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Woman with Three Children and a Goat

Nicolaes Maes
(Dordrecht 1634 – 1693 Amsterdam)

ca. 1649–53
oil on canvas
133 x 110.8 cm
NM-100

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Nicolaes Maes painted this enigmatic and evocative image of a young woman caring for two girls and an infant boy seated on a goat at the very beginning of his career. Whether Maes conceived this work as a group portrait, a *portrait historié*, or based his scene on a literary source has been debated over the years. The traditional title of this painting, dating back to the early nineteenth century, is *Spanish Gypsy*,[1] a title based on the assumption that Maes was inspired by Jacob Cats's *Het Spaens heydinnetje.* Cats published his story in *Trou-ringh* (Dordrecht, 1637), and his narrative was later turned into a play by Mattheus Tengnagel (Amsterdam, 1643).[2] In his story, Cats describes how a two-year-old noble girl is kidnapped by an old gypsy woman for her expensive clothing and jewelry and is forced to grow up as a singing gypsy. At age 15, while surrounded by fellow gypsy girls making rose wreaths, a nobleman falls in love with her and rescues her. Although several elements of this story—a gypsy woman, a baby, and girls with roses—are present in the painting, other compositional elements—the gender of the baby, the young age of the woman, and the goat—do not correspond with the story's plot, and it is unlikely that this traditional title accounts for the unusual character of this painting. Moreover, the puffs around the woman's broad, relatively flat hat are not found in costumes worn by gypsies, and she does not wear a chord around her neck, as gypsies normally do.[3]

It is probable that the painting is an allegorical family portrait.[4] Although the woman's hat is somewhat fanciful, and akin to those seen in history paintings from the Rembrandt school,[5] her simple red dress, plain white chemise and brown apron indicate that she is most likely a wet nurse or maid.[6] Maes emphasized the interaction between the maid and the boy through their compositional prominence and their contrasting yellow and bright red clothing. With a slight tilt of her head, she tenderly leans over the baby boy in her care, his gender indicated by the red coral necklaces draped over his shoulder. She helps him to sit upright on the back of a goat by supporting his back with her left hand and holding onto the animal's backside with the other. This motif relates to a tradition in seventeenth-century children's portraiture where young boys are shown astride bridled goats, symbolic of the need to curb lust and to ensure a good upbringing.[7] Here, the maid takes on a guiding role in the rearing and education of the future patriarch of this family. The boy, elegantly clad in a yellow dress, embroidered shoes, and a feathered beret over a tight hat—a so-called *biggin*—has a sweet and docile expression, as though aware that he is under her protection. His coral necklaces, moreover, were thought to provide protection against illness.[8]

In the foreground sits the boy's older sister, who wears an expensive gold-embroidered chemise under a brown dress. She carries a tubular case for crochet needles on a chain at her waist, a tambourine in her lap, and roses in her

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Nicolaes Maes, *Abraham Dismissing Hagar and Ishmael*, 1653, oil on canvas, 87.6 x 69.9 cm, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. no. 1971.73, www.metmuseum.org



Fig 2. Nicolaes Maes, *Christ Blessing the Children*, ca. 1653, oil on canvas, 206 x 154 cm, London, National Gallery, inv. no. NG757, © National Gallery, London / Art Resource, NY

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hands.[9] Another sister, wearing a brown dress and a red necklace, is seen in profile at the far right against the backdrop of a rose bush. The two girls, painted in brown and dark red hues and wearing almost identical dresses, gaze to the right, outside the picture plane. Perhaps they once looked toward a pendant painting depicting their parents.[10]

When the painting first appeared on the market in 1796, it was attributed to Rembrandt on the basis of a false Rembrandt signature.[11] This attribution persisted until Alfred von Wurzbach gave it to Nicolaes Maes in 1910.[12] Most subsequent scholars, such as Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, Wilhelm von Bode, Wilhelm Valentiner, Werner Sumowski, and Leon Krempel, accepted this attribution and generally dated the painting to ca. 1653, the year in which Maes left Rembrandt's studio and settled in Dordrecht as an independent master.[13] They connected the painting to several works from Maes's oeuvre from the early 1650s, particularly his *Abraham Dismissing Hagar and Ishmael*, 1653, his earliest dated painting **(fig 1)**, in which Hagar's features are similar to those of the maid. They also stressed the relationship of the Leiden Collection painting to *Christ Blessing the Children*, which Maes probably painted in the same year **(fig 2)**.[14] Sumowski also related the Leiden Collection painting to a drawing he attributed to Maes depicting *Hagar and the Angel near the Well en Route to Sur* from ca. 1652–1653 because of the similarity of the figure of Hagar in the drawing to that of the maid in the painting.[15]



