



Edna Entrusting Tobias with Sarah

Arent de Gelder
(Dordrecht 1645 – 1727 Dordrecht)

1690s

oil on canvas

112 x 155 cm

indistinctly signed in dark paint, along upper edge,
right of center: “A(?)lder f.”

AG-103

How to cite

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Arent de Gelder studied with Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69) for at least two years in the early 1660s, at a time when his master created some of his greatest paintings, among them the *Staalmeesters* (*The Sampling Officials of the Amsterdam Draper's Guild*) of 1662 (fig 1). The stylistic and thematic impact of these works on the young artist remained strong for decades thereafter. For example, De Gelder learned from the *Staalmeesters* how to use a table with a heavy orange-red tablecloth as a compositional focus for his figure paintings. He also emulated Rembrandt's expressive painting techniques, including scratching away paint with a palette knife, to create works with vibrant and lively surfaces, often with a palette of olive, brown, ochre, red, and orange colors. The importance of Rembrandt's inspiration is particularly evident in this evocative painting, *Edna Entrusting Tobias with Sarah*, which De Gelder's executed some thirty years after his apprenticeship with that master.

Like Rembrandt, De Gelder based a number of his biblical scenes on books from the Apocrypha, particularly the story of the pious, blind, and impoverished Tobit.^[1] Although the Book of Tobit was not accepted by the Protestants as part of the biblical canon, it was included at the very end of the authorized translation of the Bible of the Dutch Reformed Church, the so-called *Statenvertaling* of 1637. In the preface to the Bible, the Dutch theologians responsible for the translation specifically prohibited the reading of the Apocrypha during the divine service. Nevertheless, the Book of Tobit was recommended for its moralistic overtones and gained popularity during the seventeenth century.

De Gelder's *Edna Entrusting Tobias with Sarah* features Tobit's son Tobias, who had undertaken a long journey on his father's behalf to the city of Ecbatana in Media.^[2] In Ecbatana, Tobias and his traveling companion who, unbeknownst to him, was the Archangel Raphael, met with one of Tobit's kinsmen, Raguel, and his wife, Edina. The couple's daughter Sarah was both beautiful and wise, and Tobias fell in love with her. Sarah, however, was beset by a demon, who had already killed each of her seven bridegrooms when they entered the bridal chamber. Acting on the advice of Raphael, who also promised his help to conquer the demon, Tobias obtained Raguel's permission to marry Sarah.^[3] De Gelder's painting focuses on the moment that Raguel's wife, Edna, seated calmly between Sarah and Tobias, entrusts the young Tobias with her daughter.^[4] Raguel, seen in profile at the near side of the table, gazes at his wife and reacts to her words with an expressive gesture.^[5]

The words to which Raguel reacts are recorded in chapter ten, verse thirteen of the book of Tobit, where Edna says: "I commit my daughter unto thee as a special trust; do not bring her pain."^[6] The richly decorated gloves of young Tobias allude to the

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Staalmeesters* (*The Sampling Officials of the Amsterdam Draper's Guild*), 1662, oil on canvas, 191.5cm x 279 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, SK-C-6



Fig 2. Arent de Gelder, *Tobias Welcomed by His Mother Hanna*, 1690/1700, oil on canvas, 87.5 x 111 cm, Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht, on loan from the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands, Amersfoort/Rijswijk, inv. RMCC S129

important role of wedding gloves as a marriage pledge in seventeenth-century wedding ceremonies.^[7] De Gelder likely based the physiognomies on live models. Whether he did this with the intention of making his figures more convincing or to satisfy the wish of a patron who might have ordered a *portrait historié* is not known.

The identification of De Gelder's painting with this text from the Book of Tobit has been questioned in the past because of the young ages of Tobias and Sarah.^[8] By the end of the seventeenth century, however, a long pictorial tradition had been established in which Tobias was depicted as a young boy. A number of paintings and drawings from Rembrandt's circle, for example, show Tobias about the same age as the boy represented here.^[9] Moreover, the *Statenvertaling* refers to Tobias explicitly as a *jongelinc* (young man) and to Sarah as *het dochterken* (the little daughter).^[10]

An alternative passage in the Book of Tobit (7:13), which describes the wedding of Tobias and Sarah, has in the past been wrongly associated with this painting. In that text it is written, "then he [Raguel] called his daughter Sarah, and she came to her father, and he took her by the hand, and gave her to be wife to Tobias, saying, Behold, take her after the law of Moses, and lead her away to thy father. And he blessed them." Thereafter, a marriage contract was drawn and signed. De Gelder did depict this subject in a painting now in Brighton.^[11] In the Brighton work he showed the drafting and scrutinizing of the marriage contract following, it seems, the example of Jan Steen (1626–79), who painted at least three versions of this subject.^[12] Aside from the fact that the present painting does not depict the marriage contract of Tobias and Sarah, the gesture of Raguel could hardly be interpreted as a blessing. Instead, Raguel's wife, Edna, who holds the hands of the young couple with warmth and affection, is the central figure, as would be appropriate for the moment in which she entrusts Tobias with Sarah.

