



Rembrandt van Rijn  
Dutch, 1606 - 1669

## *Philemon and Baucis*

1658

oil on panel transferred to panel

overall: 54.5 x 68.5 cm (21 7/16 x 26 15/16 in.)

framed: 81.3 x 95.9 x 8.3 cm (32 x 37 3/4 x 3 1/4 in.)

Inscription: lower left: Rembrandt f. 1658

Widener Collection 1942.9.65

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### ENTRY

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* provided Dutch artists with a wide range of mythological subjects, most of which contain underlying moralizing messages on human behavior. Surprisingly, the story of the visit of Jupiter and Mercury to the aged couple Philemon and Baucis, described by Ovid in the eighth book of his commentaries, was only rarely depicted.[1] For those artists who preferred to depict subjects in Ovid that allowed them to represent sensual scenes of love, betrayal, or deceit, the story had no appeal. The story of deities quietly revealing themselves to humble and devoted individuals, however, struck a responsive chord for Rembrandt that allowed him to penetrate the essence of the myth as no artist ever had.

The moral of the story, as interpreted by Karel van Mander at the beginning of the seventeenth century, is that hospitality and openness to strangers are virtues that are always rewarded.[2] Rembrandt evoked the warmth of the old couple's personality and suggested much of Ovid's vivid description of their humble abode, including the fire over which Baucis had cooked the cabbage and bacon for their meal. Yet, Rembrandt's interest was not in portraying the eventual rewards of the couple's generosity but in the moment of revelation. Ovid writes that Philemon and Baucis recognized that they were in the presence of gods when their bowls of food and decanters of wine kept replenishing themselves. In fear, they raised their hands in prayer. Then, in an effort to offer better fare, they tried to catch their only goose, which escaped their grasp and fled to the strangers for refuge. The moment Rembrandt has depicted is that in which Jupiter both commands them not to kill the goose and blesses their offering with a firm yet comforting gesture.

Early in his career, Rembrandt had painted a number of episodes from Ovid, including the *Abduction of Proserpina*, now in the Gemäldegalerie, Berlin, but the dramatic characterization of their narratives is totally different in kind from this quiet, reverent scene.[3] The differences in subject matter and presentation, between the dynamic theatricality of one and the subdued, evocative nature of the other, are characteristic of Rembrandt's artistic evolution. Throughout his life, he carefully considered textual sources, whether they were biblical or mythological, but he also drew on others' interpretations of comparable scenes for his inspiration.[4] When he first turned to Ovid around 1630, he did so under the influence of Rubens and, for example, clearly derived his inspiration for the *Abduction of Proserpina* from a print by Pieter Claesz Soutman (Flemish, c. 1580 - 1657) after a Rubens composition.[5] For *Philemon and Baucis*, painted in 1658, the visual sources are entirely different. They reflect a fusion of mythological and biblical images that helps account for the intense spirituality of the scene.

Adam Elsheimer (German, 1578 - 1610)'s painting *Philemon and Baucis*, 1608 (Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Gemäldegalerie, Dresden, inv. no. 1977), known to Rembrandt through Hendrik Goudt (Dutch, 1585 - 1648)'s engraving of 1612 [fig. 1], was a primary source of inspiration.[6] One sees here the gods lounging in the corner of the dimly lit, humble home of the old couple who are busy preparing the meal. Elsheimer, however, depicted an earlier moment of the episode, before Philemon and Baucis had become aware of the divinities' identities. Rembrandt switched the relative positions of Jupiter and Mercury so that Jupiter, the primary deity, faces the viewer. Dressed in exotic, loosely draped robes, he dominates the scene and takes on a Christ-like appearance that strongly echoes that from the *Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci (Florentine, 1452 - 1519). Rembrandt knew of this composition from a number of sources and made at least three drawings after it, the most extensive of which he executed around 1635 [fig. 2]. Leonardo's composition had a profound impact on Rembrandt's art for the rest of his life, and he adopted it for a number of different subjects in prints, drawings, and paintings.[7] In his 1654 etching, *Christ at Emmaus*, for example, he depicted Christ in a pose comparable to that seen in the *Last Supper*. [8] As Stechow and others have emphasized, Jupiter in *Philemon and Baucis* partakes of much the same spirit. [[oscifootnote:note9]

