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Rembrandt's next move The etching of 1641

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In 1641, ten years after the present painting, Rembrandt made an etching on the same theme. In this etching, he made a number of changes, but its composition also has evident similarities with the present painting:

The post-Lastmanian horizontal format of the present painting (as shown in mirror image by Visscher's print) is used again by Rembrandt in 1641. It means that the systemic iconographical anomalies in the half top Vliet's print (1631) are descriptive of the possible mechanical transfer of composition from Rembrandt's original.

What has not changed: an expressive and deeply moving depiction of the act of the baptism.

In both works, that of 1631 and 1641, the relationship between the Christian proselytizer and the new convert is portrayed in a similar way. Both images emphasize the sacramental function of baptism, the eunuch's expression of profound religious devotion, and the tenderness with which Philip performs the act. In the etching, the cliff behind the figures gives the scene a setting comparable to that of the painting (fig.1).



Fig. 1 The continuity with changes from 1631 to 1641, a kind of a mirror image with movements of some characters in the engraving.

What has slightly changed:

In the etching, the implied descent of the Holy Spirit and its reception by the eunuch is less apparent than it is either in the present painting or in Vliet's engraving of 1631, both of which include a patch of light that falls on the eunuch's hair.

The figures of the principal scene are arranged in the same manner in the etching, although they are closer together than in the painting: the kneeling eunuch is seen more in profile, in front of Philip. In the etching he is accompanied by a smaller page from his retinue, who holds his clothing

and turban, which now has a flamboyant feather from a bird of paradise attached to it (fig.). The rest of the eunuch's entourage remains at distance, with the exception of this page and the commanding horseman.

What has changed dramatically:

In the etching, the armed horseman is dressed more extravagantly; notably, he wears a more elaborate, higher hat with a larger feather in it. In the painting, he is depicted in the act of calculating the danger posed by the implied viewer of the scene, who is positioned on the other side of the river, as in the etching. In the etching, the horseman's state of mind seems to have drastically changed. By means of the rotation of his head, elbow and wrist, which now rests on his hip, the commander expresses his bewilderment or even dismay at seeing his master, a high dignitary from the court of the queen, submit so humbly to this strange old man. The horseman looks almost menacing: a warrior ready to violate the sacred space. In the etching, the mixture of different emotions displayed by the characters is shown at its peak, and conveys an extraordinary dramatic tension.

The page who holds his master's turban and clothing is much closer to him in the etching (fig. 2).



Fig. 2 The commanding horseman seems to be surprised and defiant. He perhaps thinks: "Now that's strange behavior for the treasurer of our queen!".

Observation:

In this engraving, which was made ten years later, Rembrandt tells us what happened next in the scene depicted in the painting, which could in fact have taken place a few minutes later. In fact, we see a new episode in which the focus shifts to the commanding horseman and leads to the imminent question: **what is he going to do?**

The eunuch kneeling in the continuity:

His posture has slightly changed. In the etching, the eunuch is presented more in profile, but his attitude of devotion remains unchanged. The scene is still deeply moving (fig.3).



Fig. 3 The eunuch in a similar position in the present painting and in the engraving 1641.

The hands clasped on the breast and raised toward the heaven. The movement is barely visible (fig.4).



Fig. 4 The eunuch in transparency mixed with the engraving 1641, the movement is barely visible.

The young page: The page who holds the turban and the cloth of his master has moved and approached him.

He is positioned closer to his master than in the present painting. His expression is one of compassion, and contrasts with the aggressive behavior of the commanding horseman. The look of concern that he wears in the painting has not left him, but it is nuanced by a certain empathy, which has perhaps been aroused by what he has witnessed. He may have seen the light of the Holy Spirit which (in the episode depicted in the painting) descended from heaven onto the deacon's hand and touched the eunuch's head. In the etching the page seems resigned to whatever might happen in the aftermath of this strange ceremony (fig. 5).



Fig. 5 Young page and the dog in his back.

