



Nicolaes Maes  
Dutch, 1634 - 1693

## *An Old Woman Dozing over a Book*

c. 1655

oil on canvas

overall: 82.2 x 67 cm (32 3/8 x 26 3/8 in.)

Inscription: upper right above keys: N. MAES

Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.63

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### ENTRY

Seated at the table in a darkened room, an old woman leans her head on the back of her hand, dozing over her Bible. Her right hand, vaguely distinguishable in the shadow, rests on the book and holds her reading spectacles. Three large keys hang from a nail in the molding on the wall. The mood of the painting is somber and quiet. The light that falls on her face from the upper left also illuminates the keys, book, and red tablecloth, but most of her body and background are thrown into deep shadow.

Maes explored the theme of a sleeping woman a number of times in the mid-1650s, shortly after he left Rembrandt's studio. Invariably these paintings have an admonitory character, for the woman is always shown dozing off instead of fulfilling her duties and responsibilities. In *The Idle Servant* of 1655 (National Gallery, London), Maes made his point by having a second woman gesture reprovingly toward the irresponsible servant.[1] Dirty pots and pans lie at the woman's feet, and behind her a cat steals a chicken. As if the point needed reinforcement, Maes also placed the sleeping maid in a pose that was well known as a representation of *Acedia* (Sloth) [fig. 1]. He clearly intended to convey a comparable message in his representations of women dozing over their books, particularly when the book was the Bible.

The book in the National Gallery of Art painting can be identified as a Bible through comparison with a related painting in Brussels [fig. 2], in which this same Bible lies opened to the first page of the Book of Amos. Throughout most of this passage, God declares how he will no longer overlook the misdemeanors of the Israelites

and that He intends to punish them the same as everyone else. Reinforcing the message that the woman's behavior cannot be condoned is the fact that her lace work, a symbol of domestic virtue, also goes unattended.[2] Finally, the hourglass that props open the book and the extinguished candle in the niche are symbols of the transience of life. Since life is fleeting, the shirking of responsibilities signifies an unfulfilled existence in the eyes of both man and God.[3]

The message in the Washington painting is less explicit than in the examples from London and Brussels because the iconographic elements have been greatly reduced. Still, the underlying theme is clearly the same. The woman assumes the same pose of sloth; the only accessories, other than the Bible and her spectacles, are the keys hanging on the wall. Traditionally, keys suggest responsibility; left unattended, they indicate her failure to uphold her duties. Keys, however, have many metaphorical associations, among them, by association with the keys of Saint Peter, entry into heaven. Because a key also hangs on the back wall in the Brussels painting, in which themes of sloth and transience of life are both present, the keys here may likewise carry such dual symbolism. Falling asleep over one's Bible is not a means for discovering the keys to heaven. Indeed, in another metaphorical sense of the work, the Bible provides us with keys for understanding life and guiding our salvation; as it lies unread, these keys are therefore neglected. Similarly, spectacles, which serve to improve vision and sharpen our awareness, are effective only when used properly. An old Dutch proverb reads: "What good is the candle or eyeglasses if the owl does not want to see." [4] The devotion with which the woman in a Maes painting in the Worcester Art Museum prays [fig. 3], with her awareness of the transience of life evident in the skull and hourglass on the table before her, is a far more positive exemplar than that seen in either the Brussels or Washington paintings.[5]

Although *An Old Woman Dozing over a Book* is not dated, it must be from around 1655, when the influence of Rembrandt van Rijn (Dutch, 1606 - 1669) on Maes' style was still strong. The broad touch, the dark palette with the deep reds of the tablecloth, and the strong chiaroscuro lighting are comparable to effects found in Rembrandt's paintings from the mid-1640s.

The moralizing character that is so predominant in Maes' genre paintings of the mid-1650s, however, has no direct prototype in Rembrandt's paintings or in those of his other pupils and followers from the late 1640s and early 1650s, when Maes was in Amsterdam. Indeed, depictions by Rembrandt and his school of old women actively reading inevitably invoked the sitter's pious nature.[6] Maes' moralizing

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images were made after his return to Dordrecht and after his marriage to the widow of a preacher in January 1654. Dordrecht had a strong Calvinist tradition, and themes that stressed moral responsibility may have had a ready market.

