

PLEASURE AND PIETY

The Art of Joachim Wtewael (1566–1638)

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JOACHIM WTEWAEL LED A LIFE as exceptional and diverse as his art. A masterful storyteller who infused his narrative paintings with emotion and wit, Wtewael was as adept at interpreting sacred stories from the Bible as he was at illustrating erotic tales from Greco-Roman mythology. He executed complex compositions with brilliant color and fine detail on both monumental canvases and small copperplates. He could paint from imagination and from life, creating striking portraits of family members and introducing naturalistic still lifes into his genre and narrative scenes.

In his self-portrait of 1601 (fig. 1), Wtewael appears as a confident, well-to-do gentleman artist, clothed handsomely, with pearl and gold rings adorning his pinky finger. At age thirty-four he was already a distinguished citizen of Utrecht, one of the oldest cities in the Netherlands, and commanded high prices from collectors eager for his work. He went on to become a founding member of the local artists' guild and an active participant in local politics. An ardent Calvinist, he served on the city council during a time of religious turmoil and held various charitable positions. He was in addition a successful flax merchant — perhaps too successful in the eyes of one contemporary observer, the writer Karel van Mander, who deemed Wtewael one of the outstanding painters of his generation but lamented that he spent more time on his business than his pictures. Though demand for his work extended far beyond Utrecht, he evidently did not need to rely on selling art to earn his living.

As a teenager, Wtewael learned the craft of his father, a glass painter, before apprenticing with a local artist. He headed abroad in about 1586 to spend two years in Italy and two in France in the retinue of a French bishop. While away he embraced the popular international style known as mannerism, characterized by extreme refinement, artifice, and elegant distortion. He remained one of the leading proponents of this style in the Netherlands, even as most early seventeenth-century Dutch artists shifted to a more naturalistic manner of painting. His inventive compositions, teeming with twisting, choreographed figures and saturated with pastels and acidic colors, retained their appeal for his patrons.

Wtewael's ebullient mannerism enlivens works such as *The Apulian Shepherd* (fig. 2), painted on a tiny (6 × 8 in.) copperplate about a decade after his return to Utrecht. More than a dozen figures swirl about the scene, which relates a story of the transformation of a shepherd into an olive tree as punishment for mocking a group of dancing nymphs. Reclining in the foreground of the overgrown glade is the god Pan, who points out the foolish shepherd in the clearing at left. Branches spring from his head as he reaches out in astonishment, too late to take back his insults. The tale comes from the

FIG. 1 *Self-Portrait*,
1601, oil on panel,
Collection Centraal
Museum Utrecht,
Purchase 1918

FIG. 2 *The
Apulian Shepherd*,
c. 1600–1605, oil on
copper, Rose-Marie
and Eijk van Otter-
loo Collection



Metamorphoses by the ancient Roman author Ovid (43 BC–AD 17), a popular source for many sixteenth- and seventeenth-century artists, particularly those working in the mannerist style. The poem's descriptions of mythological figures being changed from one form into another sparked countless imaginative interpretations of distorted and intertwining bodies.

One lascivious story in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that caught Wtewael's attention concerns the adulterous affair between Mars, god of war, and Venus, goddess of love. Upon discovering their liaison, Vulcan, the god of fire and husband of Venus, took revenge by ensnaring the couple midembrace, making them the laughingstock of the celestial world. In the second of Wtewael's three extant versions (fig. 3), Vulcan tramples on Mars' discarded armor at right as he seizes the iron net that trapped the dismayed lovers. Above him Apollo pulls away the curtains of the sumptuously bedecked bed to reveal their rendezvous to a gathering of amused deities. Jupiter flies in from above clutching his thunderbolt as Mercury, recognizable by his winged hat, turns laughingly to Saturn perched on a cloud with his scythe; next to him sits Diana the huntress, who catches the viewer's eye with a knowing smile. Visible through the parted curtains is an earlier scene: Vulcan forges the net he will use to catch his unfaithful wife and her paramour. Wtewael painted all this action on a small copperplate. The jewel-like but risqué work could be locked away in a cabinet or drawer, and brought out in private to show visitors who would appreciate such a scene.

Ovid's tales did not always require a small format. Wtewael executed the heroic story of Perseus rescuing Andromeda on a monumental canvas (cover). In this dazzling composition, the fearless demigod swoops down on his winged horse, Pegasus, to slay a sea beast before it reaches its sacrificial prey, chained to a rock to await her demise. In saving Andromeda, the daughter of the king of Ethiopia, Perseus wins the fair maiden's hand. Wtewael's versatility as an artist is on display here. His exquisite milk-white princess, in a contrapposto stance familiar from ancient sculpture, embodies Ovid's comparison of her to a marble statue, thus demonstrating the artist's knowledge of the classics. The colorful monster — dragonlike, scaly, and feathered — is a wonderful creation sprung from the artist's imagination. In contrast, he rendered naturalistically the diverse assortment of exotic shells strewn about the beach.

