of Art, Washington*. New York, 1992: 122, repro.
- 1995 Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr. *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*. The Collections of the National Gallery of Art Systematic Catalogue. Washington, 1995: 394-398, color repro. 395.
- 1998 Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr. *A Collector's Cabinet*. Exh. cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1998: 68, no. 66.
- 2000 Pessach, Gill. *Landscape of the Bible: sacred scenes in European master paintings*. Exh. cat. Muzeon Yisrael, Jerusalem, 2000: 19, 72-73, no. 13, repro.
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