THE LEIDEN COLLECTION



A Scholar at His Desk

Jacob Adriaensz Backer
(Harlingen 1608/9 – Amsterdam 1651)

ca. 1632
oil on panel
66.4 x 50.8 cm
JAB-100

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An elderly, bearded scholar in a fur-lined cloak sits at a desk with an open book, surrounded by the tools of his pursuits: an impressive inkwell, a well-worn quill pen shorn of barbs, a quill box, a "pounce" caster, a stick of red sealing wax (with its soot-blackened ring), and a leather portfolio containing a sheaf of writings.[1] The quill rests in the inkwell and the adjacent quill box's lid remains ajar, indicating that this scholar has just finished composing the text before him. With his hands clasped, he sits in a moment of quiet repose, deeply lost in thought. A warm, broad light washes over him, emphasizing his flushed cheeks and knotted brow. The scholar's attire is a wonderful contrast of textures, from the thin linen shirt to the heavy gray cloak with a rich fur collar and shimmering velvet sleeves.

Jacob Adriaensz Backer (1608/9–51) painted *A Scholar at His Desk* around 1632 in Leeuwarden, when he was working in the studio of Lambert Jacobsz (1598–1636), with whom he had trained since moving from Amsterdam to the Frisian capital in the latter half of the 1620s. Jacobsz, like Backer, was a Mennonite, and the two men had previously known each other in Amsterdam when their families were close neighbors on the Nieuwendijk.[2] In Leeuwarden, the older master, likely with the assistance of Backer, frequently depicted large-figure history pieces, such as *Elisha Refusing Naaman's Gifts* in The Leiden Collection, as well as paintings of apostles and evangelists, including the imposing *Apostle Paul* in the Fries Museum and a series of evangelists from the early 1630s in Rouen's Musée des Beaux-Arts.[3] Jacobsz's *Saint Luke* **(fig 1)** from this series may have served as a compositional model for Backer's scholar, who is also shown turned to the left.

Saint Matthew **(fig 2)** from Jacobsz's series must have also served as inspiration for Backer since, like his master, Backer included Hebraic letters in his painting. They appear on the sheet of paper lying on the table in the foreground; their inclusion indicates that this scholar was familiar with biblical texts. Unlike in Jacobsz's painting, however, where the Hebrew text is decipherable, Backer's lines consist primarily of flat, gray bands, and the three Hebraic letters visible at the bottom of the page are not accurately written.[4] While they resemble נ ש ח (or chet, shin, nun), the word *cheshen* they spell is not a known word. An additional character that resembles the Hebraic ח (chet) appears in the upper corner of one of the pages in the standing leatherbound pamphlet on the desk, though it, too, seems more of a suggestion than an actual letter.

Lambert Jacobsz was an influential Mennonite preacher as well as artist and art dealer.[5] While Mennonite preachers were typically not trained in Hebrew, Jacobsz most likely had access to one of the rare, published Hebrew translations of Matthew's gospel—perhaps that of Sebastian Münster (2nd edition, 1557). The unusual inclusion

Comparative Figures

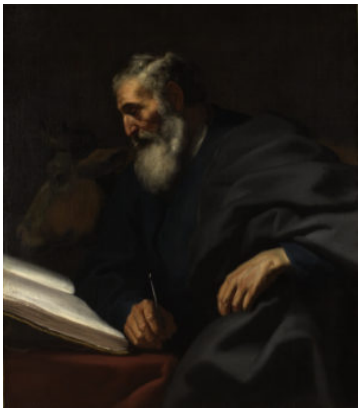


Fig 1. Lambert Jacobsz, *Saint Luke*, ca. 1630–31, oil on canvas, 100 x 90 cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen, inv. no. 1809.1, © C. Lancien, C. Loisel / Réunion des Musées Métropolitains Rouen Normandie.



Fig 2. Lambert Jacobsz, *Saint Matthew*, ca. 1630–31, oil on canvas, 100 x 90 cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen, inv. no. 1809.2, © C. Lancien, C. Loisel / Réunion des Musées Métropolitains Rouen Normandie.



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of Hebrew text in both paintings, made at nearly the same time, lends further support to the idea that Backer executed this work in Leeuwarden, while he was under the direct influence of his master.

