



Cornelis van Poelenburch  
Dutch, 1594/1595 - 1667

# *The Prophet Elijah and the Widow of Zarephath*

c. 1630

oil on panel

overall: 35.6 x 47 cm (14 x 18 1/2 in.)

framed: 51.1 x 62.1 x 5.1 cm (20 1/8 x 24 7/16 x 2 in.)

Gift of Joseph F. McCrindle in honor of John Thomas Rowe, Jr. 2004.101.2

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## ENTRY

*The Prophet Elijah and the Widow of Zarephath* illustrates the passage in 1 Kings 17:8–24 that recounts how the Lord led the prophet Elijah to Zarephath, where he met a widow and her son gathering sticks. [1] Elijah asked the widow for some water and bread, and although she was destitute because of the draught that had plagued the land for more than three years, she used her last bit of flour and oil to cook for him. Elijah then blessed her and her child and assured them that their supplies of flour and oil would never be diminished. Shortly thereafter the widow's son died, and Elijah prayed that the Lord would return the child to life. The Lord heard Elijah's prayer and returned the boy's soul to his body. This Old Testament story was often interpreted as exemplifying the power of faith to achieve miracles. It also portends New Testament accounts of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. The way the widow's son clutches a large bundle of sticks anticipates Christ's carrying of the cross on the way to Golgotha, and because the boy was brought back from the dead, he was also seen as alluding to the resurrected Christ. [2] Significantly, when this painting appeared at auction in Paris in 1752, it was sold as

a pendant to a painting by Poelenburch of Abraham and Isaac, another Old Testament story that was considered to embody the power of faith and to prefigure Christ's death and resurrection. [3]

In Poelenburch's painting the meeting of the prophet, shown wrapped in a red robe, and the widow, who kneels before him, occurs near the end of the day under cerulean blue skies. Light spreading across the parched and barren terrain illuminates their forms, as well as those of other, more distant travelers who pass through a landscape dotted with clusters of ancient ruins atop small hills or nestled against rock outcroppings. Although most of these structures are imaginary evocations of ruins Poelenburch had seen on his travels through the Roman campagna, the large shaded ruin in the foreground left, with its precariously balanced pediment, is based on the Temple of Castor and Pollux from the Roman Forum, a ruin that Poelenburch depicted often in his works. [4] He used these ruins to establish a sense of time and place, but he also carefully situated them for compositional effect. They not only help create scale and enhance spatial recession, but they also reinforce the narrative. By framing Elijah's upper body within the circular vault of a distant ruin, for example, Poelenburch gave the prophet added visual prominence in the scene.

Poelenburch continued to paint biblical scenes in Italianate landscapes even after he returned to Utrecht in the mid-1620s, making it difficult to date his paintings. The restrained poses and gestures of the figures in this work, which reflect the influence of Raphael (Marchigian, 1483 - 1520), the blue and ochre tonalities, and the soft atmospheric effects in the distant landscape are all characteristic of Poelenburch's paintings executed around 1630. The oak panel support is also typical of works he painted in Utrecht at that time. Moreover, the subject seems to have appealed to Dutch patrons. The closest pictorial prototype for Poelenburch's interpretation of the story is a now-lost painting by Poelenburch's teacher, Abraham Bloemaert (Dutch, 1566 - 1651), known through a 1604 engraving by Jan Pietersz Saenredam (Dutch, 1565 - 1607), in which the widow is similarly shown kneeling and gathering sticks with her son [fig. 1]. [5]

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

April 24, 2014

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**COMPARATIVE FIGURES**



**fig. 1** Jan Pietersz Saenredam after Abraham Bloemaert, *Elijah with the Widow of Zarephath*, 1604, engraving, The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. David C. Ruttenberg, 1982.434. © AIC

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**NOTES**

- [1] I would like to thank Sohee Kim for her assistance in researching this entry.
- [2] I would like to thank the Reverend Steven Rich for his explanations about the biblical significance of this story (correspondence December 8 and 9, 2009, in the NGA curatorial files). See Christian Tümpel, *Het Oude Testament in de Schilderkunst van de Gouden Eeuw* (Amsterdam, 1991), 101.
- [3] It is not known whether this painting still exists.
- [4] Poelenburch first depicted this ruin in *Shepherds with their Flocks in a Landscape with Roman Ruins*, c. c. 1620, oil on copper, 12 ½ x 15 ¾ in.,

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Royal Collection. See: *Treasures from the Royal Collection: The Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace* (London, 1988), 72, no. 54.

- [5] Bartholomeus Breenbergh (1598–1657) followed the same pictorial tradition in his *Landscape with Elijah and the Widow of Zarephath*, 1656, oil on panel, 69.5 x 92 cm, The State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg (inv. 6158).
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## TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support consists of a single-planked panel with horizontal grain. On the reverse, all four edges are beveled and tool marks are visible along the left edge. A thin, white ground covers the panel, but allows the wood grain to show through. Microscopic examination showed several incised diagonal lines in the ground, which may be compositional or perspective guides. The paint is smoothly and precisely applied in fine detail.

The painting is in very good condition. A wooden insert in the panel in the top left corner was probably added to replace an area damaged by insects. Short checks and small chips in the panel are found along the edges. The paint and ground bear some groupings of small losses that follow the wood grain in the foreground figures at lower right, in the clouds, and in the center of the sky. The painting was treated in 2006 to remove discolored varnish and inpainting.

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## PROVENANCE

Cottin collection; (his sale, by Pierre Remy and Sieur Helle, Paris, 27 November–22 December 1752, 1st day, no. 382);<sup>[1]</sup> purchased by Le Brun. (sale, Sotheby's, London, 21 February 1962, no. 66); (Thos. Agnew and Sons, Ltd., London); sold 29 May 1963 to Joseph F. McCrindle [1923–2008], New York;<sup>[2]</sup> gift 2004 to NGA.

[1] The painting was sold as a pendant to Poelenburch's "Abraham conduissant son Fil Isaac au lieu du Sacrifice, 12 pounces de haut sur 15 1/2 de large." On the verso of the panel are some unidentified wax seals.

[2] Also on the verso is an Agnew's label with the number 24022 stenciled on it.

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Venetia Harlow, Agnew's archivist, confirmed in an e-mail of 21 December 2009 to Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr. (in NGA curatorial files) that this label number corresponded to Agnew's stock number 3792, and provided the details of their acquisition and sale of the painting.

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## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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- 2012 Grasselli, Margaret M., and Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., eds. *The McCrindle Gift: A Distinguished Collection of Drawings and Watercolors*. Exh. cat. National Gallery of Art. Washington, 2012: x (detail), 19, repro. 185.
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