Rembrandt's appreciation of the thematic connections between Ovid's story and *Christ at Emmaus*, however, did not just develop at the end of his life.[10] His earliest depiction of the biblical story, in 1628 [fig. 3], used as its compositional

basis Goudt's *Philemon and Baucis* print [fig. 1].<sup>[11]</sup> Here, however, Rembrandt transformed the light of the oil lamp into a mystical aureole of light behind Christ that frightens and astonishes the apostles. Rembrandt remembered this dramatic effect when he painted a comparable glow of light behind Mercury. Although the light here is more subdued, it serves to give a mysterious radiance to the darkness and to illuminate Jupiter's golden raiment.

As in Rembrandt's depictions of Christ at Emmaus [fig. 3], light, rather than symbolic attributes, signifies the revelation of divinity. Rembrandt also uses light to help accent important compositional elements. He reinforces the significance of Jupiter's gesture, for example, by placing it on axis with a vertical board on the rear wall that is illuminated by Mercury's aureole. He uses other elements of the dwelling to reinforce his figural composition: the diagonal beams and rope draped over the table both draw the group together and suggest the subdivision within it.

This work is the only extant *Philemon and Baucis* painting in Rembrandt's oeuvre. Quite possibly, however, he included this subject within the series of scenes from Ovid that Baldinucci reports he painted for a Dutch merchant/magistrate.<sup>[12]</sup> Baldinucci probably learned of this series from Bernhard Keil (1624–1687), a Danish artist and Rembrandt pupil who traveled to Italy after being in Amsterdam from about 1642 to 1651. Although no dates for this series of paintings are known, it may belong to the period of Keil's residence in Amsterdam. Two drawings in the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin have frequently been considered preliminary drawings for the Washington painting.<sup>[13]</sup> The episodes from the story of *Philemon and Baucis* depicted in the drawings, however, are so different that they have to be understood as independent creations. Closer in concept is Rembrandt's sympathetic drawing *Saint Peter's Prayer before the Raising of Tabitha*, c. 1654/1655 (Musée Bonnat, Bayonne), in which Saint Peter's pose resembles, in reverse, that of *Philemon*.<sup>[14]</sup>

The painting is in poor condition. Perhaps as a result of the transfer process, which was probably undertaken in the nineteenth century, there are losses in many of the thinly painted areas of the painting. A good deal of old overpaint exists on the surface. The awkward lower portions of Mercury's torso almost certainly result from such reconstructive work.<sup>[15]</sup> A mezzotint by Thomas Watson (British, 1743 or 1748 - 1781) of 1772 [fig. 4] provides an impression of the painting's appearance at that time.

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*Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

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## COMPARATIVE FIGURES



**fig. 1** Hendrik Goudt after Adam Elsheimer, *Jupiter and Mercury in the House of Philemon and Baucis*, 1612, engraving, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of W.G. Russell Allen, 1941.1.162



**fig. 2** Rembrandt van Rijn after Leonardo da Vinci, *The Last Supper*, c. 1635, red chalk, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Robert Lehman Collection, 1975. Photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Art Resource, NY



**fig. 3** Rembrandt van Rijn, *Christ at Emmaus*, 1628, oil on panel, Musée Jacquemart-André, Paris. Photo © Institut de France–Musée Jacquemart-André, Paris



**fig. 4** Thomas Watson, mezzotint after *Philemon and Baucis*, 1772, Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam. Photo © Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

