



David Gives Uriah a Letter for Joab

Pieter Lastman
(Amsterdam 1583 – 1633 Amsterdam)

1619

oil on panel

42.8 x 63.3 cm

signed and dated in light paint along lower right corner: "PLaftman fecit 1619" ("PL" in ligature)

PL-100

Currently on view at The National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

How To Cite

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One sin always begets another. Even the great King David learned this lesson to his detriment. One day he beheld the beautiful Bathsheba, wife of Uriah the Hittite, bathing near the royal palace walls. A servant summoned

her to his bedchamber, and soon thereafter David learned that she was with child. In a desperate attempt to cover up his adultery, David sent for Uriah and ordered him to go home to his wife. The noble soldier Uriah refused to abandon his men, who were on campaign against the Ammonites. No amount of food or drink could persuade Uriah to return to his wife. So the deceitful King David turned to murder—not with his sword but with his pen.

Pieter Lastman depicts the fateful moment when King David hands Uriah a letter addressed to his commanding officer, Joab, which contains the following orders: “Place Uriah in the front line where the fighting is fiercest; then fall back so that he may be killed” (2 Samuel 11:15). Lastman captures this pivotal and dramatic moment through expressive gestures and lush undulating folds of drapery, the clarity of his design already evident in the painting’s bold underdrawing (**fig 1**). David, dressed in regal purple and draped in a red, ermine-trimmed cloak, sits high upon his throne. Twisting his body awkwardly, David grasps his scepter in one hand while holding the letter with its red wax seal in the other. Troubled by guilt and unable to make direct eye contact with Uriah, David gazes off to the side. Uriah looks directly up at the king and maintains the perfect, upright stature of an honorable man. His fidelity to the king is emphasized by the dog seated between the two men. In the distance, Uriah’s fellow soldiers gather to await the king’s latest command. Only the scribe at the right knows the treacherous content of the letter, and he is in no position to betray David’s trust.

Lastman derived this composition from the design he made in 1611 for a monumental stained glass window for the Zuiderkerk in Amsterdam, *King Cyrus Returning the Vessels from the Temple of the Lord to the Jews* (**fig 2**). In this scene a different king, also holding his scepter, similarly delivers a decree to a kneeling man within a classical architectural setting overlooking a large domed cathedral.^[1] A painted copy of the stained glass window executed by Thomas de Keyser in 1660 shows that Cyrus wore an elegant ermine-trimmed red robe similar to that draped around David’s shoulders.^[2] The many compositional similarities between these works indicate that Lastman explicitly sought to contrast the actions of the two kings, Cyrus’s benevolence and David’s treachery. Indeed, it is noteworthy that in 1611, the year in which Lastman designed the stained glass window with the story of Cyrus, he also painted his earliest depiction of King David and Uriah (**fig 3**).

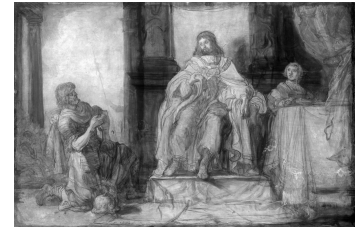


Fig 1. Infrared reflectogram of Pieter Lastman, *David and Uriah*, PL-100

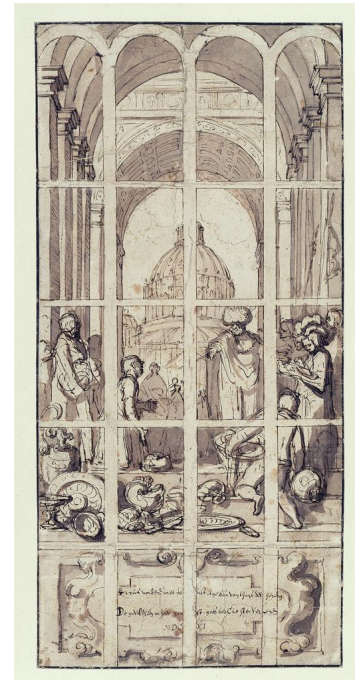


Fig 2. Pieter Lastman, *King Cyrus Returning the Vessels from the Temple of the Lord to the Jews*, 1611, pen and brown ink on paper, Kupferstichkabinet, Berlin



