Solomon and the Queen of Sheba

Willem de Poorter
(Haarlem [?] 1608 – after 1648 Haarlem [?])

ca. 1630
oil on panel
35.3 x 44.4 cm
WP-100
Currently on view at: The National Museum of China, Beijing

How To Cite

Van Tuinen, Ilona. "Solomon and the Queen of Sheba." In *The Leiden Collection Catalogue*. Edited by Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. New York, 2017.
https://www.theleidencollection.com/archive/.

This page is available on the site's Archive. PDF of every version of this page is available on the Archive, and the Archive is managed by a permanent URL. Archival copies will never be deleted. New versions are added only when a substantive change to the narrative occurs.

© 2017 The Leiden Collection

In this vibrantly colored little painting, Willem de Poorter depicts the Old Testament story of the Queen of Sheba's visit to King Solomon, recounted in 1 Kings 10:1–13. The queen, increasingly skeptical about the legendary wisdom and monotheistic religion of King Solomon, traveled with a large caravan from Sheba (probably modern Yemen) to the king's court in Jerusalem to test him with challenging questions. After Solomon had answered each of her queries successfully, and after she had witnessed his peaceful, civilized court, she was moved with admiration for the king and his God. She then lavished Solomon with gold, spices, and precious stones.

De Poorter depicts the moment just after the Queen of Sheba's disbelief has turned into conviction. Accompanied by servants who hold the vessels with expensive gifts, she kneels before the king, her royal status evident in her golden crown and the elegant yellow mantle draped over her white dress. With her back slightly bent and her right palm open, she respectfully looks up to the king, who, clad in purple robes and a white turban, towers above the queen on a high, canopied throne with a brocaded tapestry cascading down from its platform. An infrared image indicates that De Poorter had originally planned for the queen's head to be more raised and directed at the king's face, but he lowered her gaze during the painting process to emphasize her humility **(fig 1)**.

De Poorter contrasted the bright, primary colors of the robes worn by the queen and her entourage with the subdued purples, greens and grays worn by Solomon and his court, in order to emphasize the different cultural traditions represented in this scene. Indeed, De Poorter depicted the visitors gazing at the king with awe and the locals watching their guests with curiosity. This sense of curiosity is repeated in the background, where the court's guards watch members of the queen's caravan carrying vessels into the spacious interior.

Werner Sumowski first published this unsigned and undated work as a painting by Willem de Poorter in 1983.[1] Sumowski convincingly related the panel to two early paintings by De Poorter of roughly the same dimensions: the artist's earliest dated painting, *Tarquinius Finding Lucretia at Work*, 1633 **(fig 2)**, and his *Sacrifice of Jephta's Daughter* **(fig 3)**.[2] In all three works, De Poorter created similar figure groupings and positioned them close to the picture plane.[3] Each composition is also closed at the

Comparative Figures

Fig 1. Detail of infrared reflectogram of *Solomon and the Queen of Sheba,* WP-100, showing the Queen's face

Fig 2. Willem de Poorter, *Tarquinius Finding Lucretia at Work*, 1633, oil on panel, 44 x 54 cm, Musée des Augustins, Toulouse, inv. no. RO 481

Fig 3. Willem de Poorter, *The Sacrifice of Jephta's Daughter*, ca. 1630s, oil on canvas, 46.9 x 57.1 cm, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden, inv. no. 94/01

© 2017 The Leiden Collection

right by a large *repoussoir* figure. Moreover, the facial features of the queen's servant dressed in red are identical to those of the figure standing behind the high priest in *Sacrifice of Jephta's Daughter*. Stylistic similarities are even found between the underdrawing of *Solomon and the Queen of Sheba* **(fig 4)** and De Poorter's drawn copy of Rembrandt's 1630 *Jeremiah Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem* in the Rijksmuseum **(fig 5)**.[4] In each instance, De Poorter drew contours with unbroken, firm lines and modeled his forms with straight, parallel lines and free-flowing, zigzagged hatchings.

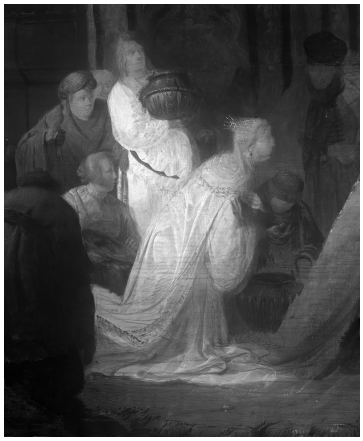

Fig 4. Detail of the infrared reflectogram of *Solomon and the Queen of Sheba*, WP-100, showing the Queen

Fig 5. Willem de Poorter, *Jeremiah Laments the Destruction of Jerusalem*, after 1630, pen and brown ink with brown wash, 406 x 304 cm, Cincinnati Art Museum, inv. no. 1953:72