The dog's behaviour has also changed slightly as the horse looks away like those pulling the cart in the present painting (fig. 6):

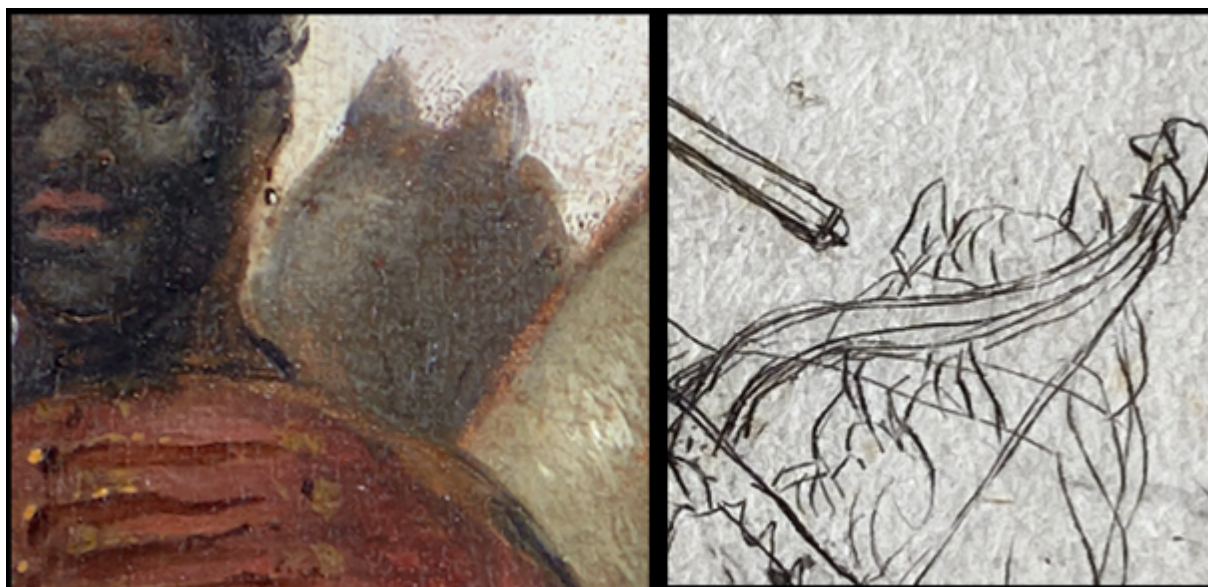


Fig. 6 Horse looking into the distance in a position like the draught horses of the present painting.

The eunuch's turban and the coat hold by the page shows some similarity in the textile of the painting and the engraving (fig.7):



Fig. 7 The eunuch's turban and the coat holds by the page, with some similarity in the textile in mirror image.

The aigrette of the turban:

In the present painting, the painter is possibly trying to capture the “looks” of a bird-of-paradise aigrette, as rightly points out by Marieke de Winkel, it could be the feather of another bird, although the lack of definition of the aigrettes themselves (their generic look/appearance) does not provide enough clues to confirm without question that these are bird of paradise aigrettes. By “clues”, it means details like the depiction of the head, beak; a more elaborate depiction of the plumage; or the presence of the two string-like feathers that are characteristic of these birds (fig.8).



Fig. 8 The aigrette of the turban in the present painting, the 1641 engraving by Rembrandt and in aigrette of the Black Magi, *Adoration of The Magi* 1628-1629, Museo del Prado.

About the aigrette of the present painting, Jose Ramon Marcaida Lopez, who wrote *Rubens and the bird of Paradise*, thinks: “The colours certainly match, and in the turban’s aigrette the way the feathers are rendered (and based on their size compared to the turban) does remind of a bird of paradise aigrette. The aigrettes resemble those made up of bird of paradise feathers”.¹ But, it still not ensured. This assumption that Rembrandt had some specimens in his collection and the fact that he depicted them is supported by a greater precision in the engraving of 1641 (fig.8).

¹ Jose Ramon Marcaida Lopez, Director of Impact, University of St Andrews) who wrote *Rubens and the bird of Paradise*.¹ (Painting natural knowledge in the early century. Jan 2014, In: *Renaissance Studies*, 28, 1, p. 112-127)

