



Self-Portrait with Magic Scene

Pieter van Laer
(Haarlem 1599 – 1642 Italy?)

ca. 1635–37

oil on canvas

80 x 114.9 cm

signed on the music sheet, lower left center: “

P.V. Laer”

PvL-100

How To Cite

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In one of the most remarkable self-portraits ever created, Pieter van Laer reacts with horror to the frightening claws of the devil that have suddenly come to claim him. Dressed in the black cloak and cap of a magician, the artist, with bulging eyes and open mouth, has witnessed this apparition



while standing behind a table filled with books, some with alchemical notations, a variety of vessels, a snuffed-out candle, and a skull resting on hot coals. To emphasize the very personal character of this dramatic image, Van Laer prominently signed this work on the musical score lying in the foreground, its lyrics warning that “the devil doesn’t jest.” Clearly, in his conjuring up a world of occult forces the magician has unleashed realms far beyond his control, and he is about to suffer the consequences of his audacity.

The identity of the magician as Van Laer is without question. His appearance is best known from a moody self-portrait in the Uffizi, Florence (**fig 1**).^[1] That work, which probably dates about 1632–33, records a number of distinctive features similar to those in the present picture: a broad, brushy, upturned mustache, a short beard, a slim nose with a rounded tip, widely arching eyebrows, and a shaggy haircut flaring sideways at the ears.

The darkness of the scene, which is partially lit by a metal oil lamp hanging in the upper left, and the strange array of objects on the magician’s table denotes Van Laer’s macabre fascination with the underworld. The extinguished candle in the center of the picture has burned halfway down, perhaps suggesting the arrival of death midway through the course of one’s life. A thin trail of smoke rising from the upside-down skull, which sits on glowing embers, probably indicates that some unsavory concoction is being heated in this morbid cooking pot.^[2] Various vessels contain unidentified liquids—a small mixing bowl filled with a red substance and a square bottle containing a copper-colored fluid—that one can imagine the magician using to create his potions. The eeriest of these vessels is the tapered glass with black creatures crawling on its surface. The spider at bottom center is most likely a deadly scorpion.

The pellets or seeds spilling out of a paper cone at the bottom right could be another ingredient for the magician’s brew, or perhaps an allusion to the Parable of the Tares (or Weeds) in Matthew 13:24–30 and 36–43, according to which the devil sows the seeds of sinful men amongst the seeds of those who will be saved. The parable was frequently employed by preachers of the time and was also treated by artists, for example by Jacques de Gheyn II (1565–1629) in a drawing of 1603, by Domenico Fetti (1588/89–1623) in a painting ca. 1622, and by Abraham Bloemaert (1566–1651) in a painting of 1624.^[3]

The books on the table are not identified by author’s names or titles, which

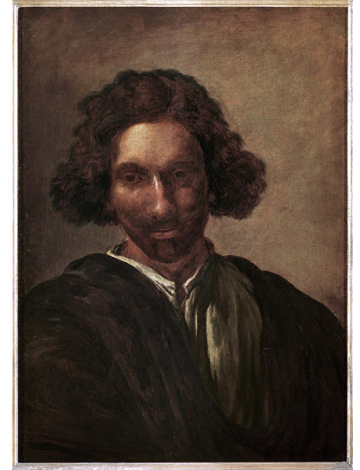


Fig 1. Pieter van Laer, *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1632–33, oil on panel, 72 x 58 cm, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, © 2015, Photo Scala, Florence, courtesy of the Ministero Beni e Att. Culturali



Fig 2. Pieter van Laer, *The Bentveughels in a Roman Tavern*, ca. 1630, brown ink and wash on paper, 20.3 x 25.8 cm, Kupferstichkabinet, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, inv. 5239