A striking difference between these works is that *Solomon and the Queen of Sheba* has no strong contrasts of light and dark. From the mid-1630s onwards, De Poorter increasingly used dramatic lighting in his history paintings.[5] Thus, it is probable that he executed *Solomon and the Queen of Sheba* in the early 1630s, before he started to develop his interest in chiaroscuro effects.[6] At this early stage of his career, De Poorter looked carefully at a number of his predecessors for inspiration. For the general composition of this scene, De Poorter seems to have referred to the engraving *Solomon and the Queen of Sheba*, 1549, based on a design by his fellow townsman Maarten van Heemskerck (1498–1574). In that print the queen is similarly situated in the center of the scene, with her followers to the left and the king and his court to the right.[7] Known also to De Poorter would have been the works of the most important history painter of his day, Pieter Lastman (1583–1633). A similar ornate curtain behind the main scene and a division between the colorful foreground and gray-hued background appear in Lastman's 1619 *David Gives Uriah a Letter for Joab* in the Leiden Collection.[8] Finally, the unusually high throne suggests that De Poorter knew the history paintings of the Delft master Leonaert Bramer (1596–1674).[9]

In medieval typology, the story of Solomon visited by the Queen of Sheba was regarded as a prefiguration of the Adoration of the Magi. The magi also came from afar and carried exotic gifts to acknowledge the Lord.[10] This typology seemingly inspired Leonaert Bramer to pair his painting *Solomon and the Queen of Sheba* with *Adoration of the Magi*.[11] It is possible that De Poorter's painting was originally conceived as part of such a typological pair, or belonged to a larger series of the life of Solomon.[12]

© 2017 The Leiden Collection

-Ilona van Tuinen

© 2017 The Leiden Collection

Endnotes

1. Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 vols. (Landau, 1983–94), 4:2406, 2418, no. 1605. While in the collection of Lord Forbes, the painting was attributed to Salomon de Koninck (1609–56). De Koninck painted several similar, small history scenes, but with a more subdued palette and a looser handling of the paint. As Sumowski notes, the attribution to Willem de Poorter originally came from Albert Blankert, who was working at the RKD (Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie/Netherlands Institute for Art History) at the time.
2. Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 vols. (Landau, 1983–94), 4:2406, no. 1604, for *Tarquinius Finding Lucretia at Work*, and 2407, no. 1606, for *Sacrifice of Jephta's Daughter*, at the time in the Marquis of Bristol collection as *Sacrifice of Iphegenia*, oil on canvas, 46.9 x 57.1 cm, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden, inv. no. 94/01.
3. Compare, for instance, an earlier *Solomon and the Queen of Sheba*, which De Poorter executed in the early 1640s and in which the figures are smaller and further away from the picture plane. See Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 vols. (Landau, 1983–94), 4:2409, no. 1615.
4. See Werner Sumowski, *Drawings of the Rembrandt School*, 10 vols. (New York, 1979–92), 9:4796–97, no. 2136x. This unsigned drawing, which is the mirror image of Rembrandt's painting, was formerly attributed to Ferdinand Bol (1616–80), but Sumowski attributed it to De Poorter on the basis of stylistic similarities with De Poorter's signed and dated 1636 drawing after Rembrandt's *Susanna at Her Bath* at the Mauritshuis.
5. For a discussion of De Poorter's *Saint Paul and Saint Barnabas at Lystra*, 1636, oil on panel, 55 x 82 cm, with a strong use of chiaroscuro inspired by Rembrandt, see Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "Willem de Poorter: *Saint Paul and Saint Barnabas at Lystra*," in Albert Blankert et al., *Gods, Saints and Heroes: Dutch Painting in the Age of Rembrandt* (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; Detroit, The Detroit Institute of Arts; Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum) (Washington, D.C., 1980), 158–59, no. 33. It remains unclear whether De Poorter ever studied with Rembrandt, and if so, when. See Adriaan Waiboer, "Willem de Poorter: Rembrandt/Not Rembrandt Pupil," *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 5, no. 2 (2013): DOI:10.5092/jhna.2013.5.2.12

   Although it is traditionally assumed that he studied in Rembrandt's Leiden workshop around 1628–31, Waiboer suggests that he might have briefly worked in the master's Amsterdam atelier around 1636 instead.
6. This dating is also supported by dendrochronological analysis performed by Ian Tyers in November 2012 on the lower of the two horizontal boards that make up the panel (the upper board cannot be examined, report on file at the Leiden Collection, New York). According to

© 2017 The Leiden Collection

Tyers, the youngest heartwood ring was formed in 1616 and the panel could have been ready for use from 1624 onwards.