Backer's painting in The Leiden Collection illustrates the artistic and spiritual bonds between him and Lambert Jacobsz, but it also shows the first glimmers of the warm, flowing style and gentler spirit that characterize Backer's works after he moved to Amsterdam around 1633.[6] The undulating, fluid quality of his Amsterdam-period style is fully evident in his *Hippocrates Visits Democritus in Abdera* **(fig 3)**, a subject taken from Classical antiquity that would have been more suitable for the cosmopolitan Amsterdam market than for collectors in Leeuwarden.[7] In this painting, Backer recast the man who modeled for *A Scholar at His Desk* as Democritus, who sits at the base of a tree writing in a large tome of his discoveries about the natural world. The model Backer used for Heraclitus (along with his rich garment) only appears in his Amsterdam-period works, pointing to a date for this painting after February 1633, when Backer returned to the metropolis.

While Backer continued to produce large-scale religious history paintings throughout the rest of his career, *A Scholar at His Desk* constitutes the last known example of a single-figured religious work in his oeuvre. Backer sadly never reached the wise old age of the man portrayed in this painting, as he died in 1651 at the age of 43.[8] He nevertheless enjoyed a fulsome—albeit abbreviated—career of nearly two decades in Amsterdam, during which time his style further evolved into a more polished manner.

- Lloyd DeWitt, 2022

Fig 3. Jacob Adriaensz Backer, *Hippocrates Visits Democritus in Abdera*, ca. 1633, oil on canvas, 94 x 64 cm, Bader Collection, Milwaukee.

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Endnotes

1. A “pounce” caster was used to scatter an absorbent that was commonly used before the advent of blotting paper.
2. Backer and Jacobsz lived across the street from each other until Jacobsz’s departure for Leeuwarden in 1620. See the biographies of Jacob Adriaensz Backer and Lambert Jacobsz in this catalogue.
3. Jacobsz only depicted large-scale history scenes between 1628 and 1633, a period that overlapped with Backer’s stay in Leeuwarden. For the Rouen series, see Diederik Bakhuÿs et al., *Tableaux Flamands et Hollandais du Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rouen* (Paris, 2009), 78.
4. Saint Matthew’s text can be partly deciphered as “ארץ בית לחם נולד ישוע . . .” (In the land of beit lechem, yeshua was born . . .) (Matthew 2:1). This is the only painting in the Rouen series of *Four Evangelists* with legible text on the page, and it represents an exceptional occurrence of Hebrew appearing in Dutch art of the seventeenth century. Matthew’s gospel was widely thought to have been originally written in Hebrew and addressed to his own people. Saint Jerome, *On Famous Men*, II: 2, 3, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2708.htm.

   My thanks to Joel Ray for his kind assistance in deciphering the letters and providing their translation. The early church father and Bible translator Saint Jerome claimed to have seen a copy of Matthew’s original text of his gospel in Hebrew. Versions of Shem Tob ben Isaac Ibn Shaprut’s 1380–85 polemical translation of Matthew’s gospel in Hebrew published in his *Touchstone* (Ebn Bohan) seem to have been used by Sebastian Münster (1537) and Jean du Tillet (1555) for their translations.
5. As noted by Arnold Houbraken, who was also a Mennonite, Lambert Jacobsz traveled as far as Cleves to deliver sermons. See Jasper Hillegers, “The Lambert Years: Govert Flinck in Leeuwarden, ca. 1629–ca. 1633,” in *Ferdinand Bol and Govert Flinck: New Research*, ed. Stephanie S. Dickey (Zwolle, 2017), 45; and Arnold Houbraken, *De Groote Schouburgh der Nederlantsche Konstschilders en Schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21; rev. ed. The Hague, 1753; repr. Amsterdam, 1980), 2: 20.
6. This style differs from the harder forms and severe characters in Jacobsz’s evangelists or the other intensely focused Biblical figures he painted in Leeuwarden in the late 1620s and early 1630s. See Diederik Bakhuÿs et al., *Tableaux Flamands et Hollandais du Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rouen* (Paris, 2009), 78. Backer had settled in Amsterdam in 1633, though he may have already moved to the city in 1632. See the biography of Jacob Adriaensz Backer in this catalogue.
7. Although Backer’s *Hippocrates Visits Democritus in Abdera* is listed in the 1637 Leeuwarden inventory of the goods of Lambert Jacobsz, scholars have debated whether Backer painted it for Jacobsz after he had moved to Amsterdam in 1632 or while Backer was still in Leeuwarden. Peter van de Brink has argued that, as it was unsigned, it was most likely a Leeuwarden product—as was the closely connected *A Scholar at His Desk*—and thus also made while Backer was under the employ of Jacobsz, who then retained it. Jaap van der Veen correctly points out that while Democritus is based on Backer’s