Fig 3. Pieter Lastman, *King David Handing the Letter to Uriah*, 1611, oil on panel, 51.1 x 61.3 cm, Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders Society purchase and Dexter M. Ferry Jr. fund, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John N. Lord, 60.63, Bridgeman Images



The subject of David and Uriah was rarely illustrated in art; earlier prints and drawings primarily depict the meeting of the two men, not the final transaction of the letter. Lastman, however, rendered this fateful moment in such a way as to remind the viewer that it marks David's fall from God's grace. Lastman based his narrative on Josephus's *The Antiquity of the Jews*, a popular biblical and historical record of the Jewish people written in the first century AD.^[3] Josephus states that David wrote the letter and "stamped it with his own seal."^[4] This detail, which is not noted in the Bible, is clearly emphasized in Lastman's painting. The implications of the seal would have been understood by the Dutch. For example, in 1614 Roemer Visscher, in his emblem book *Sinnepoppen*, warned his readers to distrust any official letter that did not have a seal of authenticity.^[5] King David's letter has the proper seal, but its content was unworthy of such honorable verification.

In 1619, the very year that Lastman painted this panel, he also painted *The Bathing of Bathsheba* (fig 4). He may have intended the two paintings to be pendants, since both works are derived from the same biblical episode and are virtually identical in size.^[6] The year 1619 marked a tragic event in Dutch history that may explain the artist's decision to paint this biblical subject. On 13 May, Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, once the great and heroic compatriot of William the Silent, was executed for high treason. His death shocked many in the Netherlands, since Van Oldenbarnevelt had served as the Land's Advocate of Holland, was instrumental in founding the United East India Company, and played a critical role in bringing about the Twelve Years' Truce. In 1618, however, Van Oldenbarnevelt fell out of political favor when he sided with the Remonstrants, a moderate branch of the Calvinist Church that supported the rights of each provincial government to determine its own religious doctrine. The stadholder Prince Maurits sided with the Anti-Remonstrants, a stricter fundamentalist branch of Calvinism that favored government protection and support of one official Reformed Church. Prince Maurits ordered Van Oldenbarnevelt's arrest and beheading, and subsequently consolidated all political and military might in the Dutch Republic. One can imagine how the biblical story of David and Uriah resounded in certain sectors of the Netherlands, demonstrating that even the greatest and most loyal of public servants could swiftly become a pawn in the cruel game of politics.

This exquisitely preserved painting is one of Lastman's finest works, not only in the characterization of the figures but also in the way the structural clarity of the composition reinforces the dramatic thrust and power of this



Fig 4. Pieter Lastman, *The Bathing of Bathsheba*, 1619, oil on panel, 42 x 63, The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, 5590



Fig 5. Han van Meegeren (forgery as a work by Johannes Vermeer), *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery*, ca. 1942, oil on canvas and mixed media, 100 x 90 cm, Collection Museum de Fundatie, Zwolle and Heino/Wijhe, the Netherlands, Loan from Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands



narrative moment. One appreciates immediately in this work why two aspiring history painters from Leiden, namely Jan Lievens (1607–74) and Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69), came to Amsterdam to study under this renowned master. Each of these artists remained indebted to Lastman's influence long after their periods of study (Lievens from around 1617–21 and Rembrandt for six months in 1625), with Rembrandt actually making a number of copies of Lastman's compositions in 1633, the year of that master's death.