A painting by De Gelder in Utrecht (**fig 2**), incorrectly interpreted as *Edna Entrusting Tobias with Sarah*, differs in the scene's much more modest setting and in the fact that one of the two female figures is an old woman.^[13] She resembles Anna, the mother of Tobias, as Rembrandt and his circle traditionally portrayed her. Werner Sumowski correctly identified the subject of the Utrecht picture as Anna greeting or blessing Tobias upon his return with Sarah.^[14] Here, too, De Gelder followed the text in the *Statenvertaling* (Tobit 11:9), which relates that Anna greeted her son even before Tobit did.^[15]

Von Moltke's opinion that the Leiden Collection painting dates from the early 1700s is incorrect.^[16] The rich, fanciful dress of Sarah and her mother, particularly Edna's square neckline, open gown tied at the waist, and the long streamers that attach the back of her headdress, are consistent with female fashions of the 1690s. Although very few paintings by De Gelder from the 1690s can be reliably dated, in comparison



with paintings from the 1680s it seems that his brushwork, especially in the detailed characterization of the lavishly decorated costumes, became much finer and more detailed, an effect particularly seen in his rendering of transparent veils. As with Sarah's veil, in most cases he often rendered these delicate garments with little more than fine white contour lines.

Raguel and Tobias, with their sumptuous cloaks and curiously shaped, multicolored turbans, are dressed in a more Orientalizing fashion than Sarah and Edna. De Gelder's knowledge of genuine Oriental dress can be detected in Tobias's yellow kaftan and heron-feather aigrette. A portrait medallion with the image of a head in profile, similar to the one hanging from Tobias's neck, is also featured in De Gelder's painting *Judah's Humble Supplication to Joseph*, ca. 1685.^[17]

Arnold Houbraken, who was also from Dordrecht and well acquainted with De Gelder, described the artist's use of studio props: "But our De Gelder has collected, no less so than he [Rembrandt], a chest of all kinds of clothes, hangings, firearms and bayonets, armor, and so on, including shoes and clogs; and the attic and walls of his studio are hung with draperies and embroidered cloths and veils, some intact, others torn. . . . From this rich stock he takes the requisites for his pictures."^[18] Taking Houbraken's account of De Gelder's use of studio props into consideration, one would not be surprised to find that the tablecloth might be identical with "1 root fluwel tafelkleed" (one red velvet tablecloth) documented in the inventory of the artist's estate in 1727.^[19]

