



September 2011 OOM: The Denial of Saint Peter by Gerrit van Honthorst

Dutch, 1620-25 Accession # 71.78 purchased in 1971 G 313

Theme: “Now Peter sat without in the palace: and a damsel came unto him saying, ‘Thou also was with Jesus of Galilee’. But he denied before them all, saying ‘I know not what thou sayest’ “. This passage from the Gospel of Matthew in the New Testament, the Christian body of sacred writings, is the subject of this painting. The story begins when Jesus has his Last Supper with the twelve apostles and he foretells that all of them would forsake him when he was in danger. Peter denied that he would do so. That evening when they all went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray, the Roman soldiers found Jesus and arrested him. All the apostles deserted him, though Peter followed at a distance. Three times, Peter was asked if he had been with Jesus and each time he denied it. Immediately after the third denial, a cock crowed, whereupon Peter realized what had happened and broke down crying, repentant. After Jesus death, Peter became a leader of the first Christian communities in Jerusalem and Rome. He was greatly admired and died a martyr’s death in 64 CE during the persecutions of the Roman emperor Nero.

Saint Peter is a symbol in Christianity of the power of forgiveness. Peter had committed the greatest sin, denial and betrayal of Jesus and yet was reconciled to him through repentance of his action. His image was favored by the Church of the Counter Reformation in promoting devotion to the Seven Sacraments, of which penance is one. His appearance is remarkably constant in art, usually shown as an

old but vigorous man, with short grey curling hair, balding or tonsured and a short, usually curly beard, often with broad, rustic features. He commonly wears a yellow or gold cloak over a blue or green tunic.

The Work: In the Honthorst painting, much play is made of gesture. The woman makes her accusation by grasping Peter's cloak. He denies it with a hesitant outstretched hand. A soldier accuses him with a pointing finger. Three other soldiers gaze at Peter with incredulity. The masked flame in the center has the power to draw the figures together and adds to the drama of the moment. The painting is a frieze-like moment of three-quarter length figures gathered in the canvas. Although the picture is neither signed nor dated, it fits into Honthorst's body of work. It was painted shortly after his return to Holland from Italy and reflects the Italian baroque style. Most of the figures are close to the picture plane and encircling Peter but leaving an opening so that the viewer can complete the circle. He uses foreshortening - a way of proportionately representing an object or person to make it appear three dimensional-in depicting the right arm of the soldier with his back to us. Honthorst adjusted the dimensions of the arm from the elbow to the hand. These are 'real' people and we can identify with Peter's human expression.

Artist: Gerrit Honthorst was born in Utrecht in 1592 to a large Catholic family. His father and grandfather were textile and tapestry designers. In 1622, Honthorst became a member of the Utrecht Guild of St Luke. He married and soon after established a large workshop and art academy with about 25 students at any one time. He went to Italy to study painting and is the most famous member of the group of Utrecht Caravaggisti, the Dutch followers of Caravaggio. Caravaggio was a leader in the ability to make art accessible based on his observation and use of real people. Honthorst had a predilection for turning the Italian's dramatic patterns of natural light and shadows into nocturnal scenes that caught the eye. He was well known for this style during the 1620's and mid 1630's. Through connections that are obscure, Honthorst made an association with the House of Orange and went to England. He painted a portrait of King Charles I and other members of the royal family. He was so successful that he changed his artistic direction. He turned to a financially rewarding style of courtly portraiture and large-scale allegorical works. In 1628 he was made an English citizen and provided a lifetime pension of 100 pounds a year. He was equally successful after his return to the northern Netherlands, especially in courtly circles. He is considered one of the most important Dutch history painters of his time.

Dutch Culture and Art: Dutch painting in the 17th century reflected common human experience shunning the grandiose, the fantastic and the supernatural. Protestantism doubtless played a part in shaping this down to earth quality but Catholic Dutch artists also contributed to the trend that seems to have been national rather than sectarian. The United Provinces, an independent nation after a truce with Spain in 1609, went its own way in culture, politics and religion. Religion and strong moral commitment were central to Dutch literature and artwork.

Neither the royal court at the Hague or the Dutch Reformed Church provided great patronage. It was the middle levels of society that provided the market for pictures. ...and there was great competition among artists. The Guild of St. Luke regulated the market-each town had its own guild, each with its own rules. ...but they all regulated the terms of apprenticeship so there was relative uniformity of training. While the market for traditional religious subjects was limited, religious sentiment found its way into pictures that appear to be purely secular. This is consistent with Calvin's views on representational art. He wrote that only what can be seen should be portrayed. Luther had no been explicit on this point: he said nothing about art in churches. The dictum was that only what appeared in the Bible was to be considered appropriate subject matter. However, for Catholics, portrayals of saints and miracles, and devotional images of Mary were still accepted. Thus, Honthorst's picture would have been acceptable to both Protestants and Catholics.

The Amsterdam Bourse was the chief money market of western Europe in the middle of the seventeenth century. As a result, merchants and traders came from all over. There were also refugees from a number of countries, especially Jews and Protestants seeking refuge from persecution in other European countries. Despite this, Dutch society was not egalitarian. Social prestige was based on wealth.

There are several characteristics of Dutch seventeenth century art that help illustrate the artistic advances of this period. These are a focus on natural forms (reflecting the rise of pure science), realistic landscapes, a concern with the phenomena of light, an unprecedented breadth of subject matter (including scenes from everyday life, known as genre), group portraiture, the independent still life format, earthy humor with satirical overtones and a deep concern for basic human relationships.

Questions

1. Who is the most important person in this painting?
2. How does the artist focus our attention on Peter?
3. Does Peter ever make amends for his denial of Jesus?

Sources:

1. "Dutch Painting in the Seventeenth Century". Harper and Row, NY, 1978
2. "Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art" by James Hall, Westview Press, 2008
3. MIA library file, especially "A Honthorst for Minneapolis" by Benedict Nicolson submitted by Mary Samuels