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Esther and Ahasuerus

Geldorp Gortzius
(Leuven 1553 – ca. 1619 Cologne)

1612
oil on panel
56.5 x 72.4 cm
Signed with monogram (partially legible) and dated in white paint in upper-right corner:
F[ecit]A[nno] [FA in ligature] 1612 / […]
GG-100

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The beautiful Queen Esther is one of the most important Jewish heroines in the Old Testament. In the rich and complex Book of Esther, set during the Babylonian captivity of the Jews, the queen braves her own death in order to save the Jewish people by approaching her husband, the austere Persian King Ahasuerus. Though Ahasuerus had chosen his wife without knowing she was Jewish, and Esther had never revealed her secret, she knew that she had to acknowledge her Jewish heritage when her husband's wicked minister, Haman, decreed that all Jews be killed. Fortunately, when she came into the king's presence to invite him to a banquet, Ahasuerus lowered his scepter, a sign that "she found favor in his sight" (Esther 5:2). At the banquet, to which Esther also invited Haman, she revealed both her Jewish background and the minister's evil plan (Esther 7:1–10). Because of his unwavering love for his wife, Ahasuerus ordered that Haman be killed and the decree nullified, thus preventing the annihilation of the Jews.[1]

Traditionally, depictions of scenes from the book of Esther showed either the dramatic encounter at Ahasuerus's crowded court, with the king seated high on his throne and Esther obediently kneeling down in front of him (see JvS-100), or the moment at Esther's banquet when she reveals Haman's plan to Ahasuerus.[2] In this previously unpublished representation of *Esther and Ahasuerus*, the Flemish artist Geldorp Gortzius abandoned all reference to the biblical narrative, and instead emphasized the tender interaction between husband and wife. Geldorp depicted Esther and Ahasuerus as bust-length figures situated close to the picture plane. With a loving expression, Ahasuerus has put his left arm around Esther's shoulder while he offers her the golden scepter. In return, Esther looks up at her husband devotedly while she cradles his scepter with both hands. Geldorp's intimate representation might well have been inspired by the first-century historian Flavius Josephus's widely known *Antiquities of the Jews*, in which Ahasuerus "leaped from his throne, and took [Esther] in his arms, and recovered her, by embracing her, and speaking comfortably to her, . . . [telling her] not to suspect any bad consequence on account of her coming to him without being called, . . . but that she, who was a queen, as well as he a king might be entirely secure." Significantly, Josephus goes on to say that Ahasuerus "put the scepter into her hand."[3]

The couple's richly appointed attire leaves no doubt of their regal status. Esther is dressed in a brown fur mantle with a split at the shoulder revealing a white satin gown embroidered with patterns of gold. A crown and diadem with pearls and precious stones shimmer amidst her brown curls. Strings of pearls, too, adorn her neck and wrists. Ahasuerus wears a deep red mantle over a dark green tunic trimmed with a golden collar inlaid with a ruby and pearls. His golden crown, the tips of which extend to the upper edge of the panel, is also garnished with pearls.[4]

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Geldorp Gortzius, *Portrait of Jeremias Boudinois*, 1610, oil on panel, 103 x 81 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Jonkeer J. de Witte van Citters Bequest, The Hague, SK-A-916

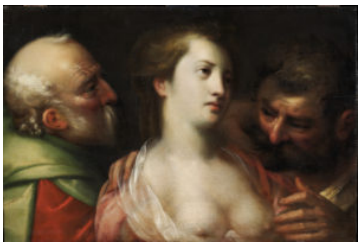


Fig 2. Geldorp Gortzius, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1600–1604, oil on panel, 47.5 x 70.5 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, inv. no. 86.3

