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Old Testament Figure, Probably King Solomon

Arent de Gelder
(Dordrecht 1645 – 1727 Dordrecht)

ca. 1685–90
oil on canvas
105.3 x 94.5 cm
signed on separate piece of canvas: “ADe Gelder f.” (“AD” in ligature)
AG-104

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The sumptuously dressed Oriental ruler in Arent de Gelder's imposing, life-sized painting has all the attributes of power, including an exotic turban elaborately wound and adorned with pearls, a costly ermine cloak, and a gold scepter, but his demeanor is that of a man weighed down by worldly concerns. With his eyes lowered and darkened in shadow and a facial expression that is resolute but muted, he stares off to his right, undoubtedly reflecting deeply on issues of moral and ethical consequence. The specific matters that have come before this potentate are not known, largely because painting is a fragment of a history painting that was originally much larger. At some point the canvas support was cropped on the left.[1] It is likely that this ruler is an Old Testament king.[2] Arent de Gelder's *King David*, now in Amsterdam, which can be dated to 1680–83 **(fig 1)**, and the figure of Ahasuerus in *Ahasuerus and Haman* of 1682–85, now in Birmingham **(fig 2)**, wear comparable cloaks of royal distinction.[3]

One can deduce the identity of this particular Old Testament king through a consideration of his age. For example, his youthfulness makes him unlikely to be King David. As in De Gelder's Amsterdam painting **(fig 1)**, King David was traditionally portrayed as a bearded old man after his accession to the throne. It is also unlikely that the painting depicts the Persian king Ahasuerus, despite the fact that he was often portrayed holding a golden scepter, since he was generally shown as an elderly man with a beard **(fig 2)**.[4] De Gelder's painting *Esther's Banquet* of ca. 1680 in Dordrecht, in which the king is younger and beardless, cannot serve as a point of reference, because his face is largely a recent reconstruction.[5]

The Old Testament figure's youthful appearance and beardlessness suggest that he is King Solomon. It is conceivable that the complete scene represented Solomon passing judgment on two women, both of whom claimed to be the mother of the same child (1 Kings 3:16–28). In this scene Solomon is traditionally portrayed as a young king on the throne, frequently passing judgment while pointing down with his scepter. There are numerous depictions of this composition. Worthy of mention is an engraving by Boëtius Adamsz Bolswert after a lost painting by Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) **(fig 3)**. Another prominent example would have been known to De Gelder, namely, the marble relief by Artus Quellinus the Elder (1609–68) in the tribunal (*vierschaar*) of the Amsterdam town hall built between 1650 and 1664 **(fig 4)**.

De Gelder, Rembrandt's last pupil, remained faithful to his master's late expressive style throughout his career, even in the face of the prevailing classicizing fashion. Although his sense of form was less stable than Rembrandt's, his palette was more adventurous and colorful, partly through his effective use of colored grounds and other under layers of paint. Arnold Houbraken describes how De Gelder varied his

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Aernt de Gelder, *King David*, 1680–85, oil on canvas, 109.5 x 114.5 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, SK-A-2695



Fig 2. Arent de Gelder, *Ahasuerus and Haman*, 1680–84, oil on canvas, 138.5 x 116.8 cm, The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston



Fig 3. Boëtius Adamsz Bolswert after Peter Paul Rubens, *The Judgment of Solomon*, 1630–33, engraving, 44 x 51.3 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 1951, 51.501.7016, www.metmuseum.org

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application of paint to depict different textiles and patterns: he “scratched out the appearance of the embroidery or the threads of the fringe with the butt of his paintbrush, or by any means possible, if only it furthered his aim; and it is astonishing how natural and powerful such an approach sometimes looks from a distance.”[6] The present painting beautifully exemplifies this technique, for such scratching into the wet paint, both broad and thin, occurs everywhere on the figure’s clothing. De Gelder’s vigorous technique of scratching is particularly evident in Solomon’s brown robe, where it both enlivens its form and gives it structure. De Gelder’s characteristic warm palette and his richly varied application of paint have an amazing ability to capture the surface qualities of different materials in a suggestive but convincing way.

It is difficult to date this picture precisely on the basis of stylistic comparison because De Gelder dated few works from the 1690s and later. His *Self-Portrait as Zeuxis* in Frankfurt **(fig 5)** displays certain similarities to *Old Testament Figure, Probably King Solomon* with regard to palette and brushwork, which suggests a date of around 1685–90.

- Volker Manuth, 2017



Fig 4. Artus Quellinus the Elder, *Group above Portal, Magistrates’ Chamber*, 1655, marble relief, Royal Palace (Paleis op de Dam), Amsterdam, © Stichting Koninklijk Paleis Amsterdam



Fig 5. Arent de Gelder, *Self-Portrait as Zeuxis, Who Portrays an Ugly Old Woman*, 1685, oil on canvas, Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main, © Städel Museum – U. Edelmann – ARTOTHEK