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## NOTES

- [1] See Eric Jan Sluijter, *De "heydensche Fabulen" in de Noordnederlandse schilderkunst circa 1590–1670* (The Hague, 1986), 100. Gary Schwartz, *Rembrandt: His Life, His Paintings* (New York, 1985), 323, notes that Jan Vos mentions a painting of Philemon and Baucis by “Van Zorg” in a poem published in 1662. He interprets this reference to mean Hendrick Martensz Sorgh (1611–1670).
- [2] Karel van Mander, *Wtlegghingh op den Metamorphosis Pub. Ovidii Nasonis*, in Karel van Mander, *Het Schilder-boeck* (Haarlem, 1604). For an English translation of the story of Philemon and Baucis see Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington, IN, 1958), 200–204.
- [3] For an illustration, see Abraham Bredius, *Rembrandt: The Complete Edition of the Paintings*, revised by Horst Gerson (London, 1969), no. 463.
- [4] Christian Tümpel, “Studien zur Ikonographie der Historien Rembrandts:

Deutung und Interpretation der Bildinhalte,” *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 20 (1969): 107–198.

- [5] See Kenneth Clark, *Rembrandt and the Italian Renaissance* (New York, 1966), 6, 8.
- [6] Keith Andrews, *Adam Elsheimer: Paintings—Drawings—Prints* (New York, 1977), 153–154, cat. 24. The painting may also have been known to Rembrandt if, as seems possible, it was in the collection of Jan van de Cappelle (Dutch, 1624/1626 - 1679).
- [7] This phenomenon has been extensively discussed in the literature. See in particular Joseph Gantner, *Rembrandt und die Verwandlung klassischer Formen* (Bern, 1964); Kenneth Clark, *Rembrandt and the Italian Renaissance* (New York, 1966); *Leonardo's "Last Supper": Precedents and Reflections* (Washington, DC, 1983), under nos. 15–20.
- [8] Ludwig Münz, *A Critical Catalogue of Rembrandt's Etchings*, 2 vols. (London, 1952), 1:265, repro.
- [9] Wolfgang Stechow, “The Myth of Philemon and Baucis in Art,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 4 (January 1941): 103–113. Stechow also stresses a connection between Rembrandt’s concept and Rubens’ composition of this scene (probably known to Rembrandt through a print by Meyssens). The relationship, however, is very tenuous. See also Jakob Rosenberg, *Rembrandt*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA, 1948), 1:185 (also 1964 ed., 300).
- [10] Wolfgang Stechow, “The Myth of Philemon and Baucis in Art,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 4 (January 1941): 103, emphasizes that the story of Philemon and Baucis was easily given a Christian interpretation. The old couple epitomized Christian virtues through their gentleness and willing sacrifice of worldly possessions. The story has Eucharistic connotations because of the importance of wine in it. Finally, the story parallels a number of biblical stories in which gods reveal themselves to mortals, among them Abraham entertaining the angels, a subject depicted by Rembrandt in his memorable etching of 1656 (Adam Bartsch, *Catalogue raisonné de toutes les estampes qui forment l’oeuvre de Rembrandt . . .*, 2 vols. [Vienna, 1797], 1: no. 29).
- [11] Wolfgang Stechow, “The Myth of Philemon and Baucis in Art,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 4 (January 1941): 111.
- [12] Seymour Slive, *Rembrandt and His Critics, 1630–1730* (The Hague, 1953), 109. Filippo Baldinucci’s comments appeared in his treatise *Cominciamento, e progresso dell’arte dell’intagliare in rame, colle vite di molti de’ più eccellenti Maestri della stessa Professione* (Florence, 1686), 78.
- [13] Illustrated in Otto Benesch, *The Drawings of Rembrandt: A Critical and Chronological Catalogue*, 6 vols. (London, 1954–1957), 5: no. 958, figs.

1170–1171; and 6: no. A76, fig. 1668.

[14] Otto Benesch, *The Drawings of Rembrandt: A Critical and Chronological Catalogue*, 6 vols. (London, 1954–1957), 5:263, no. 949, fig. 1226. I owe this observation to Christine Boeckl.

[15] So many losses exist in the painting that it was determined that it would be best to merely consolidate the painting when it was treated in 1977, despite the presence of extensive overpaint and severely discolored varnish. When the painting was treated again in 2008, some of the old varnish and overpaint was reduced or removed. See the Technical Summary for a discussion of the glass on the table between Mercury and Jupiter.