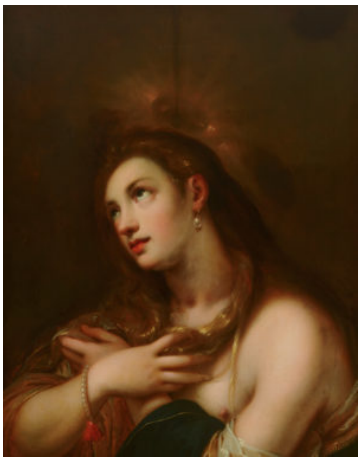


Fig 3. Geldorp Gortzius, *The Penitent Mary Magdalen*, n.d., oil on panel, 67 x 52 cm, Mauritshuis, The Hague, inv. no. 319

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Geldorp was primarily a portrait painter whose oeuvre mainly consists of single portraits, sometimes as part of a pendant pair, such as the 1610 *Portrait of Jeremias Boudinois* in the Rijksmuseum **(fig 1)**.[5] His rendering of the protagonists as bust-length figures in the present work is typical of his relatively few history paintings. One finds a similar composition in his two other Old Testament works, *Susanna and the Elders* in Budapest **(fig 2)** and *David and Bathsheba* in Cologne.[6] Such portrait-like history paintings do not appear in the oeuvres of Geldorp's teachers, Frans Francken the Elder and Frans Pourbus the Elder.[7] The artist's development of this novel compositional formula may have been rooted in his primary focus on portraiture. It may have also been related to his experience in Cologne, where he lived from 1579 until his death, and the wishes of wealthy clients who favored his portrait style.[8] The affluent Cologne banker and art collector Everhard Jabach III (1567–1636), for instance, owned portraits by Geldorp of himself and his wife, as well as a *Susanna and the Elders*—likely the one now in Budapest (fig 2). Horst Vey has convincingly proposed that Jabach may have helped determine the composition of the latter.[9]

The fine line between Geldorp's portraits and history paintings inevitably begs the question as to whether *Esther and Ahasuerus* was intended as a *portrait historié*. In the case of Esther, her idealized facial type suggests that she was not intended to fulfill this purpose. In fact, Geldorp had already used the same figure of Esther, with an almost identical expression, more than twenty years earlier for his *Mary Magdalene* in 1589.[10] The same formula recurs in an undated painting of the *Penitent Mary Magdalene* in the Mauritshuis **(fig 3)**.[11] Indeed, throughout his career, this same figure type reappears in a number of single-figure paintings, ranging from Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary to the antique and mythological heroines Lucretia and Venus.[12] In these renditions, Geldorp made only minor variations in the figure's dress, hand gestures, and attributes.

Ahasuerus's features, on the other hand, are less idealized than those of Esther, and his facial type does not appear elsewhere in Geldorp's oeuvre. He is depicted as a man of roughly the same age as Esther, quite unlike the description of him in written and pictorial accounts. Although this could indicate that Geldorp created a *portrait historié* exclusively for a male patron, it is hard to imagine a scenario in which a sitter would have wanted to be portrayed as Ahasuerus without his wife serving as the model for Esther. Also, the specificity of Ahasuerus's appearance does not necessarily link him to conventional portraits such as the one of Jeremias Boudinois **(fig 1)**. In this respect, Ahasuerus can perhaps best be compared to Geldorp's *Four Evangelists* from around 1605 in the Catharijneconvent, Utrecht, who all have strikingly different features, but who fit comfortably in the idiom of stylized renditions of historical figures.[13]

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The unusual presence of the halo above Esther's head raises further questions about the identification of the subject. Traditionally, Old Testament figures are not depicted with haloes because they are, after all, not saints.[14] Indeed, Geldorp did not include haloes when he portrayed the Old Testament heroines Bathsheba and Susanna, nor in his paintings of Lucretia and Venus. The only New Testament scene that features a queen and a king holding a scepter is that of *Christ Crowning the Virgin*, but in such an instance Christ also would be portrayed with a halo. Esther's halo in the present picture might be connected to the typological tradition of her intercession with Ahasuerus; her efforts to save the Jews were likened to the Virgin's intercession with God for the salvation of mankind. In the *Biblia Pauperum*, one of the most well-known medieval typological sources, for example, this association is illustrated by the juxtaposition of *Esther and Ahasuerus* with the *Coronation of the Virgin*.[15] Reinforcing this relationship may have appealed to Geldorp's predominantly Catholic clientele in Cologne, resulting in this exceptional portrayal of the Old Testament heroine.