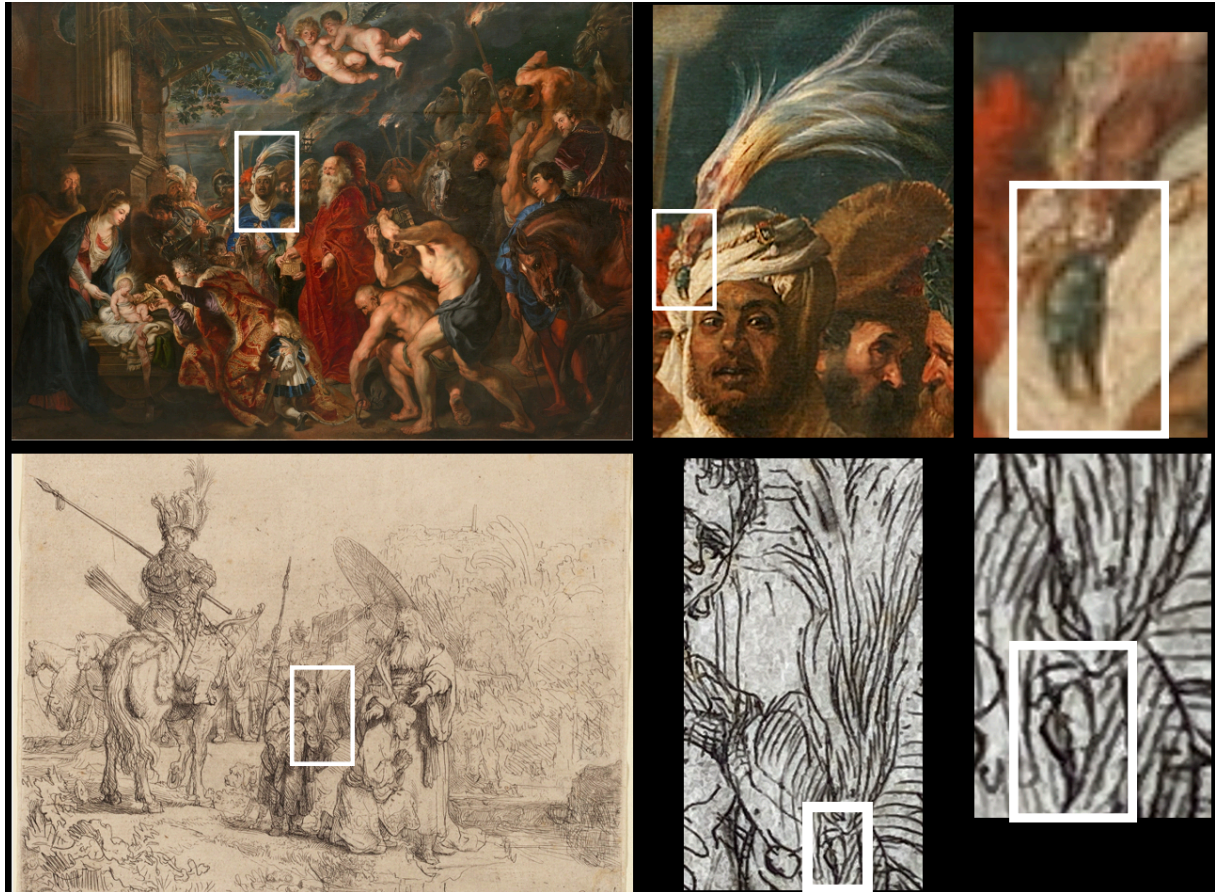


Fig. 8 Details like the depiction of the head, beak; a more elaborate depiction of the plumage; the presence of the two string-like feathers that are characteristics of the bird of paradise.

The gaze lost in thought of the page in the present painting reproduced in the background of the engraving (fig.9):



Fig. 9 Similar attitude of concern: in the etching this is a different observer of the scene, placed in the same position as the page in the painting.

The landscape in the background with tiny silhouettes:

A tiny distant landscape can be seen in the background of the present painting, and also in Vliet's etching and that of Rembrandt from 1641. This landscape includes the recognizable cliffs of Jerusalem, and reminds us where the narrative set (fig.10-11-12).



Fig. 10 The jerusalem's landscape and the tiny sihouettes.



Fig. 11 The Jerusalem cliff and two tiny personages, in the painting of 1631 and in the engraving of 1641.



Fig. 12 Copy of the silhouettes by Vliet' etching 1631.

In both Lastman and Rembrandt's biblical landscapes, small figures like these are often represented in scattered locations. The traces of the silhouettes which we can detect on the left-hand side of the present painting are not pareidolia, or involuntary marks. They recur in the prints. In the three artworks these tiny silhouettes display a similar physiognomy.

What might be the significance of these two figures?

The two figures are depicted in close proximity to each other, at the foot of some mountains and near a bridge or river bank. It is difficult to say whether this representation corresponds to something specific within the theme's pictorial code. Dreamlike atmospheres like these, in depictions of a story told in several episodes, are an old tradition, which Rembrandt

would have seen in the drawings, etchings and paintings of his predecessors and those of his own period (fig.13).



