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Allegory of Faith

Hendrick ter Brugghen
(The Hague 1588 – 1629 Utrecht)

ca. 1626
oil on canvas
72.3 x 56.3 cm
signed and dated in the light paint along the center of the left edge: “HTBrügghen fecit 162(?)” (“HTB” in ligature)
HBr-100

How to cite

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In the corner of a humble room sits a young woman who, with a smile spread across her slightly parted lips, gazes upward, her dark eyes fixated on a higher realm. Hendrick ter Brugghen framed the woman's face with a high-necked vest and a cream-colored headscarf that falls in thick creases over her shoulders. A heavy blue mantle wrapped over her arms covers a red undergarment, the left sleeve of which is just visible. The large cross she holds on her lap, its left arm only partially seen behind her left shoulder, indicates the spiritual essence of her rapture.[1]

Unifying the composition and establishing its reflective mood is the light shining from the simple candle the woman holds in her left hand. Ter Brugghen placed the flame at the exact center of the composition and carefully rendered its varying colors—orange tip, white hot core, and blue base. Just as this candle burns quietly without so much as a flicker, so also does the flame of the oil lamp hanging on the wall at the left. The lamp exudes a thin trail of smoke that rises in a perfectly straight line, underscoring the stillness surrounding the woman's spiritual reverie.

Like other Utrecht Caravaggisti, such as Dirck van Baburen (ca. 1595–1624) and Gerard van Honthorst (1592–1656), Ter Brugghen was fascinated with the depiction of light effects. This work is one of two paintings in which Ter Brugghen included two different light sources, the other being his *Musical Trio* of ca. 1626 in the National Gallery, London (**fig 1**), where the interior space is similarly lit by a candle and an oil lamp.[2] In that painting, Ter Brugghen skillfully rendered the light effects created by these different light sources: the young woman's chin and the tip of her nose are brightly lit by the candle's flame, whereas her right eyebrow is softly illuminated by the faint light coming from the oil lamp.

Who is this young woman so obviously averting her eyes from the worldly realm? In all likelihood she is not a saint, since no female saint is known to carry both a cross and a candle as attributes. It is more probable that she represents an allegorical concept, although scholars have struggled to articulate one that seems to accord fully with the character of the image. Albert Blankert, who was the first to publish this painting after it was discovered in 1991, interpreted it as an image of religious piety and specifically as an allegory of heavenly contemplation.[3] He discussed the painting together with another allegorical painting by Ter Brugghen, his *Melancholia* of ca. 1626 in the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto. *Melancholia* shows a young woman holding a skull and sitting in front of an hourglass with her eyes closed, her face leaning on her right hand.[4] The presence of the skull and the hourglass, symbols of earthly transience, prompted Blankert to interpret the Toronto painting as an allegory of worldly contemplation. Though these works have similar dimensions and may depict the same model, the figures are both turned to the left, making it unlikely that

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Hendrick Ter Brugghen, *Musical Trio [The Concert]*, ca. 1626, oil on canvas, 99.1 x 116.8 cm, National Gallery, London, Bought with contributions from the National Heritage Memorial Fund, The Art Fund, and the Pilgrim Trust, 1983 (NG6483), © National Gallery, London / Art Resource, NY

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they were intended as pendants. Instead, Blankert proposed that the two works should be seen as variations on the same theme.[5]

Leonard Slatkes, on the other hand, identified the young woman as the Virgin Mary. He argued that her headdress and mantle appear, albeit not identically, in other Ter Brugghen depictions of the Virgin, such as the *Crucifixion* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.[6] In Netherlandish painting the Virgin is depicted holding a candle only on her deathbed, and hence Slatkes interpreted the subject as being the Death of the Virgin.[7] He argued that Ter Brugghen extracted Mary from traditional representations of this scene in which she is surrounded by the twelve apostles.[8] In Death of the Virgin depictions, however, John the Evangelist often aids the feeble Mary in holding her candle,[9] and although the compositions always contain a cross, it is held by one of the apostles, never by Mary herself.[10] Since the apostles are so important to the story, and since the Virgin is never depicted holding a cross, Slatkes's argument seems unlikely.