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## TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting has been transferred and is now on a cradled, horizontally grained wood panel with a layer of gauze between the panel and paint layer. The original support also appears to have been wood. No ground layer is present; it was probably removed during the transfer.

The paint was applied in successive, medium-rich layers of varying thickness, with broad and free brushmarking giving way to finer strokes in the faces. X-radiographs indicate that Mercury's right arm was originally higher and extended farther from his body. The upper edge of this underlying arm is now visible on the surface as a thin, white line. The nature of this line was mistaken by a previous restorer, who used it to form the upper edge of the glass on the table between Mercury and Jupiter. The paint has suffered severe abrasion, particularly in the darks where, as a result, the gauze interleaf is visible. Extensive repainting and reinforcement is found throughout. The losses were consolidated in 1977, and in 2008 the painting was treated to reduce the significantly discolored varnish and remove some of the old overpaint, but the majority of the overpaint was left in place.

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## PROVENANCE

Captain William Baillie [1723-1792], London; (his sale, Langford & Son, London, 1-2 February 1771, 2nd day, no. 73). possibly English private collection, by 1772.[1] Major

Stanton; (Earl of Essex sale, Christie & Ansell, London, 31 January-1 February 1777, 2nd day, no. 75); Moris.[2] (Charles Sedelmeyer, Paris); Charles T. Yerkes [1839-1905], Chicago, by 1893; (his sale, American Art Association, New York, 5-8 April 1910, no. 1160); (Scott and Fowles, New York); Otto H. Kahn [1867-1934], New York, by 1914 until at least April 1922; sold 1922, perhaps through (Scott and Fowles, New York) to Joseph E. Widener, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania;[3] inheritance from Estate of Peter A.B. Widener by gift through power of appointment of Joseph E. Widener, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, after purchase by funds of the estate; gift 1942 to NGA.

[1] A mezzotint of the composition was executed in 1772 by Thomas Watson (John Charrington, *A Catalogue of the Mezzotints After, or Said to Be After, Rembrandt*, Cambridge, 1923:151, no. 182).

[2] The title page of the 1777 sale catalogue describes the collection as that of the Earl of Essex; however, in a copy of the catalogue at Christie's, London, the consignor's name is written in the margin as "Maj. Stanton." A handwritten results sheet bound into the same volume gives the following result: "75. 32/11/- Moris."

[3] *American Art News* (9 December 1922):1 reported that the seller of the picture to Widener was Scott and Fowles. However, the journal also reported that Scott and Fowles had owned the painting since 1910, and various other sources, including Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century...*, 8 vols., London, 1907-1927: 6:141, indicate that the owner during the mid-1910s was Otto H. Kahn. In addition, Kahn lent the painting to exhibitions in both 1920 and 1922, the latter a Rembrandt exhibition at the Fogg Art Museum, and although no checklist or catalogue exists for this exhibition, the museum's records show that the picture entered the museum on 26 March 1922, and left on 13 April 1922. Perhaps Scott and Fowles simply handled the sale for Kahn.

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## EXHIBITION HISTORY

1920 Fiftieth Anniversary Exhibition, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1920, unnumbered catalogue.



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1922 Rembrandt Paintings, Drawings and Etchings, Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1922, no catalogue.

1969 Rembrandt in the National Gallery of Art [Commemorating the Tercentenary of the Artist's Death], National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1969, no. 18, repro.

1998 A Collector's Cabinet, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1998, no. 47.

2000 Greek Gods and Heroes in the Age of Rubens and Rembrandt, National Gallery and Alexandros Soutzos Museum, Athens; Dordrechts Museum, 2000-2001, no. 62, repro.

2004 Rembrandt, Albertina, Vienna, 2004, no. 133, repro.

2011 Rembrandt in America, North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh; Cleveland Museum of Art; Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 2011-2012, no. 46, pl. 41.

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