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Jacob Adriaensz Backer

(Harlingen 1608/9 – Amsterdam 1651)

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Jacob Adriaensz Backer was born in the Frisian seaport of Harlingen in 1608 or 1609 to the Mennonite baker Adriaen Tjercksz (ca. 1575–1626) and Hilk Folckerts (d. ca. 1610). His mother died soon thereafter, and his father took a second wife, Elsje Roelofs (ca. 1576–1614), the widow of a baker, in Amsterdam in 1611. Tjercksz moved with his family into De Gloeiende Oven, the bakery of Elsje's late husband on the Nieuwendijk. Jacob Backer grew up among fellow believers, as well as among several of Amsterdam's most famous history painters, including Claes Moyaert (ca. 1592–1655) and Jan Pynas (1581/2–1631). The workshop of Pynas, most likely Backer's first teacher, was less than one hundred meters from his parental home.[1]

Following his father's death in 1626, the eighteen-year-old Backer returned to the province of Friesland to study and work under the Mennonite history painter Lambert Jacobsz (ca. 1598–1636) in Leeuwarden. They knew each other well, for Jacobsz had lived on the Nieuwendijk diagonally opposite the Backers until 1620.[2] Jacobsz involved Backer closely in his workshop production from the very beginning, which is why Backer's early work is often difficult to distinguish from that of his second master.[3] In Leeuwarden, Backer worked for a few years together with Govaert Flinck (1615–60), who started out as an apprentice under Jacobsz around 1629. Backer also became acquainted with the famous Frisian portraitist Wybrand de Geest (1592–ca. 1664), whose workshop was around the corner from Jacobsz's. De Geest painted a portrait of Jacob Backer (now lost), which Backer's half brother Dirck (1612–52) owned.[4]

Backer returned to Amsterdam, possibly in 1632, but certainly by 1633. In that year, he and his brother Tjerck signed a notarial document as "*inwoonders deser stede*" (inhabitants of this city).[5] Whether Backer established himself immediately as an independent painter is not known. In any case, his move to Amsterdam was not related to a period of study with Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69), as has long been assumed. This misunderstanding is based on an incorrect interpretation of a comment in Arnold Houbraken's *Schouburgh* regarding Backer's departure from Leeuwarden.[6]

In Amsterdam, Backer (who never married), probably moved in with his brother Tjerck, who had taken over their father's bakery on the Nieuwendijk in 1626. Tjerck would later move to the Nieuwezijds Achterburgwal. Backer regularly sought the company of the landscape painter Steven van Goor (1608–ca. 1660), a fellow former pupil of Jan Pynas. He also knew Thomas de Keyser (1596/7–1667), who painted his portrait, now known only from a print by Theodor Matham (1605/6–76).[7] Another good friend was Bartholomeus Breenbergh (1598–1657), whose portrait Backer painted, along with that of Breenbergh's wife.[8] Naturally, Backer also knew Govaert Flinck—his old friend from their Leeuwarden years—with whom he regularly drew after live models, as evidenced by some fine studies of nudes that were clearly done during shared sessions.

In the 1640s, together with Flinck and Bartholomeus van der Helst (1613–70), Backer was in great demand among Amsterdam's elite, in large part because he had an exceptionally rapid manner of working that allowed him to produce paintings more cheaply than his competitors. His swiftness led Joachim von Sandrart (1606–88) to recount in his *Teutsche Academie* (1675) the oft-cited anecdote about a lady who traveled in the morning from Haarlem to Amsterdam to sit for Backer. He painted her portrait so quickly that she returned home that same evening with the completed likeness under her arm.[9] Backer was never short on success or acclaim during his lifetime. Between 1634 and 1644, he earned several substantial official commissions, including the celebrated group portrait of the regentesses of the Amsterdam Orphanage, two splendid militia pieces for the Kloveniersdoelen, and an allegorical scene for the chimneypiece of the New Gallery of Buren Castle for Stadholder Frederick Henry.[10]

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Backer taught several gifted painters in Amsterdam, including Abraham van den Tempel (1622/3–72), the son of his own master Lambert Jacobsz. Around 1640, Van den Tempel worked in Backer's workshop, along with Adam Camerarius (d. ca. 1666/86) of Groningen, Louis Vallée (d. 1653), and Jan van Noordt (1623/4–after 1676). In the late 1640s, these students were succeeded by Jan de Baen (1633–1702), Jan van Neck (ca. 1635–1714), and Adriaen Backer (1635/6–1684), Jacob's highly talented nephew, who, like his uncle, would become a leading portrait and history painter. Jacob joined the Remonstrant congregation in Amsterdam in June 1651—three months before Govaert Flinck did so—and died shortly thereafter, on 27 August 1651. He was buried a few days later in a family grave in the Noorderkerk.