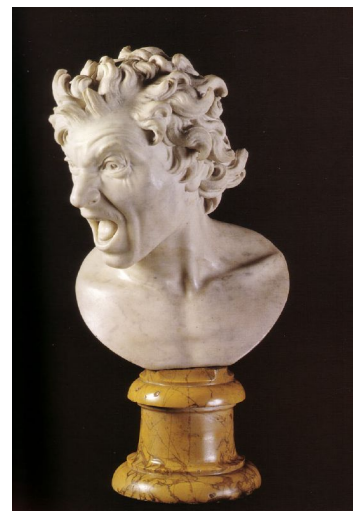


Fig 3. Gianlorenzo Bernini, *The Damned Soul*, 1619, marble, Palazzo di Spagna, Rome



is to be expected considering their likely content. Publications dealing with occult knowledge were included among the thousands of works listed in the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (Index of Prohibited Books), which was frequently updated by the Congregation of the Index, the pope, and the Holy Office of the Inquisition; any knowledge of them could have landed Van Laer in difficult circumstances. The handwritten markings on the end of the largest book may be the artist's approximation of Hebrew letters, suggesting heretical or esoteric ideas.^[4] The symbols in the open book appear to be associated with magic and witchcraft, although the exact meanings of most of them are no longer understood.^[5] The five-pointed inverted pentagram, however, represents the devil.^[6] The pierced heart likely suggests suffering (especially from love), grief, or death. As is common in alchemical scenes of the seventeenth century, the individual motifs and symbols do not add up to a coherent message but rather create an atmosphere of illicit pursuits.

The prominent sheet of music, which contains the artist's signature, is identified as a "Canon a 3 [voci]" (canon or "round" for three voices), specifically three tenors, according to the key indicated on the staff. Van Laer's canon appears to be composed either in the Phrygian mode, which descends in a sequence called a "diabolus in musica," or as the sketch of a "crab canon" (*canon cancrizans*), in which two musical lines reverse each other.^[7] The crab is known for its back and forth movement, just as the devil runs counter to the divine plan.^[8] In either case, the lyrics, "il diavolo no burla no il diav . . . a" (the devil doesn't jest no the devil . . .), leave no doubt as to the warning that the painting conveys.

Although this painting is primarily concerned with the occult and witchcraft, it has certain resonances with alchemy. The alchemist's labors were intimately bound to the study and early practice of chemistry, and a huge amount of literature evolved in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries explaining the types of physical matter and the processes by which one could conduct experiments to transform one element into another. It was, for many, a respectable profession, and its scholarly component is evident in the list of significant scientists who sought to separate the essence of matter from its base components, among them Robert Boyle (1627–91) and Sir Isaac Newton (1642–1727).^[9] Many alchemists made significant scientific contributions to the development of, among others, medicines and cosmetics, as well as pigments and dyes. Nevertheless, alchemy's ambiguous status in popular culture derived from its origins in natural philosophy, metaphysics, and religion. Alchemists were secretive about the



processes that allowed them to make their transformations, and their texts and treatises utilized a wide range of occult signs and symbols similar to those seen in the open manuscript in Van Laer's haunting painting.

Too little is known of Van Laer's life to fully understand the psychological underpinnings that undoubtedly impacted this terrifying vision and drove him to paint it. Perhaps his interest in witchcraft derived from his deformed body—hunchbacked with a lower body three times larger than his torso. In Rome, where he painted this work in the mid-1630s, he was known as "il Bamboccio" (clumsy puppet) because of his stunted torso. In his day exposure to witchcraft was often said (especially by eager Inquisitors) to result in physical deformity.

Van Laer had a successful career in Rome, but he also seems to have lived a raucous life as part of a group of Netherlandish artists, the *Schildersbent* (painters' group), who called themselves *Bentvueghels* (usually translated as "birds of a feather," but in this case meaning "The Bent Flock"). The fraternity was known for its frolicsome meetings in taverns, especially its bacchic initiation rites and its antagonistic stance toward the high-minded Accademia di San Luca. This community of artists, however, also seems to have shared in Van Laer's fascination with the occult. This interest is seen in a fascinating painting by Van Laer's brother, Roeland van Laer (1598–ca. 1635) from around 1626, that depicts the Bentvueghels wildly drinking and performing a *tableau vivant* in a tavern during some sort of initiation rite.^[10] Graffiti covers the back wall of the room, including proverbs, exhortations, a depiction of a flaming heart pierced by an arrow, and the same musical score that Pieter van Laer included in his painting. Interestingly, Roeland signed his painting on that score, just like Pieter would later do in *Self-Portrait with Magic Scene*.^[11]