- Ilona van Tuinen, 2019

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Endnotes

1. See the entry in this catalogue for Jan van Stavaren's *Esther before Ahasuerus* (JvS-100) for a more traditional rendition of the scene, as well as a more elaborate account of the story.
2. For an influential sixteenth-century example of the former, see, for instance, Philips Galle's 1564 engraving after Maarten van Heemskerck's design of *Esther before Ahasuerus*, 202 x 245 mm (British Museum, London; see JvS-100, fig. 4). For a contemporary depiction of the Feast of Esther, see Pieter Lastman, *The Feast of Esther*, ca. 1610–19, oil on panel, 52 x 78 cm (National Museum, Warsaw).
3. Flavius Josephus, *Antiquitates Judaicae*, ca. 93–94 AD, book 11:6:9. English translation by William Whiston, *The Works of Flavius Josephus, the Learned and Authentic Jewish Historian* (Belfast, 1841), 305.
4. Interestingly, the painting retains all four original bevels and has not been reduced in size, indicating that the present composition is identical to Geldorp's original work. See the Technical Summary.
5. The pendant is the *Portrait of Lucretia del Prado*, 1610, oil on panel, 105 x 80 cm (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam). Both portraits, along with seven others by Geldorp of the same family with ties to Middelburg, entered the Rijksmuseum's collection as part of the substantial De Witte van Citters bequest. See Gerdien Wuestman, "Het familjie boeckje van Pieter Boudaen Courten (1594–1668): Memoires van een geportretteerde," *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 53 (2005): 42–61.
6. For the dating of *Susanna and the Elders* to ca. 1600 on the basis of a print by Crispijn de Passe and a painting by Melchior Geldorp dated 1605, see Horst Vey, "*Susanna und die Ältesten* von Geldorp Gortzius in Budapest," *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch* 48/49 (1987/1988): 187–213. The *David and Bathsheba*, oil on canvas, 58.5 x 80 cm (Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Cologne) is dated 1602. To the present author's knowledge, these are the only Old Testament stories Geldorp produced. Geldorp also depicted single New Testament figures and saints as close-up half-figures. For Geldorp's four paintings of the evangelists, see Paul Dirkse, "Vier evangelisten geschilderd door Geldorp Gortzius," in *Begijnen, pastoors en predikanten. Religie en kunst in de Gouden Eeuw* (Leiden, 2001), 15–19.
7. For Geldorp's training, see the biography by Piet Bakker in this catalogue. Both Pourbus and Francken, like Geldorp, were predominantly portrait painters, but their history paintings contain various figures and a distinct narrative focus. See, for instance, Frans Pourbus the Elder, *David and Abigail*, ca. 1570–79, oil on panel, 101.8 x 157.2 cm (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna). Incidentally, Pourbus painted this work during the decade that Geldorp was his student, which may help to explain why the facial types of Pourbus's David and Abigail are similar to those in the present work. See also Frans Francken the Elder, *The Adoration of the Magi*, ca. 1600, oil on copper, 28.3 x 35.8 cm (Herzog Anton-Ulrich Museum, Braunschweig).
8. For Geldorp's status as favorite portraitist of the Cologne upper class, see Ilja M. Veldman, "Keulen als toevluchtsoord voor Nederlandse kunstenaars (1567–1612)", *Oud Holland* 107, no. 1 (1993): 34–58,

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esp. 46–47.