Neither of these theories takes full account of the central importance of the candle, which must have had thematic as well as compositional importance. Numerous references to candles appear in the Old and New Testament, as in the book of Psalms 18:28 ("For thou wilt light my candle, the Lord my God will enlighten my darkness") and in Revelation 22:5 ("And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign for ever and ever"). In these passages the light of the candle is discussed in terms of God's light, in one case equating the two, and in the other describing how the latter renders the former entirely unnecessary. In this painting Ter Brugghen alludes to the light of the candle in both of these ways. Here, on earth, the woman depends on the candle to light her world, but she gazes upward in anticipation of the heavenly light she will eventually receive. When one considers all of the pictorial elements in this work—the painting's quiet and reflective mood, the cross and lit candle, the woman's white and blue robes, and her heavenly gaze—it seems probable that Ter Brugghen intended the painting to depict an allegory of Faith.

Ter Brugghen prominently signed and dated the left center of the canvas: "HTBrugghen fecit 162[…]." Because of paint abrasion, only a faint vertical stroke is visible in the last digit, and can be read either as a 1 or a 6. The thematic and stylistic parallels of this work to the Toronto *Melancholia* and the London *Musical Trio*, both of ca. 1626, however, strongly suggest that this painting was executed in 1626.[11] As with virtually all of Ter Brugghen's works, it is not known who commissioned this work, although it is reasonable to assume that the artist painted it for a Catholic patron. One possibility may be the Haarlem artist Frederick Vroom (1600–67), whose 1667 inventory records a "Tronigie van Maria by Heynde ter Burgh."[12] Whoever was

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the original owner, this compelling image of a private expression of faith surely struck a chord with the devout believers who meditated before it.

- Ilona van Tuinen, 2017

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Endnotes

1. Albert Blankert, *A Newly Discovered Painting by Hendrick ter Brugghen* (Zwolle, 1991), 19 and 26, correctly observed that there is an error in the perspective of this fragment of the left arm of the cross.
2. Albert Blankert, *A Newly Discovered Painting by Hendrick ter Brugghen* (Zwolle, 1991), 11, and Leonard J. Slatkes and Wayne Franits, *The Paintings of Hendrick ter Brugghen: Catalogue Raisonné* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 2007), 114–15, also made this observation.
3. Albert Blankert, *A Newly Discovered Painting by Hendrick ter Brugghen* (Zwolle, 1991), 20–23. Based on Blankert's allegorical interpretation, subsequent authors have referred to this painting more generally as an allegory of faith. See Paul Huys Jannsen, *Jan van Bijlert (1597/98–1671): Painter in Utrecht* (Amsterdam, 1998), 123, and Mirjam Neumeister, *Das Nachtstück mit Kunstlicht in der niederländischen Malerei und Graphik des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts* (Petersberg, 2003), 201.
4. The painting owes its name *Melancholia* to the pose of the woman, with her face in her hand. This pose had been associated with melancholy ever since Albrecht Dürer's influential engraving of 1514 *Melancholia*. Based on the woman's young appearance and the presence of the skull, various scholars suspect that Ter Brugghen was evoking the penitent Mary Magdalene, though the absence of her traditional attributes prevents any definitive identification. See, for instance, Karen A. Finlay, *Terbrugghen: Melancholy* (Exh. cat. Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario) (Toronto, 1984), who identifies her as *Melancholy*, but acknowledges the undeniable references to Magdalene. See also Marten J. Bok, "Was Hendrick ter Brugghen a Melancholic?" *Journal of the Historians of Netherlandish Art* 1, no. 2 (2009): 1-8, who proposes that the image is Mary Magdalene personified as Melancholia mourning the death of Jesus.
5. Albert Blankert, *A Newly Discovered Painting by Hendrick ter Brugghen* (Zwolle, 1991), 23.
6. On the *Crucifixion*, see Walter Liedtke, "The Crucifixion with the Virgin and Saint John," in *Dutch Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 2 vols. (New York, 2007), 1: 109–18.
7. Leonard Slatkes, "Bringing Ter Brugghen and Baburen Up-to-Date," *Bulletin du Musée National de Varsovie* 37 (1996): 199–218, esp. 217–19. This interpretation was also published in Leonard J. Slatkes and Wayne Franits, *The Paintings of Hendrick ter Brugghen (1588–1629): Catalogue Raisonné* (Amsterdam, 2007), 114–15. See also Albert Blankert, *A Newly Discovered Painting by Hendrick ter Brugghen* (Zwolle, 1991), who made the same observation about the young woman's clothes, but refrained from identifying her as the Virgin because the Virgin is never depicted holding a cross. See Leonard J. Slatkes and Wayne Franits, *The Paintings of Hendrick ter Brugghen (1588–1629): Catalogue Raisonné* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 2007), 155 n. 1, where Franits tentatively proposed another interpretation. The presence of the oil lamp prompted him to suggest that the woman might be one of the Wise Virgins from the parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1–13). In Ter Brugghen's painting, the most essential element of this parable, the oil jar, is not depicted, making it unlikely that the artist