In about 1630 Pieter van Laer made a fascinating drawing of the Bentvueghels in a tavern that includes motifs also relevant to the present painting (**fig 2**).^[12] The drawing depicts members of the Bentvueghels drinking, smoking, playing backgammon, and vocalizing in a room decorated with numerous line drawings on the back wall. Two figures stand apart from the revelers, one pointing at the word "BAMBOO" (an abbreviation for Bamboccio) and the other leaning against the back wall. Between them two drawings on the back wall depict Van Laer, one a geometric cartoon of his short figure as seen from behind and the other a caricature of his head in profile. Ominously, however, on the right side of the wall is a drawing of a large skeleton (Death) holding up an hourglass,



and next to it a large, full-length horned figure with satyr's legs and wings holding out a claw-like hand not unlike the outstretched claws in the painting.^[13] The overall appearance of this creature is in complete accord with contemporary illustrations of the devil, such as those in the 1608 "book of witches," titled *Compendium Maleficarum*, by the Italian priest Guaccius (Francesco Maria Guazzo).^[14] This macabre juxtaposition of a festive gathering with drawings of Death and the devil suggests that complex feelings and emotions were ingrained in the lives of the Bentvueghels, not just Van Laer.

Van Laer's self-portrait shares an interest in rendering the passions then current in Italian and Netherlandish studios in Rome. Caravaggio (1571–1610) in particular was fascinated by the challenge of rendering the passions of fear and surprise.^[15] Van Laer would have known and admired Caravaggio's *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* of about 1593–94 (National Gallery, London); *Head of Medusa*, of 1596–98 (Uffizi, Florence); the astonished Assyrian in *Judith and Holofernes*, of about 1598–99 (Palazzo Barberini, Rome); and his later *David with the Head of Goliath*, of 1605–10 (Galleria Borghese, Rome).^[16] The most important antecedent for Van Laer's screaming self-portrait, however, was probably the famous marble bust by Gianlorenzo Bernini (1598–1680), *The Damned Soul* of 1619 (**fig 3**), which likewise employed the artist's own features and represented a mortal on his way to hell.^[17]

No information is known about the original destination of Van Laer's remarkable self-portrait, but it seems probable that he created this frightening image from some inner motivation rather than to fulfill a commission. Nevertheless, during the early seventeenth century a painting like this would have appealed to Van Laer's Roman patrons because of the great artistic interest in intense visual drama and personal expression. In Rome, as well, the theme of magic as a dangerous temptation was particularly apt: in no other city did curiosity about the natural world so often collide with orthodox belief.^[18]

- Walter A. Liedtke and Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr.

Endnotes

1. See Karla Langedijk, *Die Selbstbildnisse der holländischen und flämischen Künstler in der Galleria degli Autoritratti der Uffizien in Florenz* (Florence, 1992), 61–63, where Van Laer's



earlier self-portrait in the Galleria Pallavicini, Rome and other evidence for his appearance are also discussed.

2. Mario Giuseppe Genesi, "Per una decodifica dei dettagli magico-musicali nella *Scena Magica con Autoritratto* di Pieter Bodding van Laer," *Music in Art* 30, nos. 1–2 (2005): 89, suggested that the smoke was from burning incense.
3. De Gheyn's drawing is in the Kupferstichkabinet, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Berlin; Bloemaert's painting is in the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore; Fetti's is in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid. In the case of De Gheyn, the subject seems of a piece with several scenes of witchcraft he drew at about the same time. On this point see Linda C. Hulst, *The Witch as Muse: Art, Gender, and Power in Early Modern Europe* (Philadelphia, 2005), 152–57.
4. The Kabbalah, along with magic and astrology, was one of the many controversial interests that doomed Giordano Bruno (burned at the stake in Rome on 17 February 1600), as discussed in Karen Silvia de León-Jones, *Giordano Bruno and the Kabbalah: Prophets, Magicians, and Rabbis* (Lincoln, NE, 2004). All of Bruno's writings were placed on the Index in 1603.
5. The numbers in a column (6?, 4, and 7) could be the beginning of a magic square (in which the numbers in each column, row, and main diagonal yield the same sum).
6. Kathryn Paulsen, *The Complete Book of Magic and Witchcraft* (New York, 1980), 149. When the point is at the top it represents the deity.
7. These alternatives are described in Mario Giuseppe Genesi, "Per una decodifica dei dettagli magico-musicali nella *Scena Magica con Autoritratto* di Pieter Bodding van Laer," *Music in Art* 30, nos. 1–2 (2005): 91–95.
8. As suggested in Laurence Wuidar, "Magie démoniaque et allégorie de l'ouïe: Le canon musical dans les vanités de Breughel, Natali et Van Laer," *Annales d'histoire de l'art et d'archéologie* 27 (2005): 106–7, where crabs are also said to be associated with love and fortune because of their reversals and conflicts.
9. For this history, see, among others, H. A. M. Snelders, *De geschiedenis van de scheikunde in Nederland*, vol. 1, *Van alchemie tot chemie en chemische industrie rond 1900* (Delft, 1993), 11–25; Lawrence M. Principe and Lloyd DeWitt, *Transmutations—Alchemy in Art: Selected Works from the Eddleman and Fisher Collections at the Chemical Heritage Foundation* (Philadelphia, 2002); and Lawrence M. Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy* (Chicago, 2013), especially chapter 5: "The Golden Age: Practicing Chymistry in the Early Modern Period."
10. Roeland van Laer, *Bentveughels in a Roman Tavern*, ca. 1626, oil on canvas, 88.5 x 147.5 cm, Museo di Roma, inv. no. 26031. For a discussion of this painting, see Thomas Kren, "Chi non vuol Baccho: Roeland van Laer's Burlesque Painting about Dutch Artists in Rome,"