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Endnotes

1. This reduction is evident by the lack of cusping on the left edge of the canvas. The painting was originally signed. The signature survives on a separate strip of canvas (8 x 41 cm), which must have been cut off when the canvas was cut. The current location of the strip with the signature is unknown.
2. For the most recent discussion of the iconography of the painting, see Volker Manuth in Dirck Bijker, et al., *Arent de Gelder (1645–1727), Rembrandts laatste leerling* (Exh. cat. Dordrecht, Dordrechts Museum; Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum) (Ghent, 1998), 180–81, no. 25 (ill.).
3. For the painting in the Rijksmuseum, see Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 vols. (Landau and Pfalz, 1983–94), 2: no. 788 (ill.); Joachim Wolfgang von Moltke, *Arent de Gelder, Dordrecht 1645–1727* (Doornspijk, 1994), 28, 70, no. 21 (ill.) and in Dirck Bijker et al., *Arent de Gelder (1645–1727), Rembrandts laatste leerling* (Exh. cat. Dordrecht, Dordrechts Museum; Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum) (Ghent, 1998), 162–63, no. 18 (ill.). For the painting in the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham, see Sumowski, 2:1164, no. 739 (ill.); Joachim Wolfgang von Moltke, *Arent de Gelder, Dordrecht 1645–1727*, 36, 72, no. 26 (ill.); and Dirck Bijker, et al., *Arent de Gelder (1645–1727), Rembrandts laatste leerling* (Exh. cat. Dordrecht, Dordrechts Museum; Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum) (Ghent, 1998), 156–57, no. 16 (ill.).
4. Written communication (4 January 1995) from Peter Kidd to Otto Naumann Ltd., New York. The association of Ahasuerus with the golden scepter stem from the account of Esther's meeting with Ahasuerus: "And it was so, when the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, that she obtained favor in his sight: and the king held out to Esther the golden scepter that was in his hand. So Esther drew near, and touched the top of the scepter" (Esther 5:2).
5. When the restoration was carried out in Dordrecht in 1998, the physiognomy of the young king in the painting in the Leiden Collection served as an example for the badly damaged face of the figure in the Dordrecht painting. See Dirck Bijker et al., *Arent de Gelder (1645–1727), Rembrandts laatste leerling* (Exh. cat. Dordrecht, Dordrechts Museum; Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum) (Ghent, 1998), 154.
6. "Krabt de gedaante van het borduursel, of de draden der franje daar uit met zyn penceelstok, zonderende geene wyzen uit, als zy maar tot zyn oogmerk behulpig zyn; en 't ist e verwonderen hoe natuurlyk en kragtig zulk doen somwylen zig in affstant vertoont." Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen*, 3 vols. (Amsterdam, 1718–21; revised edition published in The Hague, 1753; reprinted in Amsterdam, 1980), 3:207–8.

Provenance

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- Private collection, Portugal, and thence by descent.
- Private collection, Boston [Lepore Fine Arts, Newburyport, Mass., 1993; Otto Naumann, Ltd., New York, 1993].
- Mr. and Mrs. Bert van Deun, Oberageri, Switzerland, by 1997 [Otto Naumann, Ltd., New York, 2004].
- From whom purchased by the present owner in 2004.

Exhibition History

- Dordrecht, Dordrechts Museum, “Arent de Gelder (1645–1727), Rembrandts laatste leerling,” 10 October 1998–17 January 1999; Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, 17 January–19 May 1999. Ghent, 1998, 188–89, no. 25 [lent by Bert van Deun].
- Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, on loan with the permanent collection, January 2015–February 2016 [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, Hermitage Amsterdam, “Rembrandt and his Contemporaries: History Paintings from The Leiden Collection,” 4 February–27 August 2023, no. 15 [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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- Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr., Christiaan Vogelaar, and Caroline van Cauwenberge. *Rembrandt and His Contemporaries: History Paintings from The Leiden Collection.* Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Hermitage Amsterdam. Zwolle, 2023, 74–75, no. 15. [Exhibition catalogue also published in Dutch.]
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- Nogrady, Elizabeth. "Arent de Gelder, Old Testament Figure, Probably King Solomon." In Art and Life in Rembrandt's Time. Edited by Elizabeth Nogrady et al., 119, ill. Exh. cat. Amsterdam, H'ART Museum; West Palm Beach, Norton Museum of Art. Zwolle, 2025. [Exhibition catalogue also published in Dutch.]

Technical Summary

The painting is a fragment of a larger composition. The support, a single piece of medium-weight, plain-weave fabric, has been reduced in size along the length of the left edge and has been lined. The tacking margins have been removed, and there is cusping along the upper, right and lower edges. An inventory number handwritten in a radio-opaque medium is located in the upper right quadrant of the support reverse. There are no wax collection seals, stencils, paper labels or import stamps along the lining or stretcher reverse.

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A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied. The paint has been applied in loose, fluid brushstrokes of transparent glazes through the brown background, figure's turban, brown garment, proper left sleeve, fur robe, and red drapery, which allow a light-colored underlayer to show through, and more opaquely through the fleshtones. Dabs of highlights through the ornamentation along the figure's turban, in the jewel-encrusted band across his chest, and along the scepter handle have been applied in low impasto. Details along the figure's brown garment have been scratched into glazes of wet paint with both a half-centimeter-wide tool and the pointed end of the back of a brush. The turban plume has been created entirely by scratching into the wet paint of the brown background with the pointed end of the back of a brush and allowing the light underlayer to show through.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers, but the images reveal a compositional change to the figure's proper left hand. Originally, only the tip of the thumb peeked out from behind the index finger. Subsequently, the tip of the thumb was shortened and the entire length of the thumb was added.

The painting is unsigned and undated. An 8 cm-high by 41 cm-wide fragment of the fabric removed from the left edge bore the original signature.[1] A 1993 image shows the painting with an 8 cm-high fabric addition composed of two sections attached to the width of the upper edge. The left section was the fragment bearing the signature. Sometime prior to 1995, both sections of the addition were removed and the fragment bearing the signature was retained and framed.[2]

The painting underwent conservation treatment in 1993 prior to its acquisition and remains in a good state of preservation.[3]

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler in vier Bänden*, 6 vols. (Landau, 1983), 6:3712, no. 2291a, reproduced in color p. 3885.
2. Unfortunately, the framed signature fragment could not be located. Canvas weave analysis of the signature fragment and painting support could provide information regarding the original position of the signature and the painting's original overall dimensions.
3. The painting was examined on-site with no stereomicroscope. Magnification provided by 5x Optivisor.

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