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intended to depict one of the virgins from this story.

8. See Leonard Slatkes, "Bringing Ter Brugghen and Baburen Up-to-Date," *Bulletin du Musée National de Varsovie* 37 (1996): 218; and Leonard J. Slatkes and Wayne Franits, *The Paintings of Hendrick ter Brugghen (1588–1629): Catalogue Raisonné* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 2007),114. Slatkes cites the examples of Joos van Cleve's *Death of the Virgin* altarpiece in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich and Pieter Bruegel the Elder's nocturnal grisaille of the same subject, now in Upton House in Banbury. Ultimately, these examples can all be traced back to Germany, to Martin Schongauer's influential engraving of ca. 1480 (B. 33). In arguing that the painting depicts the *Death of the Virgin*, Slatkes wanted to show that it was Ter Brugghen, not Rembrandt, who created the first single-figured history scene.
9. A rare exception is the woodcut *Death of the Virgin* by Albrecht Altdorfer of ca. 1520, in which the dying Virgin, surrounded by the apostles, is holding the candle without any aid.
10. The key role of the twelve apostles becomes even clearer if we consider the apocryphal source for this subject matter: Jacob de Voragine's *Golden Legend.* See Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. William Granger Ryan, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1993), 2: 79–80. According to this story, the apostles were flown in on clouds from all corners of the world at the Virgin's request, because she wanted them around her when she died.
11. Albert Blankert, *A Newly Discovered Painting by Hendrick ter Brugghen* (Zwolle, 1991),18, interpreted this vertical stroke as the remnant of a 4. This, however, is not possible, since the distance between the stroke and the 2 is too small. Slatkes, in Leonard J. Slatkes and Wayne Franits, *The Paintings of Hendrick ter Brugghen (1588–1629): Catalogue Raisonné* (Amsterdam, 2007), 115 n 16, did not see any vertical stroke when he researched the painting and dated it to ca. 1626–27. Nancy Krieg in 2010 and Annette Rupprecht in 2011 independently examined the painting. Ultraviolet light best revealed the traces of paint in the last digit. They both suggested that the vertical stroke looked most like a 1. The present author also saw the vertical stroke while examining the signature under ultraviolet light. After comparing Ter Brugghen's numerical digits in other dated paintings, it seems that the stroke cannot be part of a 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, or 9. It could have been a 1. Because the bottom of the stroke is curved ever so slightly to the right, it could also have been part of a 6.
12. See Albert Blankert, *A Newly Discovered Painting by Hendrick ter Brugghen* (Zwolle, 1991), 26–29. Leonard J. Slatkes and Wayne Franits, *The Paintings of Hendrick ter Brugghen (1588–1629): Catalogue Raisonné* (Amsterdam, 2007), 114–15, list this as an option, but also include the reference in the 1667 inventory, 266, no. L6, in the section of lost paintings by Ter Brugghen.