Simiolus 11 (1980): 63–80; and David A. Levine and Ekkehard Mai, eds., *I Bamboccianti: Niederländische Malerrebellen im Rom des Barock* (Exh. cat. Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum; Utrecht, Centraal Museum) (Milan, 1991), 209–11, no. 20.1.

11. Associations between the texts in these two paintings were first made in David A. Levine and Ekkehard Mai, eds., *I Bamboccianti: Niederländische Malerrebellen im Rom des Barock* (Exh. cat. Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum; Utrecht, Centraal Museum) (Milan, 1991), 199–201, no. 19.7.
12. David A. Levine, “Pieter van Laer’s Artists’ Tavern: An Ironic Commentary on Art,” in *Holländische Genremalerei im 17. Jahrhundert: Symposium Berlin 1984*, ed. Henning Bock and Thomas W. Gaehtgens, special issue no. 4, *Jahrbuch Preussischer Kulturbesitz* (1987): 175–76.
13. A figure or other form in the center of the wall has been rubbed out, perhaps because of some obscene aspect, as suggested by Holm Bevers, *Aus Rembrandts Zeit: Zeichenkunst in Hollands Goldenem Jahrhundert* (Exh. cat. Berlin, Kupferstichkabinet, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) (Berlin, 2011), 95, under no. 66.
14. The figure has been identified in the past as Pan or Chonos, whose attributes include satyr’s legs and wings, respectively (but not in combination). Many of Guaccius’s woodcut illustrations are reproduced in Emile Grillo de Givry, *Illustrated Anthology of Sorcery, Magic and Alchemy* (London, 1991). Compare also the devil with wings, horns, and satyr’s legs in Willem van Swanenburgh’s engraving of 1609, *A Beardless Youth and the Devil at an Easel*, which is compared with a similar print, of 1550, by D. V. Coornhert after Maarten van Heemskerck, in Claudia Swan, *Art, Science, and Witchcraft in Early Modern Holland: Jacques de Gheyn II (1565–1629)* (Cambridge, 2005), 184–85, fig. 67. The devil and Death (in the form of a skeleton) appear as a pair in numerous sixteenth-century prints, such as *Death and the Devil Come for the Card Player* in Hans Holbein the Younger’s famous series of woodcuts *The Dance of Death* (1523–26). The group to the right in Van Laer’s drawing bears some resemblance to Holbein’s ensemble, especially as seen in the reversed version by the monogrammist GS.
15. See Jennifer Montagu, *The Expression of the Passions* (New Haven and London, 1994), chap. 5, on this tradition, mainly in Rome; and Dagmar Hirschfelder, *Tronie und Porträt in der niederländischen Malerei des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 2008), 321–34. On the theoretical background, see Franziska Gottwald, *Das Tronie: Muster, Studie und Meisterwerk* (Berlin and Munich, 2011), chap. 2.
16. Interestingly, Van Laer originally included a raised hand in the left background of *Self-Portrait with Magic Scene*, as in *Boy Bitten by a Lizard*, although such excited gestures are common in Italian baroque art.
17. Irving Lavin, “Bernini’s Bust of the Medusa: An Awful Pun,” in *Docere, delectare, movere: affetti, devozione e retorica nel linguaggio artistico del primo barocco romano. Atti del*