Fig 3. Adriaan de Lelie, *Self-Portrait with Josephus Augustinus Brentano (1753–1821)*, 1813, oil on canvas, 285 x 160 cm, Private Collection

William Robinson, however, questioned the attribution to Maes in his 1996 dissertation on the early works of Nicolaes Maes, in which he placed the painting within the School of Rembrandt without an attribution to a given artist. He still maintains that the "differences [between the present painting and the two early paintings by Maes mentioned above] are more compelling than the similarities."[16] It is true that, upon closer inspection, the modeling of the hands in the London painting is more complex and the interplay of light and shadow on the faces in the background of the London painting is more subtle and has a crisp, theatrical effect compared to the present painting. There are also differences in execution with *Abraham Dismissing Hagar and Ishmael*. The maid's white chemise and the white goat are modeled more broadly and with more Rembrandtesque impasto than the more smoothly rendered chemise that Hagar wears in the Metropolitan Museum of Art painting.

Nevertheless, the similarities between the Leiden Collection painting and Maes's other early works, especially *Christ Blessing the Children* with its similar subdued palette and monumentality of figures, are significant. The atmospheric lighting in the Leiden Collection painting is striking and seems to foreshadow Maes's more sophisticated use of light and shade in *Christ Blessing the Children*. It thus seems likely that the Leiden Collection painting is one of the earliest paintings by Maes, executed

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in Rembrandt's workshop between 1649 and 1653, and before he painted *Abraham Dismissing Hagar and Ishmael* and *Christ Blessing the Children*.[17]

The provenance of *Woman with Three Children and a Goat* can be traced back to the eighteenth century. Its first recorded owner was Wouter Valckenier (1705–84), descendant of an influential Amsterdam patrician family, whose ancestors Pieter Ranst Valckenier (1661–1704) and Eva Suzanna Pellicorne (1670–1732) are featured in Michiel van Musscher's pendant portraits, also in the Leiden Collection (MM-102a/b).[18] By 1813 the work was in the possession of Josephus Augustinus Brentano (1753–1821), an Amsterdam-based Italian merchant and art collector. Brentano attached great significance to Maes's painting, as can be seen in Adriaan de Lelie's 1813 portrait of him with his art collection, in which the work can be seen hanging prominently on the wall behind him **(fig 3)**. In the two subsequent centuries, the painting was owned by a string of impressive collectors, including Anthony Nathan de Rothschild (1792–1868) and Alfred Charles de Rothschild (1842–1918); the distinguished New York banker and art collector J. Pierpont Morgan (1837–1913); and the Dutch entrepreneur and collector Anton C. R. Dreesmann (1923–2000).[19]

- Ilona van Tuinen, 2017; revised 2022

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Endnotes

1. Sale, Josephus Augustinus Brentano (1753–1821), Amsterdam (De Vries & Brondgeest, Amsterdam, 13 May 1822, no. 282, as by Rembrandt [to De Vries for 3,205 florins]): in the sales catalogue, the figures are described as "landlieden uit Oud-Kastilië, welke met sluikgoederen reizen" (Castilian gypsies with their illicit goods). In 1824 the painting was exhibited at the British Institution in London as "Spanish Gypsy," which was adopted in the sales catalogue of Christianus Johannes Nieuwenhuys, Christie's, London, 10 May 1833, no. 123. When the painting was auctioned during the sale of the Dr. C. R. Dreesmann Collection, Christie's, London, 11 April 2002, no. 538, it was still called "Spanish Gypsy."
2. See Jacob Cats, "Het Spaens heydinnetje," in *Trou-Ringh* (Amsterdam, 1937), 308–47. Thanks to David DeWitt for bringing *Het Spaens heydinnetje* to my attention. Mattheus Tengnagel, *Het leven van Konstance: Waer af volgt het toneelspel De Spaensche heidin* (Amsterdam, 1643).
3. For a description of gypsy dress, see Marieke de Winkel, *Fashion and Fancy: Dress and Meaning in Rembrandt's Paintings* (Amsterdam, 2006), 265–66. The distinctive, disclike hat, also called a *bern*, was made from wickerwork covered by strips of linen and held up by a chin strap. Since gypsies were thought to come from Egypt, they were often included in Old Testament scenes set there, mostly from Exodus. There are several examples of Rembrandt's use of the gypsy hat, including his etching of ca. 1644 (B. 57), just before the period in which Maes studied with him, depicting Mary in gypsy dress on the way to Egypt. In Maes's own contemporary *Abraham Dismissing Hagar and Ishmael* (fig. 1), Hagar is also depicted with a gypsy hat.
4. For authors suggesting the possibility of a group portrait, see Werner Sumowski, "In Praise of Rembrandt's Pupils," in *The Hoogsteder Exhibition of Rembrandt's Academy*, ed. Paul Huys Janssen and Werner Sumowski (Exh. cat. The Hague, Hoogsteder & Hoogsteder) (Zwolle, 1992), 74, and Paul Huys Janssen, "Nicolaes Maes, Young Woman with Three Children," in *The Hoogsteder Exhibition of Rembrandt's Academy*, ed. Paul Huys Janssen and Werner Sumowski (Exh. cat. The Hague, Hoogsteder & Hoogsteder) (Zwolle, 1992), 236–39, no. 30, who suggested that the artist was deliberately defying the traditions of Dutch portraiture by having all four figures looking in different directions. For another example of a maid portrayed with a child, see Frans Hals, *Catharina Hooft with Her Nurse*, ca. 1620, Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.
5. A similar hat with a puffy brim appears early in Rembrandt's oeuvre in his *Sheet of Studies of Four Heads and a Half-Length Study of a Woman* (recto), ca. 1633–35, silverpoint on vellum prepared with pale gray pigment, 13.4 x 8 cm, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam, Koenigs Collection, inv. R25, as well as much later in Barent Fabritius, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, 1667, London, National Gallery, inv. 1338. Interestingly, Fabritius based his composition on Rembrandt's two 1646 depictions of the subject (Munich, Alte Pinakothek, 1646, inv. 373; London, National Gallery, 1646, inv. NG47), but added the woman wearing the hat in the foreground himself. Unlike the hats in Rembrandt's drawing and Fabritius's paintings, the hat in the present painting contains an intricately woven pattern at the top.

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For a less elaborate but very similar dress over a high white vest, like those worn by the girls in the painting, see Mary's dress in Gerbrand van den Eeckhout, *Rest on the Flight to Egypt*, oil on canvas, 1653, 101 x 83.7 cm, Milwaukee Art Museum, Bader Collection.

6. The woman's status has already been noted by John Smith, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch, Flemish, and French Painters*, 9 vols. (London, 1829–42), 7: 74, no. 175, and repeated in much of the literature. Marieke de Winkel, in an e-mail of June 2013, suggested the same (copy on file at the Leiden Collection). Many thanks to Marieke de Winkel for sharing her insights on the clothing in this work.
7. The tradition of depicting children with bridled goats can be traced back to Frans Hals's *Three Children with a Goat*, ca. 1620, oil on canvas, 152 x 107.5 cm, Brussels, Royal Museum of Fine Arts. For a discussion of the motif of bridled goats and the symbolism of curbing children's lust, see Jan Baptist Bedeaux and Rudi Ekkart, eds., *Pride and Joy: Children's Portraits in the Netherlands 1500–1700* (Exh. cat. Haarlem, Frans Hals Museum; Antwerp, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten) (New York, 2000), 218–20, no. 57 for Jan Albertsz Rotius, *Four-Year-Old Boy with Goat*, 1652, panel, 116 x 87 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. nr. SK-A-995, in which the little boy firmly grips one of the goat's horns, and 246–48, no. 67 for Gerbrand van den Eeckhout, *Willem Woutersz Oorthoord in a Goat-Cart*, 1662, oil on canvas, 96 x 121 cm, Private Collection (formerly New York, Jack Kilgore).
8. On the benificial powers of red coral for children, see Saskia Kuus, "Jacob Willems Delff, *Portrait of a Two-Year Old Boy*, 1582, panel, Rijksmueum, inv. no. SK-A-1907," in *Pride and Joy: Children's Portraits in the Netherlands* 1500–1700, ed. Jan Baptist Bedeaux and Rudi Ekkart (Exh. cat. Haarlem, Frans Hals Museum; Antwerp, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten) (New York, 2000), 102.
9. E-mail correspondence with Marieke de Winkel, April 2014 (copy on file at the Leiden Gallery): "this type of case used by women to carry their crochet needles or knives was common in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and was the precursor of the so-called *chatelaine*." Thanks to Marieke de Winkel, who also lists examples taken from Dutch inventories of the 1630s.
10. I am indebted to Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. for this suggestion.
11. Sale of Elizabeth Valckenier, née Hooft (1712–96), widow of Wouter Valckenier (1705–84), Amsterdam; Rycken, Amsterdam, 31 August 1796, no. 33. See also the Provenance and the Technical Summary: the signature is no longer visible on the painting.
12. Alfred von Wurzbach, *Niederländisches Künstler-Lexikon: Auf Grund Archivalischer Forschungen Bearbeitet* 3 vols. (Vienna, 1906–11), 2:90. See also a note by Cornelis Hofstede de Groot of ca. 1909 pertaining to this painting, preserved in the Hofstede de Groot fiches at the RKD in The Hague, in which he tentatively suggests an attribution to Maes. Hofstede de Groot noted that the least Rembrandtesque features of the painting are the lack of anatomy in the goat, the rendition of the boy, and the vegetation on the ground.
13. Hofstede de Groot, Cornelis, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century Based on the Work of John Smith,* ed. and trans. Edward G. Hawke, 5: 500, no.

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89, 8 vols. (London, 1907–28), originally published as *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten höllandischen Maler des XVII. Jahrhunderts,* 10 vols. (Esslingen and Paris, 1907–28); Wilhelm von Bode, *Der Meister der holländischen und vlamischen Malerschulen* (Leipzig, 1919), 66; 9th ed. (Leipzig, 1958), 77; Wilhelm Valentiner, *Nicolaes Maes* (Berlin, 1924), 11, 44, fig. 6; Werner Sumowski, "Christus segnet die Kinder: Bemerkungen zu einem Frühwerk von Nicolaes Maes," *Festschrift für Hans Ladendorf*, ed. Peter Bloch and Gisela Zick (Cologne, 1970), 42; Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 vols (Landau and Pfalz, 1983–94), 3: 2011, 2055, no. 1329; 6: 3628, 3677, no. 1329; Leon Krempel, *Studien zu den datierten Gemälden des Nicolaes Maes (1634–1693)* (Petersberg, 2000), 44–46, pl. II, 362, no. D 40, fig. 5.

14. For a discussion of the dating and the widely accepted attribution of the London painting to Maes, see Marjorie M. Wieseman, "Christus zegent de kinderen," in *De Zichtbaere Werelt: Schilderkunst uit de Gouden Eeuw in Hollands oudste stad*, ed. Peter Marijnissen, Wim de Paus, Peter Schoon, and George Schweitzer (Exh. cat. Dordrecht, Dordrechts Museum) (Zwolle, 1992), 228. See Piet Bakker's biography in this catalogue: already five years later, in around 1658, Maes adapted a smoother style in which he continued to work until his death.
15. Werner Sumowski, *Drawings of the Rembrandt School*, 10 vols. (New York, 1979–92), 8:4116, no. 1835.
16. William Walker Robinson, "The Early Works of Nicolaes Maes, 1653–1661" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1996), no. C-12, as by School of Rembrandt. Many thanks to Mr. Robinson for sharing his current thoughts on the attribution in e-mail correspondence of March 2014 (copy on file at The Leiden Collection), from which this citation is taken.
17. See the biography of Maes by Piet Bakker in this catalogue. Leon Krempel, *Nicolaes Maes* (Petersberg, 2000), 44–46, pl. II, 362, no. D 40, fig. 5, places the painting after *Abraham Dismissing Hagar and Ishmael* and *Christ Blessing the Children*.
18. See Provenance. For Michiel van Musscher's portraits, see MM-102a/b. Wouter Valckenier was the grandson of Cornelis Valckenier (1640–1700), Pieter's second cousin.
19. See Provenance. The editors would like to express their thanks to Gary Schwartz for calling our attention to revisions and additional research regarding the Rothschild provenance in January 2022

Provenance

- Wouter Valckenier (1705–84), Amsterdam; by descent to his widow Elizabeth Hooft (1712–96) (her sale, Rycken, Amsterdam, 31 August 1796, lot 33, as by Rembrandt [to B. Carli for 1,413 florins]).
- Josephus Augustinus Brentano (1753–1821), Amsterdam, by 1813 (his sale, De Vries & Brondgeest, Amsterdam, 13 May 1822, as by Rembrandt [to De Vries for 3,205 florins]).
- Lord Charles Townshend (1785–1853), London, by 1824.

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- Christianus Johannes Nieuwenhuys (1775–1837) (his sale, Christie's, London, 10 May 1833, no. 123, as by Rembrandt [to Gordon for 610 guineas]).
- Sir Anthony Nathan de Rothschild (1810–76), 1st Baronet, London, 1833; by descent to his nephew, Alfred Charles de Rothschild (1842–1918), London; [through Charles Davis, London, to J. Pierpont Morgan, as by Rembrandt].
- Pierpont Morgan (1837–1913), New York, July 1909; [through Thos. Agnew & Sons, London, to Alfred Charles de Rothschild, as by Rembrandt].
- Alfred Charles de Rothschild (1842–1918), London, July 1912; by descent to grand-nephew Edmund Leopold de Rothschild (1916–2009), London and Hampshire (to Dr. Tancres Borenius).
- Dr. Tancres Borenius (1885–1948), London, 15 April 1942.
- Baron Paul Hatvany (1899–1977), London, possibly by 1960 (his sale, Christie's, London, 11 July 1980, no. 17 [through Hans Cramer to Dr. Anton C.R. Dreesmann for £32,000].
- Dr. Anton C.R. Dreesmann (1923–2000), Laren; on consignment to Douwes Fine Art, Amsterdam, 1995–96; sale, Christie's, London, 11 April 2002, no. 538, unsold; sale, Christie's, New York, 19 April 2007, no. 80 [to Johnny Van Haeften, Ltd.]).
- [Johnny Van Haeften, Ltd., London].
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2007.

Exhibition History

- London, British Institution, 1824, no. 119, as by Rembrandt [lent by Lord Charles Townshend, London].
- London, Matthiesen Gallery, *Rembrandt's Influence in the 17th Century*, 20 February–2 April 1953, no. 49 [lent by a Private Collection].
- The Hague, Mauritshuis, "Terugzien in bewondering: A Collector's Choice," 19 February–9 March 1982, no. 53 [lent by Anton C. R. Dreesmann].
- Notre Dame, Indiana, Snite Museum of Art, "A Dutch Treat: Selections of XVII and XVIII Century Dutch Art from the Collection of Dr. A. C. R. Dreesmann," 17 October–26 December 1982, no. 8 [lent by Anton C. R. Dreesmann].
- The Hague, Hoogsteder & Hoogsteder, "The Hoogsteder Exhibition of Rembrandt's Academy," 4 February–2 May 1992, no. 30.
- Amsterdam, Gebr. Douwes Fine Art, "Selling Exhibition of Old Master Paintings," 27 November 1995–19 January 1996, no. 27.
- Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, on loan with the permanent collection, August 2015–August 2016 [lent by the present owner].

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Technical Summary

The support, a single piece of medium-weight, plain-weave fabric with tacking margins removed, has been lined. Paper tape covers the fabric edges along all four sides. Cusping along the lower edge is not as pronounced as that along the remaining three sides, although it appears the original dimensions have not been significantly altered. A number of chalk inscriptions, a black stencil, and three paper labels are located along the stretcher reverse, but there are no wax seals or import stamps along the lining or stretcher.

A border of gray ground remains exposed along the outer edges of the fabric. The paint has been thinly applied through the dark tones and with impasto through the light tones. Broad, gestural brushstrokes of paint describe the forms and give vibrancy to the surface.

Infrared images reveal carbon black was used in the laying in of the composition. The horns of the goat and background foliage have been delineated with strokes of carbon black, as have the deepest shadows beneath the arms of the left hand figure and the shadow falling across the ground beneath the feet of the goat.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images. Compositional changes visible in the images and as pentimenti include a slight change to the bodice of the central figure and to the proper right shoulder, which

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was shifted lower during the paint stage.

The painting is unsigned and undated.[1]

The painting has not undergone conservation treatment since its acquisition in 2007 and remains in a good state of preservation.[2]

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. Inscription, canvas weave, and ground and paint descriptions based on personal examination of February 2014, while the painting was framed and glazed at a private viewing room in New York.
2. Entry based in part on a 2012 examination report written by Simon Howell and Rachel Casey-Thomas of R. M. S. Shephard Associates, Wimbledon, UK.

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