9. Horst Vey argued that Jabach's decision to commission Geldorp Gortzius to portray this scene was connected to Jabach's personal motto, "Virtue above all" (German: "Die Tugend lebt über den Tod hinaus"). See Horst Vey, "*Susanna und die Ältesten* von Geldorp Gortzius in Budapest," *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch* 48–49 (1987–88): 197. Jabach may have requested a depiction of this scene without any possible distractions, as in Geldorp's closely framed bust-length version, so as to keep the focus on his motto. It is not clear whether Jabach owned the *Susanna and the Elders* in Budapest or another version of this work. Considering the high level of repetition in Geldorp's oeuvre, it is likely that the composition was similar, if not the same.
10. Attributed to Geldorp Gortzius, *Mary Magdalene (?)*, 1589, oil on panel, 51 x 41 cm (location unknown; auctioned at Hargesheimer & Günther Kunstauktioned Düsseldorf, 16 January 2010, no. 64, unsold). Though it is not entirely certain whether this painting was executed by Geldorp, the composition is certainly typical for the master, and must have been designed by him.
11. Geldorp Gortzius, *The Penitent Mary Magdalene*, n.d., oil on panel, 67 x 52 cm (Mauritshuis, The Hague); see Quentin Buvelot, *Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis: A Summary Catalogue* (Zwolle, 2004), 124–25, no. 319.
12. See attributed to Geldorp Gortzius, *The Madonna in Prayer*, oil on panel, 50.6 x 42 cm (location unknown; auctioned at Sotheby's Olympia, 8 April 2003, no. 148 [unsold]); Geldorp Gortzius, *Lucretia*, oil on panel, 59.6 x 48.9 cm (location unknown; formerly collection Mrs. S.M.C. Jungeling, The Hague, auctioned at Arts & Antiques Group, 7 May 2012, no. 16); Geldorp Gortzius, *Venus*, oil on panel, 59.9 x 50 cm (Art Market; Christie's Amsterdam, 8 May 2012, no. 55 [unsold]).
13. The four paintings include *John*, 1604; *Marcus*, 1605; *Matthew*, 1606; and *Luke* [n.d.], each oil on panel, ca. 82 x 64.5 cm (each Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht). See Paul Dirkse, "Vier evangelisten geschilderd door Geldorp Gortzius," in *Begijnen, pastoors en predikanten. Religie en kunst in de Gouden Eeuw* (Leiden, 2001), 15–19.
14. Haloes were reserved for saints and figures from the New Testament.
15. See Avril Henry, *Biblia Pauperum: A Facsimile Edition* (Ithaca, 1987), 117, with commentary on 119. The third scene that is represented in this context is that of *Solomon Enthroning His Mother Bethsabee*. On the *Speculum humanae salvationis*, another important typological source, see Horst Appuhn, *Heilsspiegel: Die Bilder des mittelalterlichen Erbauungsbuches Speculum humanae salvationis* (Dortmund, 1981), 73, with commentary on 112–13, where the connection between Esther and the Virgin as intercessors is illustrated by the juxtaposition of *Esther and Ahasuerus* with *Mary Showing Christ Her Breasts*.

Provenance

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- Joseph Topin, Aix-en-Provence, France, around 1840 (as by Battoni).
- Félix Vieil, art dealer, Aix-en-Provence, around 1900; by descent to his granddaughter, Aix-en-Provence; (Sale, Christie's, Paris, 15 November 2006, no. 306; [Jack Kilgore & Co., Inc., New York]).
- From whom acquired by the present owner, 2007.

Exhibition History

- Amsterdam, Hermitage Amsterdam, "Rembrandt and his Contemporaries: History Paintings from The Leiden Collection," 4 February–27 August 2023, no. 27 [lent by the present owner].

References

- 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, 122–25, no. 27. [Exhibition catalogue also published in Dutch.]

Technical Summary

The painting was prepared on a single plank of horizontally grained wood. All four edges of the reverse are evenly beveled, indicating that the panel retains its original size. The panel was prepared with a thin, white ground that does not obscure the texture of the wood grain. The paint was applied in thin layers, with low brush marks and glazes.

Infrared reflectography did not reveal any underdrawing, except for a small change to the fingers of Esther's proper left hand. A glossy but well-saturating varnish covers the surface. The varnish has been disturbed along the edges where it came into contact with the frame rabbet.

The painting has not been treated since its acquisition and remains in a good state of preservation.[1]

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. These technical notes are based on a technical examination report by Annette Rupprecht, dated November 2011.

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