Beyond its outstanding artistic qualities, *David Gives Uriah a Letter for Joab* has had a fascinating place in the complex history of the Nazi and postwar eras that adds to the work's cultural significance. Jacques Goudstikker, a prominent Jewish dealer of Old Master paintings in Amsterdam, acquired this painting around 1919. In May 1940 Goudstikker fled Amsterdam just days prior to the Nazi invasion of the Netherlands, but he died tragically on the ship that was taking him and his family to safety in London. Goudstikker's gallery and his collection of paintings were confiscated by the Nazis. The gallery, now run by Alois Miedl, soon sold Lastman's painting and a number of other works to Adolf Hitler's second-in-command, Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring. In 1944 Göring traded Lastman's painting, among others, back to Miedl for Han van Meegeren's Vermeer forgery, *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery* (**fig 5**). Lastman's painting was then acquired by Hermann Voss for Hitler's proposed Führermuseum in Linz.

After the war, the Allies recovered Lastman's painting and turned it over to the Dutch authorities in 1946. A special Dutch Recuperation Commission decided against returning the painting to the family despite years of protest by Goudstikker's widow, Desirée. The painting was lent to the Groningen Museum in Groningen from 1975 to 1987 and to the Mauritshuis in The Hague from 1987 to 2006. The complex story of the Goudstikker case was reexamined by a special restitution committee in 2005, which recommended that the Dutch government reverse its earlier decision. The painting was returned to the Goudstikker heirs, and eventually purchased by present owner in 2007.^[7]

-Rachel Pollack

Endnotes



1. This cathedral is based on Saint Peter's in Rome.
2. This painting, which is on canvas and measures 118 x 92 cm, is in the Fondation Custodia (Coll. Frits Lugt), Paris. De Keyser probably painted this work after the window was removed from the church in 1658.
3. Astrid Tümpel and Peter Schatborn, *Pieter Lastman: Leermeester van Rembrandt* (Amsterdam, 1991), 108–9.
4. William Whiston, ed., *The Genuine Works of Flavius Josephus, the Jewish Historian* (London, 1755), 1:464 (book 7, chapter 7 of *The Antiquities of the Jews*).
5. Roemer Visscher, *Sinnepoppen* (Amsterdam, 1614), 46, no. XLVI.
6. *The Bathing of Bathsheba* measures 41.5 x 61.5 cm, while *David and Uriah* measures 41.6 x 62.5 cm. Unfortunately, the early provenances of these panels are unknown, so it cannot be determined whether they were originally in the same collection. The painting of Bathsheba is first recorded ca. 1667 in the collection of the famous Leiden medical professor Franciscus de la Boe Silvius (1614/19–72) (see Eric Jan Sluijter, "Two Case Studies of Painting in Wealthy Interiors," in Mariët Westermann, *Art and Home: Dutch Interiors in the Age of Rembrandt* [Zwolle, 2003], 113), while *David and Uriah* is first mentioned in 1779 in the sale of the collection of Jacques Clemens, the canon of St. Bavo's Cathedral in Ghent.
7. For another painting in the Leiden Collection with a Goudstikker provenance, see Jan Steen, *Sacrifice of Iphigenia* (JS-112).

Provenance

- Jacques Clemens (1713–79), Canon of the Saint Bavo Cathedral, Ghent (his sale, Ghent, 21 June 1779, no. 151).
- Dr. Wilhelm Schmidt, Munich, before 1911 (sale, Dr. Hans Stegman, Director of the Bayerische Nationalmuseum, and Dr. Wilhelm Schmidt, Director of the Graphische Sammlung, Munich, "Ölgemälde Alter Meister," Galerie Hugo Helbing, 20 April 1917, no. 72).
- Jacques Goudstikker (1897–16 May 1940), Amsterdam, before November 1919 [from Lippmann], inv. no. 646/1199, also listed as no. 1341. 1
- Confiscated by Nazi forces in a forced sale by Goudstikker Collection employees Arie Albertus Ten Broek and Jan Dik, Jr. to Alois Miedl on 13 July 1940; purchased by



Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring (1893–1946) from Miedl on 13 July 1940 for 331 reichsmarks and delivered to Carinhall on 13 September 1940; transferred to Walter Andreas Hofer, Director of the Art Collection of the Reichsmarschall, Berlin; traded by Göring and Hofer to Goudstikker/Miedl, Amsterdam, on 9 February 1944 in exchange for Han van Meegeren's *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery*; purchased by Hans Herbst, Director of Dorotheum Auction House, in Vienna in 1944; purchased by Hermann Voss, Director of the Führermuseum in Linz, on behalf of Adolf Hitler for 15,000 reichsmarks, Linz no. 3928; collected by the Allies and recorded at the Munich Central Collecting Point, 25 July 1945–29 March 1946, Mu. no. 5236. 2

- Foundation for Dutch Art Property (Stichting Nederlands Kunstbezit), The Hague, 1948–52, no. NK 2834.
- Collection of the Department for Dispersed National Artworks (Collectie Dienst voor's Rijks Verspreide Kunstvoorwerpen), 1952–75, no. NK 2834, on loan to the Groninger Museum, Groningen, 1953–75.
- Department of Dispersed National Collections (Dienst Verspreide Rijkscollecties), 1975–85, no. NK 2834, on loan to the Groninger Museum, Groningen, 1975–87.
- Department of the National Fine Arts Collection (Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst), 1985–97, no. NK 2834, on loan to the Mauritshuis, The Hague, 1987–97, no. 1074.
- The Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage (Instituut Collectie Nederland), Amsterdam, 1997–2006, no. NK 2834, on loan to the Mauritshuis, The Hague, 1987–2006, 1074.
- Restituted to the sole heir of Jacques Goudstikker, Marei von Saher, Greenwich, Conn., 6 February 2006 [Otto Naumann Ltd., New York, 2007].
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2007.

Exhibition History

- The Hague, “Exposée dans les localités du schilderdkundig genootschap ‘Pulchri Studio,’” November 1919, no. 63 [lent by Jacques Goudstikker].
- Saint Louis, City Art Museum, “Exhibition of Dutch and Flemish Pictures from the 15th–17th Century from the Goudstikker Collection of Amsterdam,” Detroit, The Detroit Institute of Arts, 13 January–15 February 1923, no. 35; New York, Anderson Gallery, 10 March–7 April 1923, no. 66 [lent by Jacques Goudstikker].
- The Hague, “Collection Goudstikker d’Amsterdam: 10e Exposition dans les Locaux de



Pulchri Studio, La Haye,” 13 March–4 April 1926, no. 87 [lent by Jacques Goudstikker].