- Volker Manuth, 2017

Endnotes

1. See Julius Held, *Rembrandt and the Book of Tobit*, The Gehenna Essays in Art 2 (Northampton, Mass., 1964), also published as “Rembrandt und das Buch Tobias,” in Julius Held, *Rembrandt-Studien* (Leipzig, 1983), 78–100.
2. The purpose of the trip was to gather silver that his blind father had deposited with his kinsman Gabael.
3. During their wedding night Tobias exorcised the demon by burning the liver and the heart of the fish which he had caught in the river Tigris and which he would later use to cure his old father’s blindness.
4. The literature contains various interpretations of the theme of Arent de Gelder’s painting. In the earliest monograph on the painter, Lilienfeld suggests that it represents a biblical scene, perhaps Young Tobias in the House of Raguel (see Karl Lilienfeld, *Arent de Gelder: Sein Leben und seine Kunst* [The Hague, 1914], 173, no. 114.) Van Fossen and Von Moltke agreed with him (see David R. van Fossen, “The Painting of Aert de Gelder” [Ph.D. diss. Harvard University, 1969], 264, no. 64; Joachim Wolfgang von Moltke, *Arent de Gelder, Dordrecht 1645–1727* [Doornspijk, 1994], 80–81, no. 43). Sumowski, who disagreed with the identification of the scene as a story from the Old Testament, assumed it to be a “subject of antiquity in a feudal setting” (Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandtschüler*, 6 vols. [Landau and Pfalz, 1983–94], 6:3713, no. 2293). See also Volker Manuth, in *Inaugural Exhibition of Old Master Paintings* (Exh. cat. New York, Otto Naumann Ltd.) (New York, 1995), 133–36, no. 30 (“Edna Entrusting Tobias with Sarah”); and Volker Manuth in Dirck Bijker, et al., eds., *Arent de Gelder (1645–1727), Rembrandts laatste leerling* (Exh. cat. Dordrecht, Dordrechts Museum; Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum) (Ghent, 1998), 188–89, no. 29 (“Tobias in het huis van Edna and Sarah” [Tobias in the House of Edna and Sarah]).
5. The X-radiograph reveals that De Gelder originally placed a figure between Edna and Sarah. Whether this figure was the first position of Sarah or another figure altogether is not clear.
6. Book of Tobit 10:13: “ik geef u mijn dochter over als een vertrouwd pand, bedroef haar niet.” Edna’s farewell words derive from the Greek translation of the Bible, the Septuagint, but do not occur in either the Latin (Vulgate) or Luther’s translation. The Greek text was the basis of the Dutch Bible produced in 1637—the so-called *Statenvertaling*—which explains the inclusion of this scene and its subsequent treatment by Arent de Gelder. On this subject, see Christian Tümpel et al., *Im Lichte Rembrandts: Das Alte Testament im Goldenen Zeitalter der niederländischen Kunst* (Exh. cat. Münster, Westfälisches Landesmuseum; Amsterdam, Joods Historisch Museum; Jerusalem, Israel Museum) (Zwolle, 1994), 296, no. 63, and Volker Manuth, “‘De voorwerpen van zyn Historische vertoeningen zyn meest Bybelstof...’: De bijbelse historiestukken van Arent de Gelder; Keuze van onderwerpen en iconografie,” in Dirck Bijker, et al., eds., *Arent de Gelder (1645–1727): Rembrandts laatste leerling* (Exh. cat. Dordrecht, Dordrechts Museum; Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum) (Ghent, 1998), 51–69, esp. 61–63.

7. For the gloves in seventeenth-century Dutch wedding ceremonies, see Bianca M. du Mortier, “De handschoen in de huwelijksymboliek van de zeventiende eeuw,” *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 32 (1984): 189–201.
8. David R. van Fossen, “The Painting of Aert de Gelder” (PhD diss. Harvard University, 1969), 264; Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandtschüler*, 6 vols. (Landau and Pfalz, 1983–94), 6:3713, no. 2293.
9. Compare for example Rembrandt’s pen and brush drawing *Tobias Frightened by the Fish* of ca. 1650 in the Copenhagen Printroom; see Otto Benesch, *The Drawings of Rembrandt*, ed. Eva Benesch, 6 vols. (London, 1973), 3: no. 638 (ill.).
10. “So seyde de Engel tot den Jongelinck, Broeder wy sullen heden tot Raguël ter herberge gaen.” Tobit 6:13: “ende het dochterken is schoon ende verstandich.” Tobit 6:12.
11. *The Marriage Contract*, ca. 1670, oil on canvas, 94.6 x 143.5 cm, Art Gallery and Museum, Brighton, inv. no. FA000014. See Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandtschüler*, 6 vols. (Landau and Pfalz, 1983–94), 2: no. 733 (ill.), and Joachim Wolfgang von Moltke, *Aert de Gelder, Dordrecht 1645–1727* (Doornspijk, 1994), 81, no. 44 (ill.)
12. The three versions (excluding several variants and copies) are: (1) M. H. de Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco; (2) Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig; and (3) unknown private collection. See Baruch D. Kirschenbaum, *The Religious and Historical Paintings of Jan Steen* (New York, 1977), 121, 25/487, fig. 86; 122, 25a/457, fig. 66; and 123, 25b, fig. 77.
13. Catharijneconvent, Utrecht, inv. RMCC S129 (on loan from the Instituut Collectie Nederland). For an overview of the identification of the subject matter of the painting, see Joachim Wolfgang von Moltke, *Aert de Gelder, Dordrecht 1645–1727* (Doornspijk, 1994), 81–82, no. 45 (plate XXIV).
14. Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandtschüler*, 6 vols. (Landau and Pfalz, 1983–94), 2: no. 762.
15. “En Anna liep toe en viel haar zoon aan de hals, en zeide tot hem: Kind, ik heb u gezien, thans wil ik wel sterven; en zij weenden beiden” (*Statenvertaling*, Tobias 11:9).
16. Joachim Wolfgang von Moltke, *Aert de Gelder, Dordrecht 1645–1727* (Doornspijk, 1994), 80.
17. Dirck Bijker et al., *Aert de Gelder (1645–1727), Rembrandts laatste leerling* (Exh. cat. Dordrecht, Dordrechts Museum; Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum) (Ghent, 1998), no. 14. See also Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandtschüler in vier Bänden*, 6 vols. (Landau and Pfalz, 1983–94), 5: no. 2090a, and 2: no. 735.
18. “Maar onze de Gelder, heeft niet minder dan hy [Rembrandt] een voddekraam van allerhande soort van kleederen, behangsels, schiet-en steekgeweer, harnassen, enz. tot schoenen en muilen inkluis, by een verzamelt; en de zoldering en de wanden van zyn schildervertrek, zyn behangen met floersche en gestikte zyde bewindselen en sluijers, sommige geheel, andere gescheurt...Uit dezen ryken voorraad haalt hy de toerusting zyn er beelden.” 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 :208.