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Leeuwarden model, the model for Hippocrates appears in Rembrandt's works painted in Amsterdam, such as *Man in Oriental Costume*, 1632 (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), as well as several Amsterdam-period *tronies* by Backer, including *Old Man in Liturgical Dress*, ca. 1632–33 (The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg) and *Old Man in a Green Cloak*, ca. 1632–33 (Gemäldegalerie, Dresden). The new awareness of Rembrandt's success with richly costumed figures also points to an Amsterdam-period work. Van der Veen also points out that Lambert Jacobsz was closely connected to his fellow Mennonite and Amsterdam art dealer Gerrit van Uylenburgh, and Backer may have shipped *Hippocrates Visiting Democritus in Abdera* from Amsterdam to Leeuwarden via this connection, through which a number of other Amsterdam products joined Jacobsz's inventory. Jaap van der Veen, "Jacob Backer, Eine Biographische Skizze," in *Jacob Backer (1608/9–1651)*, ed. Peter van den Brink (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis; Aachen, Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum) (Zwolle, 2008), 33, 88, and 178; David de Witt, *The Bader Collection: Dutch and Flemish Paintings* (Kingston, 2008), 51–52; and Jasper Hillegers, "The Lambert Years: Govert Flinck in Leeuwarden, ca. 1629–ca. 1633," in *Ferdinand Bol and Govert Flinck: New Research*, ed. Stephanie S. Dickey (Zwolle, 2017), 52.

8. Jaap van der Veen, "Jacob Backer, Eine Biographische Skizze," in *Jacob Backer (1608/9–1651)*, ed. Peter van den Brink (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis; Aachen, Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum) (Zwolle, 2008), 24.

Provenance

- (Sale, Christie's, London, 21 July 1972, no. 145, as by Jacob Jordaens [to Duits Gallery Ltd. for 1,900 guineas].)
- [Duits Gallery Ltd., London.]
- (Sale, Sotheby's, London, 8 December 1976, no. 115 [for £2,000].)
- [Kunsthandel Gebroeder Douwes, Amsterdam, by 1977.]
- Private collection, the Netherlands, by 1998 (sale, Christie's, Amsterdam, 16 November 2006, no. 60 [to Jack Kilgore & Co., Inc., for €50,400]).
- [Jack Kilgore & Co., Inc., New York.]
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2007.

Exhibition History

- Leeuwarden, Fries Museum, "Van Jan Steen tot Jan Sluijters: De smaak van Douwes," 21 November 1998–21 February 1999, no. 2 [lent by a private collection].

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Technical Summary

The painting is on a panel support, most likely oak, and is made from three vertical planks with two narrower planks flanking a wider central one. The verso has original bevels to accommodate a frame on all four sides, and there are fine horizontal grooves on the right plank, which may be original sawmill marks.

The beige ground is radio-opaque, and it fills the grooves in the wood grain. It appears in the X-radiograph to be applied with a wide brush using sweeping horizontal strokes. No underdrawing is visible in the infrared (IR) photograph, but the artist made use of vigorous brushwork, still visible on the surface in some areas, to lay in initial contours for the final image. In the IR photo, some of these contours, such as the back of the figure's head, the rightmost side of his beard just below his ear, and his sleeve just below his beard have been slightly adjusted in the final paint layers. The artist may also have changed the height of the book that stands upright on the table in the background, increasing its height by about one-third. Both the ground and the paint layers are thinly applied with no impasto, and in raking light the panel's wood grain is evident on the surface. In some areas, particularly the top third of the background, the final paint application is thin enough that the ground shows through.

The painting is in very good condition. There are splits at the bottom edge of the panel's central plank and in the right panel's join, as seen from the verso. Both were repaired in the past and integrated with retouching that has now discolored. A few retouches in the thinly painted background, too, have discolored. The varnish,

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which is slightly glossy, skipped over the surface when it was applied, leaving a few localized matte areas.

– Gerrit Albertson, 2022

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