Many of the props Maes used in this work reappear in other paintings from this period. So too does the model, who is in both the Brussels and the Worcester paintings,[7] and in the latter wears the identical striped headdress as here.[8] Although the identity of the model is not known, she was in all probability a relative. One wonders if Maes followed Rembrandt's example and used his mother for his representations of old women in these strongly didactic works.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

April 24, 2014

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## COMPARATIVE FIGURES



**fig. 1** Jerome Weirix, after P. Galle, *Acedia*, engraving, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1953. Photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Art Resource, NY



**fig. 2** Nicolaes Maes, *An Old Woman Asleep before a Bible*, c. 1655, oil on canvas, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels. © Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels; Photo: J. Geleyns / Ro scan



**fig. 3** Nicolaes Maes, *An Old Woman Praying*, c. 1655, oil on canvas, Worcester Art Museum, Massachusetts

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## NOTES

- [1] Maes' painting is at the National Gallery, London, inv. no. 207. For a discussion of this theme see William W. Robinson, "The *Eavesdroppers* and Related Paintings by Nicolaes Maes," in *Holländische Genremalerei im 17. Jahrhundert*, ed. Henning Bock and Thomas W. Gaehtgens, 283–313 (Berlin, 1987).
- [2] For a discussion of the symbolism in this work see Eddy de Jongh, *Tot lering in vermaak: Betekenissen van Hollandse genrevoorstelling uit de zeventiende eeuw* (Amsterdam, 1976), 143.
- [3] Eddy de Jongh, *Tot lering in vermaak: Betekenissen van Hollandse genrevoorstelling uit de zeventiende eeuw* (Amsterdam, 1976), 143, quoting Johan de Brune, *Banket-Werk van goede gedachten* (Middelburg, 1657), 287, no. 728 ("Ledigheyd"): "Aen 't verlies van den tijd hanght het verlies van de eeuwige zaligheyd."
- [4] Heinrich Schwarz and Volker Plagemann, "Eule," in *Reallexikon zur*

*deutschen Kunstgeschichte* 6 (1973): 267–322 (n.b. 308), fig. 28. “Wat baetes kaers of bril, als den uijl niet sien en wil.” (See Eddy de Jongh, *Tot lering in vermaak: Betekenissen van Hollandse genrevoorstelling uit de zeventiende eeuw* [Amsterdam, 1976], 247, no. 65.)

- [5] Wayne Franits in Ursel Berger and Jutta Desel, *Bilder vom alten Menschen in der niederländischen und deutschen Kunst, 1550–1750* (Braunschweig, 1993), 174, associates the warm clothes the woman wears in the Washington painting with the belief that the body becomes cold and dry in old age as it approaches death. He thus sees the character of the clothing as reinforcing the theme of transience that otherwise exists in the painting. Arguing against this theory, however, is the fact that the very alert woman in the Worcester painting is dressed warmly as well. Without central heating, houses would have been frigid and multiple layers an absolute necessity to stay warm.
- [6] In oral communication, Gregory Rubinstein has noted that the theme of a woman reading a book only developed in Dutch painting in about 1630, perhaps as a result of a contemporary increase of literacy among women. In the following decades many painters depicted old women reading; it would be interesting to investigate the reasons for the introduction and popularity of this motif. See, for example, Rembrandt, *Rembrandt’s Mother in the Guise of the Prophetess Anna* (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. A 3066); Rembrandt and Workshop, *An Old Lady with a Book*, NGA 1937.1.73; and Gerard Dou, *Old Woman Reading* (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. A 2627).
- [7] This same model also appears in *A Woman Spinning* (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. A246) and *An Old Woman Peeling Apples* (Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin, inv. no. 819C).
- [8] William W. Robinson, “‘The Sacrifice of Isaac’: An Unpublished Painting by Nicolaes Maes,” *Burlington Magazine* 136 (September 1984): 540 n. 6, has observed that Maes also used this cloth in his *Dismissal of Hagar*, 1653 (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, inv. no. 1971.1.73), and the *Sacrifice of Isaac*, c. 1655–1658 (Alfred Bader Collection, Milwaukee).

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## TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support, a medium-weight, plain-woven fabric, has been lined with the tacking margins trimmed. Cusping visible along all edges indicates the original dimensions have been retained. A smooth off-white ground application was followed by a dark imprimatura layer, applied overall and incorporated into the background.

Paint was applied thinly in all but the flesh tones with low impasto in light passages and transparent glazing in the darks. Wet-into-wet blending softens the edges of the controlled brushstrokes.

There is a long horizontal tear across the book and some abrasion along the proper left side of the sitter's face and in the sitter's proper right hand. In a restoration that occurred prior to acquisition, the sitter's proper left hand and eye were heavily and awkwardly overpainted.[1] The painting was treated in 2000 to remove the overpaint and discolored varnish. The abrasion was also inpainted at that time.

[1] The paint in these areas was analyzed by the NGA Painting Conservation and Scientific Research departments using cross-sections and air-path X-ray Fluorescence Spectroscopy to determine that it was not original (see reports dated May 3, 2000, and August 15, 2000, in NGA Conservation department files).