Though probably born Catholic, Wtewael evidently had become a Calvinist by 1610, when he was involved in a struggle between clashing factions of Protestants over control of the city council in Utrecht. Calvinism rejected the ornate decoration of churches and the devotional role of art, lessening the demand for

FIG. 3 *Mars and Venus Surprised by Vulcan*, 1604–1608, oil on copper, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles



FIG. 4 *Moses Striking the Rock*, 1624, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund



religious paintings and sculptures in the Netherlands. The types of subjects popular with Catholic patrons — emphasizing saints or the Virgin Mary — are less common in Wtewael's own work. However, the artist did address didactic biblical themes a number of times. One of his most evocative works depicts a pivotal episode in the story of Moses (fig. 4). Thirsty and weary from their long journey wandering through the desert, the Israelites had unleashed their frustrations on their leader, who shared their complaints with God. He commanded Moses to take the rod that had parted the Red Sea during the flight out of Egypt and use it to bring water out of a rock. Wtewael depicted the moment after Moses had struck the rock with the rod. As water gushes forth, the Israelites, arranged in a contrived but mesmerizing serpentine procession, rush with vessels to collect it. The artist deftly used light and shadow to dramatize the miracle and illuminate Moses at right (standing next to his brother, the high priest Aaron). The nurturing spring of the biblical story was linked to the sacrificial blood of Jesus, and thus to salvation. But the subject reveals Wtewael's politically engaged sensibility, for it was also associated with the long struggle of the Netherlands for independence from Spain. The Dutch drew parallels between their own and the Israelites' quest to escape subjugation, and they likened the first leader of their revolt, William the Silent, Prince of Orange (1533–1584), to Moses — for each died before his people reached the promised land.

Although Wtewael never abandoned his mannerist roots, the trend in Dutch art of depicting everyday life emerged in his work to a degree. In a late painting showing the workings of a contemporary kitchen (fig. 5), a robust young woman gazes unabashedly at the viewer as she skewers plucked chickens. The nearby tables overflow with the makings of a feast: stacks of cheese and a large knob of butter, bread, fish, and a glass of wine, a joint of meat surrounded by carrots, cabbages, and cucumbers. The maid, preoccupied with her task, seems unaware of the biblical scene taking place in another kitchen behind her, where Christ visits Martha and Mary. As recounted in the gospel of Luke, the overworked Martha complained to Jesus when her sister sat down to listen to him preach, leaving her to prepare the meal; he replied that Mary had made the better choice. The moralizing lesson of elevating the spiritual, contemplative life over worldly distractions thus tempers the almost carnal sensuousness of the foreground scene.

Wtewael's fluid command of composition is evident in his drawings as well as his paintings. His remarkable skills as a draftsman animate a series of carefully finished designs for glass panels (now lost) to decorate the town hall in Woerden, which lies west of Utrecht. The series, from about 1612, allegorizes the decades-long conflict

FIG. 5 *The Kitchen Maid*, c. 1620–1625, oil on canvas, Collection Centraal Museum Utrecht, Purchase with support from the Vereniging Rembrandt, 1999



FIG. 6 *Allegory of the Dutch Revolt, The Twelve Years' Truce*, 1612, pen and ink with wash and gouache over black chalk, Maida and George Abrams Collection, Boston



with Spain. One of the designs (fig. 6) represents the agreement in 1609 to suspend fighting between the two lands. It would come to be known as the Twelve Years' Truce after hostilities resumed in 1621. In Wtewael's drawing, the Dutch Maiden, the personification of the Netherlands, shakes hands with the personification of Spain at right. She is pushed by a Spanish general toward her Dutch counterpart, who stands between a protective Prince Maurits of Orange and, at left, the French king Henri IV, who helped negotiate the truce.

Wtewael seems to have abandoned his art around the time his beloved wife, Christina, died (April 1629) and lived out his last decade tending to other concerns. The Latin motto on the plaque behind the artist in his self-portrait (see fig. 1) announces that he seeks "Not Glory but Remembrance." Fate would not be so kind, for despite the esteem he enjoyed in life, his reputation waned over the centuries. His mannerist paintings, so different in appearance and subject from the usual description of Dutch seventeenth-century art, were often neglected in histories of the period. And his name, spelled variously as Uytewael or Wttewael and difficult to pronounce, did not help his standing. This exhibition sheds light on Wtewael's artistic excellence, allowing him to reclaim his rightful place among the great masters of the Dutch Golden Age.

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COVER *Perseus and Andromeda*, 1611, oil on canvas, Musée du Louvre, Paris, Département des Peintures, Gift of the Société des Amis du Louvre, 1982

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