- Piet Bakker, 2022

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Endnotes

1. On Jan Pynas as Backer's first teacher, see Jaap van der Veen, "Jacob Backer, een schets van zijn leven," in *Jacob Backer (1608/9–1651)*, ed. Peter van den Brink (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis; Aachen, Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum) (Zwolle, 2008), 14–15.
2. Jaap van der Veen, "Jacob Backer, een schets van zijn leven," in *Jacob Backer (1608/9–1651)*, ed. Peter van den Brink (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis; Aachen, Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum) (Zwolle, 2008), 16–17. See also Piet Bakker, "Een schilder en zijn netwerk: Lambert Jacobsz en een nieuw beeld van de zeventiende-eeuwse schilderkunst in Friesland," *De Vrije Fries* 88 (2008): 31–64.
3. Jasper Hilligers, "Lambert Jacobsz (c. 1598–1636) en zijn werkplaats: Atelierpraktijk in Leeuwarden omstreeks 1630," *De Vrije Fries* 89 (2009): 67–92.
4. Listed in the 1653 inventory of the possessions of Jacob's half brother Dirck Backer is "*Een tronie van salige Jacob Backer van Wyb[rand] d'Geest*" (A tronie of the late Jacob Backer by Wyb[rand] d'Geest); see J.D. Wagner, "Nieuwe gegevens omtrent Jacob Backer," *Oud Holland* 40 (1922): 33, no. 20.
5. Stadsarchief Amsterdam, Notarial Archives, Notary F. van Banchem, inv. 308, fol. 262r–v, 19 mei 1633, cited in Jaap van der Veen, "Jacob Backer, een schets van zijn leven," in *Jacob Backer (1608/9–1651)*, ed. Peter van den Brink (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis; Aachen, Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum) (Zwolle, 2008), 18.
6. Albert Blankert debunked this myth in "Classicism and History Painting in the Late Seventeenth Century," in *Gods, Saints and Heroes: Dutch Painting in the Age of Rembrandt*, Albert Blankert et al. (Exh. cat. Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art; Detroit, Detroit Institute of Arts; Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum) (Washington, D.C., 1980), 206. Broos described Backer's purported pupillage with Rembrandt as "a case of consistent misreading of a quote"; see B.P.J. Broos, "Fame shared is fame doubled," in *The Impact of a Genius: Rembrandt, His Pupils and Followers in the Seventeenth Century*, Albert Blankert et al. (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Waterman Gallery; Groningen, Groninger Museum) (Amsterdam, 1983), 48–49.
7. Theodor Matham, after Thomas de Keyser, *Portrait of Jacob Backer*, 1651 (Rijksmuseum, Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam). See also Arnold Houbraken, *De Groote Schouburgh der Nederlantsche Konstschilders en Schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21; rev. ed. The Hague, 1753; repr. Amsterdam, 1976), 1: 336.
8. Jacob Adriaensz Backer, *Portret à l'antique of Bartholomeus Breenbergh (1598–1657)*, 1644, and *Portret à l'antique of Rebecca Schellingwou (ca. 1610–1667), Wife of Bartholomeus Breenbergh*, ca. 1644 (both Amsterdam Museum).
9. Joachim von Sandrart, *Joachim von Sandrarts Academie der Bau-, Bild- und Mahlerey-Künstevon 1675: Lebem der berühmten Maler, Bildhauer und Baumeister*, ed. Arthur R. Peltzer (Munich, 1925), 178; and

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Arnold Houbraken, *De Groote Schouburgh der Nederlantsche Konstschilders en Schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21; rev. ed. The Hague, 1753; repr. Amsterdam, 1976), 1: 336.

10. *The Regentesses of the Amsterdam Orphanage*, 1634 (Amsterdam Museum), see Peter van den Brink, ed., *Jacob Backer (1608/9–1651)* (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis; Aachen, Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum) (Zwolle, 2008), 100–103, no. A21; *The Militia Company of Hendrick Dircksz Spiegel*, 1638 (present whereabouts unknown), see Kurt Bauch, *Jacob Adriaensz Backer: Ein Rembrandtschüler aus Friesland* (Berlin, 1926), 3, no. 234; *The Militia Company of Captain Cornelis de Graeff and Lieutenant Hendrick Lauwrensz*, 1642 (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam), see Van den Brink, *Jacob Backer (1608/9–1651)*, 236, no. A92; and *Allegory of the Republic*, ca. 1644–45 (Stiftung Staatliche Schlösser und Gärten, Schloss Oranienburg, Berlin), see Van den Brink, *Jacob Backer (1608/9–1651)*, 146–47, no. A109.

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