*convegno organizzato dall'Instituto olandese a Roma e dalla Bibliotheca Hertziana (Max-Planck-Institut) in collaborazione con l'Università cattolica di Nijmegen. Roma, 19–20 gennaio, 1996 (Rome, 1998), 165, fig. 20, relates *The Damned Soul* to other expressive heads by Bernini and to the sculptor's admiration of the ancient *Laocoön*.*

18. See the case of Bruno mentioned in note 4 above. Galileo was tried and convicted by the Inquisition in Rome in 1633. See also David Freedberg, *The Eye of the Lynx: Galileo, His Friends, and the Beginnings of Modern Natural History* (Chicago and London, 2002), esp. 59–62 on “Cassiano's drawings and beliefs.”

Provenance

- Prince Dragonetti-Torre, Aquila, until 1972.
- [Richard L. Feigen & Co., New York, until 2005].
- From whom acquired by the present owner.

Exhibition History

- Princeton, Princeton University Art Museum, “Dutch and Flemish Paintings from New York Private Collections,” 12 April–14 June 1987 [lent by Richard L. Feigen].
- Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, “I Bamboccianti: Niederländische Malerrebelln im Rom des Barock,” 28 August–17 November 1991; Utrecht, Centraal Museum, 6 December 1991–9 February 1992, no. 19.7 [lent by Richard L. Feigen].
- Cremona, Santa Maria della Pietà, “Dipingere la musica: Strumenti in posa nell'arte del Cinque e Seicento,” 12 December 2000–18 March 2001, no. I.33; Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Palais Harrach, 4 April–1 July 2001, no. I.33 [lent by Richard L. Feigen].
- Bartlesville, Oklahoma, The Price Tower Arts Center, “Music's Power: Great European Paintings on Musical Themes,” 28 May–July 10, 2002, no. 4 [lent by Richard L. Feigen].
- Hartford, Wadsworth Atheneum, on long-term loan, September 2002–December 2003 [lent



by Richard L. Feigen].

- Greenwich, Bruce Museum, “Alchemy: Magic, Myth, or Science?” 26 September 2009–3 January 2010 [no number, lent by present owner].
- New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, on loan with the permanent collection, 2006–15 [lent by the present owner].
- Paris, Petit Palais, “The Baroque Underworld: Vice and Destitution in Rome,” 24 February–24 May 2015 [lent by the present owner].
- New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, on loan with the permanent collection, June 2015–May 2016 [lent by the present owner].

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- Rebbert, Carolyn Rose. *Alchemy: Magic, Myth, or Science?* Exh. cat. Greenwich, Bruce



Museum. Greenwich, 2009, 13, no. 12.

- Cremona Pastorello di Cornour, Anna. *La Torino dei Bamboccianti: Memorie di strada e di Palazzo*. Pinerolo, 2010.
- Ebert-Schifferer, Sybille. *Caravaggio: The Artist and His Work*. Los Angeles, 2012, 87, no. 49. Translated from the German, *Caravaggio*. Munich, 2009.

Technical Summary

The support, a single piece of coarse, plain-weave fabric with tacking margins almost entirely removed, has been lined. The threads are irregular in size and contain numerous slubs. Cusping along all four edges indicates the original dimensions have been retained. A paper label has been adhered to the stretcher but there are no wax collection seals, import stamps, stencils or inscriptions along the lining or stretcher reverse.

A dark red-brown preparatory layer has been applied and a narrow band remains exposed along the length of the left vertical edge. The paint has been applied quite freely; many details were worked wet into wet with loose, broad brushstrokes. Some details, particularly the highlights in the objects on the table, were added later with a drier brush. Slight impasto was used to draw attention to the highlights along the skull and the devil's hands. Thin glazes of black paint have been applied along the music score.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 900–1700 nanometers, though dark paint can obscure carbon-containing underdrawings.

The painting has not undergone conservation treatment since its acquisition in 2005 and remains in a good state of preservation.^[1]

-Annette Rupprecht