7. Dirck Volkertsz Coornhert after Maarten van Heemskerck, *Solomon and the Queen of Sheba*, 1549, engraving, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, inv. no. 49.95.112.
8. See Rachel Pollock's entry on PL-100 in this catalogue.
9. This was first noticed by Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 vols. (Landau, 1983–94), 4:2406, 2418, no. 1605. Indeed, the characteristically high throne appears throughout Bramer's oeuvre, from his earliest dated painting, *The Fall of Simon Magus*, ca. 1623, oil on copper, 29 x 39 cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Dijon, to*The Judgment of Solomon*, 1640s, oil on panel, St. Annen-Museum, Lubeck.
10. In the *Biblia Pauperum*, one of the most common medieval typological sources, the Adoration of the Magi is juxtaposed with two Old Testament scenes, Abner Visiting King David and the Queen of Sheba Visiting King Solomon. See *Biblia Pauperum: Faksimileausgabe der Vierzigblättrigen Armenbibel-Blockbuches in der Bibliothek der Erzdiözese Esztergom*, with an introduction and commentary by Elisabeth Soltész (Hanau, 1967), xxix, no. 3.
11. See Jane ten Brink Goldsmith et al., "Leonaert Bramer's *The Queen of Sheba Before Solomon*," in *Leonaert Bramer 1596–1674: Ingenious Painter and Draughtsman in Rome and Delft* (Exh. cat. Delft, Stedelijk Museum Het Prinsenhof) (Zwolle, 1994), 164–65, no. 44; see also the appendix, 279, nos. 24–S27.2: Bramer appears to have executed six depictions of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, one of which had a pendant depicting the*Adoration of the Magi*. Two of them were possibly paired with other scenes from the life of Solomon.
12. Although no paintings of the Adoration of the Magi by De Poorter survive, a copy after his composition of this subject was auctioned at Butterfields, 31 May 1990, no. 5151 (oil on canvas, 63.5 x 76 cm).

Provenance

- Possibly Nicolaes van Suchtelen (his sale, Hoorn, 17 April 1715, no. 60, "De Koningin van Seba door de Poorter" (for 14.10 florins).
- General Andrew Bissett, 1723; by descent to his niece, Marjory Winram, wife of Sir Robert Innes of Orton and Balvenie; by descent to their daughter, Catherine, wife of James, 16th Lord Forbes (1725–1804); by descent to Lord Forbes, Castle Forbes in Balforbes, Aberdeenshire (sale, Christie's, London, 6 July 2007, no. 187 [Johnny van Haeften, Ltd., London, 2007]).

© 2017 The Leiden Collection

- From whom acquired by the present owner.

Exhibition History

- Ithaca, Cornell University, Johnson Museum of Art, “An Eye for Detail: Dutch Painting from the Leiden Collection,” September 2014–May 2015 [lent by the present owner].
- Beijing, National Museum of China, “Rembrandt and His Time: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection,” 17 June–3 September 2017 [lent by the present owner].

References

- Sumowski, Werner. *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*. 6 vols. Landau, 1983–94, 4:2406, 2418, no. 1605.
- Tátrai, Júlia. “Allegory on the Colonial Power: A Recently Discovered Work by Willem de Poorter.” *Bulletin du Musée Hongrois des Beaux-Arts* 114–15 (2011): 99.

Technical Summary

The support, an octagonal composite panel comprised of two horizontally grained oak planks with the horizontal panel join above Solomon’s knee, has been thinned.[1] Triangular oak additions have been added to the four corners to create a rectangular format, and the painted composition has been extended onto the additions. A rectangular marouflage backing board, composed of two horizontally grained Baltic oak planks dating from 1512, has been applied to the composite panel.[2] The horizontal panel join of the marouflage panel is in almost exactly the same location as the horizontal panel join of the original planks. One paper label and a number of handwritten inscriptions are located along the backing board, but there are no wax seals, import stamps, stencils or panel maker’s mark.

A light-colored, radio-opaque ground has been thinly applied to the original, octagonal composite panel, and a non-radio-opaque ground has been applied to the four triangular additions. The paint has been thinly and smoothly applied along the background and flesh tones, with low visible brushwork along the figure’s contours and drapery folds.

Infrared images captured at 780–1700 nanometers reveal an extensive graphite (est.) underdrawing through the folds of the Queen of Sheba’s yellow cloak and along the folds of red

© 2017 The Leiden Collection

drapery on the figure to her left. The images and pentimenti suggest the shape and position of the lower edge of the Queen of Sheeba's white gown and her profile were shifted slightly during the paint stage.

The painting is unsigned and undated.

The painting was cleaned and restored in 2007 and remains in a good state of preservation.

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. The characterization of the wood is based on Ian Tyers's dendrochronology report.

2. According to Ian Tyers's dendrochronology report. Unfortunately, the two original planks and four triangular additions are too short and provide too few rings along the end-grain to date.

© 2017 The Leiden Collection