Fig. 13 Tiny figures in the landscape, in a similar position in the present painting and in Rembrandt's etching of 1641.

Maerten van Heemskerck could therefore legitimately depict a number of sequences from the biblical narrative in his representation of the theme, as suggested by these two engravings made of his work by Philip Galle, which include the principal events of the story of the *Baptism of the Eunuch* (fig.14).



Fig.14 Philips Galle, after Maerten van Heemskerck, *The Angel Orders Saint Philip to Accompany the Ethiopian Eunuch*, *The Baptism of the Eunuch by Saint Philip*, 1575, Washington, National Gallery of Art, 1974.33.21 and 1974.33.22.

In Rome, Maerten van Heemskerck made numerous sketches of architecture and sculpture, of paintings from the High Renaissance and of Michelangelo's frescoes in the Sistine Chapel. Among these, we have discovered an interesting detail that relates to our theme. It is from his depiction of *The Creation of the Sun and the Moon*. Heemskerck repurposed Michelangelo's figure in a more chaste manner, covering the angel's naked buttocks, to show him carrying Philip away from his office up into the air and towards the eunuch's chariot in his second engraving of *the Baptism of the Eunuch*. This is just one episode in the story (fig.15-16).



Fig.15 Michelangelo, detail of God, *the Creation of the Sun, and the Moon*, 1508-12 by Michelangelo, Sistine Chapel ceiling. Vatican City and *The Baptism of the Eunuch by Saint Philip*, 1575, detail of Philip by Philips Galle, after Maerten van Heemskerck, NG Washington.



Fig. 16 Philips Galle, after Maerten van Heemskerck, *The Angel Orders Saint Philip to Accompany the Ethiopian Eunuch*, *The Baptism of the Eunuch by Saint Philip*, 1575, Washington, National Gallery of Art, 1974.33.21 and 1974.33.22.

In the first etching, the scene shows an angel compelling Philip to walk along the desert road from Jerusalem to Gaza, close to Azotus. In the second etching, Philip is carried on the angel's wings to join the eunuch on the road. He then sits in the eunuch's chariot and discusses the book of the prophet Isaiah with him, preaches the gospel of Jesus and, finally, after the eunuch's confession of faith, baptizes him.

Both prints portray a series of brief episodes in rapid succession. In the present painting, however, Philip's mission is completed in a single image, with a discreet inclusion of the landscape of Jerusalem in the background. It has been said that the two recurrent tiny figures might be a minimalist allusion of the initial episode in the story in which the angel orders Philip to go and convert and baptize the eunuch. However, as Volker Manuth

points out, it is unlikely that Rembrandt would have departed from the rule of three unities of time, place and action in this way (fig.17). In the painting the intermediary figurations of Philip and the eunuch are useless.



Fig. 17 Present painting detail, possible dreamlike landscape (1), on the top left side. Philip is reading (3) while angel commands him to go to the road of Gaza (4) to join the eunuch, followed by the baptism (5).

An exception to this rule of not mixing places and times can be seen in Rembrandt's inclusion of another dreamlike landscape, in his painting, *Jeremiah Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem* 1630 (fig.18).



Fig. 18 *Jeremiah Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem*, 1630, Rijksmuseum, oil on panel, 58cm × 46cm, the present painting.

Continuity in horizontal composition:

We can draw a direct line of continuity from the present painting to Rembrandt's engraving of 1641 and his drawing of 1640, in the Louvre, in which the rider remains on the sidelines (fig. 19).



Fig. 19 Deacon Philippe baptizes the eunuch from the Ethiopian court, from Lastman to Rembrandt van Rijn, c. 1641,



Fig. 20 Horizontal composition on the same theme from the present painting, the drawing of the Louvre to the engraving of 1641.

Observation: the continuity and the evolution of Rembrandt's thinking.

Continuity is apparent in the remanence of the main elements found in the present painting, with some evocative changes. All three use a horizontal composition, and the characters recur, some with similar postures (Philip and the eunuch), others having evolved to add to the drama of the scene. Whereas the chariot and the majority of the entourage remain at distance in the background, the young page and the commanding horseman have moved forward in the later works, the first to serve his master with compassion, the other to threaten him. We can see in these works both the continuity and the evolution of Rembrandt's thinking.

It seems unlikely that Rembrandt followed an idea of his pupils ten years after the *Baptism of the Eunuch* reproduced by Vliet and Visscher. On the contrary, we can see the deepening of a depiction in continuity with his earlier work of 1631 in the same composition.

No comment:



