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Young Man Blowing a Torch to Light a Candle

Godefridus Schalcken and Studio
(Made 1643 – 1706 The Hague)

ca. 1692–96
oil on canvas
112.8 x 90 cm
GS-106

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This rather large canvas shows a young man with long wavy hair, depicted half-length, holding in his left hand a piece of burning wood, which he has apparently taken from the fire in a brazier to his right. Blowing on the red-hot wood, he sends sparks swirling into the air. He probably needs a flame to light the candle in the simple brass sconce with a wide candle-ring and a handle with an eyelet, which he grips with his right hand. The young woman behind him gazes at the viewer; her hair is put up in a style called *à la Fontange*.[1] As evident from the exceptionally large pearl drop adorning her left ear and the pearl necklace she wears, this woman is dressed *à la mode* and belongs to the upper class. The bunch of onions hanging on the wall and the shelf above the young man's head indicate, however, that the scene is set in a less than elegant room, which is obviously a kitchen or pantry.

This composition is most closely related to *Boy Blowing on a Firebrand to Light a Candle* **(fig 1)**, a work that Godefridus Schalcken painted for one of his most important patrons, Robert Spencer, 2nd Earl of Sunderland (1641–1702), some time between the spring of 1692 and the autumn of 1696, the period in which he worked in England.[2] At Althorp, Lord Spencer's country estate in Northamptonshire, the painting was seen in the early eighteenth century by the engraver George Vertue (1684–1756), who praised it highly by quoting the epigram that John Elsum had published on this work in 1700: "A Night-piece of a Boy blowing a Firebrand; suppos'd by Schalcken. Striving to Blow the Brand into a Flame, he brightens his own face, and the Author's Fame."[3] The painting, which has been in Edinburgh since 1989, must have been held in high regard, considering the fairly large number of old copies of it that are known.[4] The artist, too, must have been satisfied with that work, as he used it as the model for the present painting, most likely originating in the same period.

The most striking difference between the two paintings is that in the Leiden Collection's painting the elegantly dressed woman is seen in an ordinary setting. Somewhat less conspicuous is the difference in artistic quality between the two canvases. The consistently higher quality of the canvas in Edinburgh suggests that it was painted entirely by Schalcken. In the painting discussed here, the effects of artificial lighting—the piece of burning wood, the flying sparks, and the glowing hearth—are also rendered with great virtuosity, allowing us to see in these elements the master's touch. The figures, however, seem less skillfully rendered: the young man's hands and his coat, as well as the female figure behind him, are painted stiffly and with little tonal differentiation, which strongly suggests that Schalcken's studio assistants had a hand in their execution.[5]

From the beginning of his career, Schalcken had pupils working in his studio. His

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Godefridus Schalcken, *Boy Blowing on a Firebrand to Light a Candle*, 1692–96, oil on canvas, 75 x 63.5 cm, National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh, NG 2495



Fig 2. El Greco, *Boy Blowing on an Ember to Light a Candle*, ca. 1570–75, oil on canvas, 60.5 x 50.5 cm, Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples, Q192

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sister Maria (ca. 1645–before 1700) must have been one of the first to join his studio when he returned to Dordrecht.[6] Beginning in about 1675, he frequently took his pupils along to the notary to witness various documents he had drafted.[7] Unfortunately, no such documents exist from Schalcken's time in England, but we may safely assume that he ran his London studio in much the same way. Only the painter Gramagli, active as a portraitist in England, can be named as a possible pupil of Schalcken in London. Gramagli is recorded only once in this context, in an account written by Allart de la Court (1688–1755) of a tour he made of England in 1710. While in Exeter he described the following meeting: "On 11 June we visited a Dutch painter named Gramagli, who had been a pupil of Schalken [*sic*]; [he] was a portrait painter, but of the worst sort."[8] Be that as it may, if indeed Gramagli was Schalcken's pupil in London, he was probably not the only assistant in his teacher's studio.

The canvas in Edinburgh and the Leiden Collection painting come from a long tradition of works in which a young man blows on a smoldering piece of wood, a subject that demanded an exceptionally high degree of technical skill to realize the necessary lighting effects. One of the first painters to portray this subject was Domenikos Theotokopoulos**,** known as El Greco (1541–1614), who painted a number of works in Rome around 1570–75, including *Boy Blowing on an Ember to Light a Candle* **(fig 2)**, of which several contemporary copies exist.[9] In the same period, the subject was also painted in Venice, mostly as part of large history or genre pieces.

The blowing-on-embers motif soon became particularly popular among the many followers of Caravaggio in northern and southern Europe. In the Netherlands the "Caravaggisti" were concentrated in Utrecht, which is why such masters as Gerrit van Honthorst (1592–1656), Hendrick ter Brugghen (1588–1629), and Abraham Bloemaert (1566–1651), to name only a few, painted subjects of this kind. In Leiden, where Schalcken had been trained by Gerrit Dou (1613–75), Jan Lievens (1607–74) was the one who introduced this subject. In a panel painting that dates from around 1624–25, Lievens portrayed a young man blowing on a torch in a series of the Four Elements.[10]

The popularity of this subject was certainly boosted by the discovery of its art-theoretical legitimation in the form of an ekphrasis, a pictorial description of an artwork from antiquity. Pliny, for example, gives in his *Naturalis historia* the names of two Greek artists, each of whom had produced a legendary work in which a boy blows on a fire that has almost gone out, and in which the reflection of the fire on the boy's face was deemed the result of exceptional artistic skill.[11]

It is unlikely, however, that ekphrasis was of paramount importance to Schalcken. The utmost faithfulness to life in the depiction of artificial illumination was surely his

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top priority. Nevertheless, in the work of Schalcken a flame—whether that of a torch, candle, or lamp—often served as a metaphorical representation of the spark of passion that could be ignited between two people (see GS-103). Even so, it is unclear whether this type of spark was intended in *Young Man Blowing a Torch to Light a Candle*, considering that the bejeweled woman in the background is too far removed from the youth to suggest an amorous context. In any case, it was the artist's aim to amaze the viewer with his brilliant rendering of various kinds of fire and glow, and their reflections on objects in the immediate surroundings.

- Guido Jansen, 2017

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Endnotes

1. The hairdo was named after the marquise de Fontange, who was praised by her lover, Louis XIV, when she appeared at court in the summer of 1680 with her hair piled high on her head, after which this hair style remained hugely popular among all women of standing until about 1710.
2. The ninth child born to the Schalckens was named Godefridus after his father and baptized in The Hague on 3 February 1697. Therefore, Schalcken and his family probably left London at the end of 1696, since it is unlikely that he would have subjected his heavily pregnant wife to a dangerous journey.
3. For Vertue and Elsum's epigram, see Kenneth J. Garlick, "A Catalogue of the Pictures at Althorp," *Walpole Society* 54 (1974–76): 76, no. 585. George Vertue, "Vertue Note Books volume II," *Walpole Society* 20 (1931–32): 16, refers to *Epigrams upon the Paintings of the Most Eminent Masters, Ancient and Modern, with Reflexions upon the Several Schools of Painting, by J. E., Esq.* (London, 1700). The verse in question is epigram 137. George Vertue, "Vertue Note Books volume V," *Walpole Society* 26 (1937–38), 57, describes the connection between the artist and Robert Spencer: "Schalcken painted several pictures for Ld Sunderland which were to be seen amongst his collection—at his Seat in Northamtonshire [*sic*]—called Althorp—by this it appears that Noble Lord encouraged him and patronized his works."
4. Thierry Beherman, *Godfried Schalcken* (Paris, 1988), no. 326; because Beherman had never seen the work with his own eyes, he incorrectly included it in his book as a copy. He also listed another copy that was in fact known to him. The National Gallery of Scotland lists at least five more copies; with thanks to Christian Tico Seiffert, senior curator. The large number of copies was undoubtedly prompted by the many prints published after this painting in the eighteenth century; the website of the British Museum gives the names of Richard Purcell (active ca. 1746–68), Philip Corbut (active ca. 1746–66), Charles Spooner (1720–67), Johan Faber the Younger (ca. 1695–1756), and James Wilson (active ca. 1760–80) as the makers of prints after the painting.
5. It is no coincidence that in 2006 this painting, which is not entirely convincing, was sold by Christie's in Amsterdam as "attributed to Schalcken"; evidently the specialists at this auction house did not consider it a completely autograph work by the master.
6. On 26 July 1682, in Dordrecht, the *banns* (marriage announcements) of Maria Schalcken and Severijn van Bracht were published; Dordrecht city archives (Erfgoedcentrum DiEP), ONA 20.243 (unnumbered) Notary Govert de With, 20 April 1683. The couple had at least one daughter, Anna (b. 1683), and one son, Cornelis (b. 1685). In July 1700 her husband once again had his *banns* published, so by that time he was a widower. For her *Self-Portrait at the Easel*, incorrectly recorded by Beherman as a work by Godefridus, see Thierry Beherman, *Godfried Schalcken* (Paris, 1988), no. 61; for this very painting, now in the De Mol van Otterloo collection, see Frederik J. Duparc, et al. *Golden: Dutch and Flemish Masterworks from the Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo Collection* (Exh. cat. Salem, Peabody Essex Museum; San Francisco, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; Houston, Museum of Fine Arts Houston) (New Haven, 2011), 279–81, no. 57, with outdated biographical information. For more

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information about Maria, see Marloes Huiskamp's note online, which includes several details supplied by myself.

7. This, at any rate, is the picture that emerges from the many notarial documents in Dordrecht and The Hague that bear Schalcken's signature alongside those of various pupils.
8. "Den 11 Juny gongen wy by een Hollandse schilder genaamt Gramagli, welke een Discipel was geweest van Schalken; was een Portretschilder dog van de slegste soort." Felix Driessen, *De reizen der De la Courts 1641–1700–1710* (Leiden, 1928), 99. De la Court called the town Exon or Exchester. Nicolaas de Roever also knew this document, but had read the name of the painter as "Giamagli," which is why Hofstede de Groot recorded him as such as a pupil of Schalcken in his *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis*; this name was subsequently misspelled in yet another way by Beherman, who recorded it as "Giamali." See N. de Roever, "Een bezoek aan den Ridder Adriaen van der Werff, kunstschilder, in 1710," *Oud Holland* 5 (1887): 70; Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *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, 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), 5: 440; and Thierry Beherman, *Godfried Schalcken* (Paris, 1988), 28. Nothing else is known about this painter.
9. Harold E. Wethey, *El Greco and His School,* 2 vols. (Princeton, 1962), 2: 78–79, nos. 121 and 122, and 2:195, nos. X-137–X-140, for the copies. See also David Davies, John H. Elliott, and Xavier Bray, et. al., *El Greco* (Exh. cat. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art; London, National Gallery) (London, 2003), 221–31, nos. 63/65.
10. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., ed., Jan *Lievens: A Dutch Master Rediscovered*, (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; Milwaukee, Milwaukee Art Museum; Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis) (New Haven, 2008), 7–8, with ill.
11. Jan Bialostocki, "Puer sufflans ignes," in *The Message of Images: Studies in the History of Art* (Vienna, 1988), 139–44. Pliny refers in his *Naturalis historia* at 34:79 and 35:138 to the two antique artworks, one by Lycius, the other by Antiphilus.

Provenance

- Private collection, Northern Europe.[1]
- (Sale, Christie's, Amsterdam, 16 November 2006, no. 70, as attributed to Godefridus Schalcken [to Johnny Van Haeften, Ltd., and Salomon Lilian].
- [Johnny Van Haeften, Ltd., London, and Salomon Lilian, Amsterdam.]
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2006.

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Provenance Notes

1. Unfortunately, nothing is known about the earlier whereabouts of this rather large painting. A note made by Hofstede de Groot, kept at the RKD (Netherlands Institute for Art History) in The Hague, reveals that in August 1926 he assessed a painting by Schalcken for the art dealers Duret and Baumgartner in Geneva. He noted: “Twee levensgroote figuren, bij kaarslicht. Echt, maar te groot om aantrekkelijk te zijn. Verz. Comtesse de Broussillon, vroeger Julien Gréau rue de Verneil Parijs” (Two life-size figures by candlelight. Genuine, but too large to be attractive. Collection Comtesse de Broussillon, formerly Julien Gréau rue de Verneil Paris). RKD Databases, Excerpts, HdG-fiche 1481675. Regrettably, there is no information on its measurements or support.

Exhibition History

- Kansas City, Missouri, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, on loan with the permanent collection, January–December 2009 [lent by the present owner].
- Brooklyn, Brooklyn Museum, on loan with the permanent collection, March 2013–March 2016 [lent by the present owner].
- Hamburg, Hamburger Kunsthalle, “Breathing,” 30 September 2022–12 February 2023 [lent by the present owner].

References

- Franits, Wayne. *Godefridus Schalcken: A Dutch Painter in Late Seventeenth-Century London*. Amsterdam, 2018, 171 (as by Godefridus Schalcken and Workshop).
- Kölle, Brigitte, and Sandra Pisot, eds. *Atmen*. Exh. cat. Hamburg, Hamburger Kunsthalle. Berlin, 2022, 26, 28, ill.

Versions
Version

1. Godefridus Schalcken, *Boy Blowing on a Firebrand to Light a Candle*, ca. 1692–98, oil on canvas, 75 x 63.5 cm, National Gallery of Scotland, inv. no. NG 2495.

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Technical Summary

The support, a single piece of medium-weight, plain-weave fabric, has been lined. All four tacking margins have been almost entirely removed, and narrow remnants of unprimed fabric remain. Cusping along the upper and lower edges suggests the original dimensions have not been significantly altered. There are no wax collection seals, canvas stamps, inscriptions or labels along the lining or stretcher.

A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied. The paint has been applied smoothly in opaque layers blended wet-into-wet with no use of impasto. The shadows along the figure's flesh tones and garments have been applied in thin glazes. Highlights along the flame, glowing embers, and candleholder have been applied with slightly raised brushwork.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers and no compositional changes are noted. There is no X-radiograph of the painting.

The painting appears to be unsigned and undated.

The painting has not undergone conservation treatment since its acquisition in 2006 and remains in a good state of preservation.

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