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## PROVENANCE

Antoine Delacoux de Marivault [1771-1846], Paris; (his sale, Salle Desmarets by Le Brun and Jaluzot, Paris, 9-10 June 1806, 1st day, no. 29, probably bought in);[1] (sale, by Pérignon and Chariot, Paris, 28-29 March 1816, 1st day, no. 49, bought in); deposited 1817 with (Frederic Quilliet, Paris);[2] (Quilliet sale, by Henry and Jaluzot, Paris, 15-17 April 1818, 1st day, no. 188). possibly (sale, Edward Foster, London, 7 June 1833, no. 69).[3] (Anonymous sale, Worcester, 1856); Thomas Grove Smith [d. 1879], Rashwood House, Droitwich, Worcestershire; by inheritance to his son, Herbert George Smith [d. 1918], Apsey House, Batheaston, Somerset;[4] (Arthur J. Sulley & Co., London); sold 25 September 1919 to (Thos. Agnew & Sons, Ltd., London); sold 15 January 1920 to (John Levy Galleries, New York).[5] Nils B. Hersloff, East Orange, New Jersey;[6] consigned April 1933-May 1934 and January 1935-April 1936 to (M. Knoedler & Co., New York);[7] purchased 16 April 1936 by The A.W. Mellon Educational and Charitable Trust, Pittsburgh; gift 1937 to NGA.

[1] The early provenance of the painting, through 1833, was kindly provided by Burton B. Fredericksen in a letter to Arthur Wheelock, dated 18 December 2002, in NGA curatorial files. Marivault's collection was offered for sale *en bloc* in January

1806; concerning this exhibition/sale, and the June 1806 sale and confusion surrounding its dates, see also Burton B. Fredericksen and Benjamin Peronnet, eds., *Répertoire des tableaux vendus en France au XIXe siècle*, one volume in two parts, Los Angeles, 1998: pt. 1:32-33, 35-36, cats. 96 and 109. William W. Robinson, in a letter to Arthur Wheelock of 12 March 1996 (in NGA curatorial files), noted a sale record in the Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie (RKD), The Hague, that gives the dates as 10-11 June 1809. However, the description of lot number 29 is identical to the description in the 1806 catalogue, so the 1809 date is likely in error. Frits Lugt (*Répertoire des catalogues de ventes publiques*, 4 vols., The Hague, 1938-1964: vol. 1) cross-references three sales to each other--Lugt numbers 6281, 7604, and 8017--that all likely refer to the 1806 sale, which is Lugt number 7119.

[2] Fredericksen and Peronnet 1998, pt. 1:32, cat. 96.

[3] As Fredericksen points out in his letter (see note 1), the paintings in this sale are described as having been "just imported from France," but the description is brief and the dimensions are not given, so the painting's identity is uncertain.

[4] The provenance from 1856 to 1919 comes from a three-page typewritten pamphlet concerning the work written by W. Roberts in 1919. It was probably produced for Sulley and Co., London, and is in the library of M. Knoedler & Co., New York (copy in NGA curatorial files).

[5] Stockbook no. 5563, Thomas Agnew & Sons, London. A handwritten note by Frits Lugt in a copy of the 1935 Knoedler exhibition catalogue that included the painting (now at the Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie, The Hague) reads: "fraai, heb ick bij Agnew 1920 gemist."

[6] N.B. Hersloff, then resident in Pinehurst, North Carolina, wrote to Duveen Brothers, Inc. on 15 November 1930 to ask if the dealer would be interested in buying the painting. He was told, however, in letter of 20 November 1930, that the firm did not buy works by the artist. (Duveen Brothers Records, accession number 960015, Research Library, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles: reel 321, box 466,

folder 2; copies in NGA curatorial files)

[7] On 7 April 1933 the picture was received by Knoedler, on consignment from "H. B. Hersloff, Compania De Trafico Y Formento" (no address given, transaction no. CA 513 in the stockbook). It was returned to the consigner on 8 May 1934, but returned again in January 1935 (transaction CA 768, again from "H.B. Hersloff"). However, the painting is listed in the 1935 Knoedler exhibition catalogue as having come from the collection of "Nils B. Hersloff, Esq.," rather than "H.B.," as was entered in the normally reliable Knoedler stockbooks. (The stockbook information was kindly provided by Nancy C. Little, librarian at M. Knoedler & Co., New York).

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## EXHIBITION HISTORY

1900 Autumn Exhibition, Victoria Art Gallery, Bath, 1900, no. 41.

1935 Exhibition of Twenty Masterpieces (1400-1800) in Aid of King George V's Jubilee Trust, M. Knoedler & Co., London, 1935, no. 10.

1993 Bilder vom alten Menschen in der niederländischen und deutschen Kunst 1550-1750, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig, 1993-1994, no. 44, repro.

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- 1993 Berger, Ursel, and Jutta Desel. *Bilder vom alten Menschen in der niederländischen und deutschen Kunst, 1550-1750*. Exh. cat. Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig, 1993: 174-175, no. 44, repro.
- 1995 Liedtke, Walter A. *Rembrandt/not Rembrandt in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: aspects of connoisseurship. Vol. 2, Paintings, drawings, and prints: art-historical perspectives*. Exh. cat. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1995: 2:126-127, fig. 77.
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