Provenance

- Possibly Frederick Vroom, Haarlem, by 1667.
- Private collection, Switzerland [French art market; Charles Roelofsz, B. V., Amsterdam, ca. 1991;

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Noortman Master Paintings, Maastricht, 1993].

- Private collection, Belgium [on consignment to Simon Dickinson Ltd., London, 1999; Johnny van Haeften, Ltd., London, 2009].
- From whom acquired by the present owner, 2009.

Exhibition History

- London, Robert Noortman Gallery, "Dutch and Flemish Old Master Paintings," May–June 1993, no. 8.
- Washington, National Gallery of Art, April–June 1995, on loan with the permanent collection [lent by Robert Noortman Gallery].
- New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, March–August 2010, on loan with the permanent collection [lent by the present owner].
- Utrecht, Centraal Museum, on loan with the permanent collection, January 2015–January 2016 [lent by the present owner].
- Paris, Museé du Louvre, "Masterpieces of The Leiden Collection: The Age of Rembrandt," 22 February–22 May 2017 [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].
- Shanghai, Long Museum, West Bund, "Rembrandt, Vermeer and Hals in the Dutch Golden Age: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection," 23 September 2017–25 February 2018 [lent by the present owner].
- Moscow, The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, "The Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer: Masterpieces of The Leiden Collection," 28 March 2018–22 July 2018 [lent by the present owner].
- St. Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum, "The Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer: Masterpieces of The Leiden Collection," 5 September 2018–13 January 2019 [lent by the present owner].
- Abu Dhabi, Louvre Abu Dhabi, "Rembrandt, Vermeer and the Dutch Golden Age. Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection and the Musée du Louvre," 14 February–18 May 2019 [lent by the present owner].
- Amsterdam, H'ART Museum, "From Rembrandt to Vermeer: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection," 9 April–24 August 2025 [lent by the present owner].
- West Palm Beach, Norton Museum of Art, "Art and Life in Rembrandt's Time: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection," 25 October 2025–29 March 2026 [lent by the present owner].

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Technical Summary

The support, a medium-weight, plain-weave fabric, has been lined. All four tacking margins have been almost entirely removed. Narrow remnants remain and there is cusping along all four edges. Neither the warp nor the weft threads run parallel to the stretcher edges. There is one paper label but no wax collection seals, stencils, other labels or import stamps on the lining or stretcher.

A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied. The paint has been applied with loose fluid brushstrokes in thin, smooth, transparent glazes through the background allowing the underlayers to show through. The figure’s blue mantle, although not tested, is most likely painted with smalt, and the shadowed portions have faded.[1]

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers. There are no obvious pentimenti or compositional changes visible in the images or the X-radiograph.

The painting is signed and dated in light-colored paint on the brown background along the center of the left edge. The artist’s name and the word *fecit* are legible with the naked eye, and the first three numerals of the

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date can be made out under magnification. The last numeral of the date is extremely faint, and has been read as a 1, 4, or 6.

The painting was cleaned, lined, and restored in 2010. It remains in a good state of preservation, although the blue pigment of the mantle has faded and a short diagonal tear through the figure's proper left hand has been restored.

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. According to the 2011 Tratment Report: "This glass-based pigment shows signs of pigment degradation. This is very common in works by Ter Brugghen. An extreme example of which can be found in *St. Sebastian Tended by Woman* in the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College." Nancy Krieg treated the Oberlin painting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Paintings Conservation Department, under John Brealey.

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