19. Published in Joachim Wolfgang von Moltke, *Arent de Gelder, Dordrecht 1645–1727* (Doornspijk, 1994), 203.

Provenance

- E. J. de Court van Valkenswaard (his sale, Dordrecht, Mak van Way, 12 April 1847, no. 49 [64 guilders to De Gruijter]).
- H. Konow, Copenhagen, 1914.
- T. Kroepelien Collection, Bergen, Norway, by 1961; and by descent [Thomas Agnew and Sons, Ltd., London, 1989; Douwes Fine Art, Amsterdam, 1994; Otto Naumann, Ltd., New York, 1995].
- Alfred Bader, by 1995 [Otto Naumann Ltd., New York, 2004].
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2004.

Exhibition History

- Copenhagen, Kunstforeningen I Kobenhavn, “Billender af gammel kunst,” 1891, no. 60.
- New York, Otto Naumann Ltd., “Inaugural Exhibition of Old Master Paintings,” 12 January–1 March 1995, 133–36, no. 30.
- 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, no. 29 [lent by Otto Naumann].
- Budapest, Szépművészeti Múzeum, “Rembrandt and the Dutch Golden Age,” 31 October 2014–15 February 2015, no. 118 [lent by the present owner].
- Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, on loan with the permanent collection, 5 May, 2017–30 April 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. 14 [lent by the present owner].

References

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- Van Fossen, David Raymond. “The Paintings of Aert de Gelder.” PhD diss. Harvard University, 1969,

264, no. 64

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- Sumowski, Werner. *Die Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*. 6 vols. Landau and Pfalz, 1983–94, 6: 3713, no. 2293; 3887, fig. 2293.
- Manuth, Volker. “Edna Entrusting Tobias with Sarah.” In *Inaugural Exhibition of Old Master Paintings*. Exh. cat. New York, Otto Naumann Ltd. New York, 1995, 133–36, no. 30.
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- De Vries, A. *Ingelijst werk. De verbeelding van arbeid en beroep in de vroegmoderne Nederlanden*. Amsterdam, 2003, 53.
- Cavalli-Björkman, Görel. “Tobias in the House of Edna and Raguel.” In *Rembrandt och hans tid: Människan i Centrum / Rembrandt and His Age: Focus on Man*. Edited by Görel Cavalli- Björkman, 404–5, no. 118. Exh. cat. Budapest, Szépművészeti Múzeum. Budapest, 2014.
- 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, 70–73, no. 14. [Exhibition catalogue also published in Dutch.]

Technical Summary

The support, a single piece of medium-weight, plain-weave fabric with tacking margins removed, has been lined. Cusping along all four edges indicates the original dimensions have not been significantly altered. There is a handwritten inscription and hand-drawn circle but no wax collection seals, stencils, paper labels or import stamps along the lining or stretcher reverse.

The ground has been thinly and evenly applied followed by a light-brown underlayer that remains visible through the glazes of paint applied along the majority of the foreground and background. The paint has been applied more opaquely through the flesh tones and drapery, with areas of low impasto along areas of white highlight associated with all four figures. Areas of detail in all four figures have been scratched into glazes of wet paint with the back of a brush.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers. The images and X-radiograph reveal that Sarah’s head was shifted to the left and positioned slightly higher during the paint stage and was originally painted with more radio-opaque pigments than the four faces in the final composition. A pentimento indicates that Edna’s shoulder was shifted to the right and that Sarah and Edna were originally positioned closer together. Pentimenti under Raquel’s chin and throughout Tobias’s lower face indicate shifts in the position of their faces.



The painting is indistinctly signed in dark paint right of center along the upper edge and is undated.

The painting was cleaned and restored in 2002 prior to its acquisition in 2004. The painting is in fair condition and state of preservation with areas of abrasion and out-of-tone restorations along the background.