- Amsterdam, Maatschappij Arti et Amicitiae, “Tentoonstelling van Schilderijen en teekeningen van Nederlandse Italianideerende schilders uit de 16e en 17e eeuw” (“Van Heemskerck tot Haekaert”), 14 July–16 September 1934, no. 41 [lent by Jacques Goudstikker].
- Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, “Tentoonstelling Bijbelsche Kunst,” 8 July–8 October 1939, no. 53a [lent by Jacques Goudstikker].
- Groningen, Groninger Museum, on permanent loan, 1953–87 [lent by the Collection of the Department for Dispersed National Artworks (Collectie Dienst voor’s Rijks Verspreide Kunstvoorwerpen, 1953–75; Department of Dispersed National Collections (Dienst Verspreide Rijkscollecties), 1975–85; Department of the National Fine Arts Collection (Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst), 1985–87].
- Bolsward, City Hall, “Wurd en byld: Woord en beeld; Gysbert Japicx 1603–1666, en de kunst van zijn tijd,” 27 June–4 September 1966, no. 41, no. 6 [lent by the Collection of the Department for Dispersed National Artworks (Collectie Dienst voor’s Rijks Verspreide Kunstvoorwerpen)].
- Groningen, Groninger Museum, “Het Verraad: David geeft de brief aan Uria, een schilderijen van Pieter Lastman uit 1619,” 6 June–6 July 1980 [lent by the Department of Dispersed National Collections (Dienst Verspreide Rijkscollecties)].
- Washington, National Gallery of Art, “Gods, Saints, and Heroes: Dutch Painting in the Age of Rembrandt,” 2 November 1980–4 January 1981; Detroit, The Detroit Institute of Art, 16 February–19 April 1981; Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, 16 May–19 July 1981, no. 22 [lent by the Department of Dispersed National Collections (Dienst Verspreide Rijkscollecties)].
- The Hague, Mauritshuis, on permanent loan, 1987–97, no. 1074 [lent by the Department of the National Fine Arts Collection (Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst)].
- Amsterdam, The Rembrandt House Museum, “Pieter Lastman, leermeester van Rembrandt,” 7 December 1991–17 February 1992, no. 12 [lent by the Department of the National Fine Arts Collection (Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst)].
- Jerusalem, Israel Museum, Spertus Gallery, “Painting the Bible in Rembrandt’s Holland,” 1993 [lent by the Department of the National Fine Arts Collection (Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst)].
- Münster, Westphalian State Museum of Art and Cultural History; Amsterdam, Jewish Historical Museum; Jerusalem, Israel Museum, “Im Lichte Rembrandts: Das Alte Testament in Goldenen Zeitalter der niederländischen Kunst,” 1994, no. 45 [lent by the Department of the National Fine Arts Collection (Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst)].
- Greenwich, Conn., Bruce Museum, “Reclaimed: Paintings from the Collection of Jacques Goudstikker,” 10 May–7 September 2008; New York, The Jewish Museum, 12 March–2



August 2009; San Antonio, McNay Museum of Art, 5 October 2009–10 January 2010, no. 12 [lent by the present owner].

- Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art, January 2010–June 2011, on loan with the permanent collection [lent by the present owner].
- Kyoto, Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art, “Communication: Visualizing the Human Connection in the Age of Vermeer,” 25 June–16 October 2011; Miyagi, The Miyagi Museum of Art, 27 October–12 December 2011; Tokyo, The Bunkamura Museum of Art, 23 December 2011–14 March 2012, no. 26 [lent by the present owner].
- New York, Metropolitan Museum, on loan with the permanent collection, September 2012–May 2016 [lent by the present owner].
- Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art, “Drawings for Paintings in the Age of Rembrandt,” 4 October 2016–2 January 2017 [lent by the present owner].

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Technical Summary



The support, a single plank of horizontal, wavy-grained, rectangular oak, has bevels on all four sides.^[1] The unthinned and uncradled panel has shallow vertical handtool marks and two small wood inserts along the lower edge.^[2] Ten paper labels, three round import stamps, and various numerical inscriptions are located on the reverse of the panel, but there are no machine toolmarks, wax seals, stencils or obvious panel maker's marks.

A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied with sweeping horizontal and diagonal strokes, followed by thinly and smoothly applied paint throughout most of the composition and drapery folds; areas of detail are built up in low impasto.

Infrared images captured at 780–1700 nanometers reveal an extensive underdrawing below the painted composition. A freehand graphite sketch rather than an ink wash was used to lay out the composition. King David's elaborate drapery folds included a horizontal sash and large bow with two loops. Uriah was also completely sketched, including his drapery folds, helmet with plume, and arms. In the underdrawing, the crisp folds of the corners of the tablecloth to David's right hung lower and the upper edge of the fabric, which hangs between the columns directly behind David, was executed with a low hung swag in the center, although it was then painted straight, parallel to the upper panel edge. An additional figure drawn at the far right has been obscured by the painted green drapery. The domed building and landscape in the distance seen at the left were added during the paint stage, but are not visible in the X-radiograph and were not underdrawn.

The painting is signed and dated in light paint along the lower right corner. PL is written in ligature and the s is written as a long descending s.

The painting has not undergone conservation treatment since its acquisition and remains in a good state of preservation.

-Annette Rupprecht