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Esther before Ahasuerus

Jan Adriaensz van Staveren
(Leiden 1613/14 – 1669 Leiden)

ca. 1640–45
oil on panel
86.7 x 75.2 cm
signed in light paint along angel's shield on armrest of king's throne: "JOHANNES STAVEREN 1(6?)(??)"
JvS-100

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During the Babylonian captivity of the Jews, the beautiful Jewish orphan Esther, heroine of the Old Testament Book of Esther, won the heart of the austere Persian king Ahasuerus and became his wife (Esther 2:17). Esther had been raised by her cousin Mordecai, who made Esther swear that she would keep her Jewish identity a secret from her husband. However, when Ahasuerus appointed as his minister the anti-Semite Haman, who issued a decree to kill all Jews, Mordecai begged Esther to reveal her Jewish heritage to Ahasuerus and plead for the lives of her people. Esther agreed, saying to Mordecai: "I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16).

Esther's dramatic words were not exaggerated. Not only was it risky to confess her long-kept secret, but anyone who approached the king without being summoned also risked the death penalty unless Ahasuerus extended his golden scepter as a sign of benevolence (Esther 4:11). Fortunately, Ahasuerus adored his wife and lowered his scepter upon seeing her. While touching the tip of the scepter, Esther invited Ahasuerus and Haman to a banquet. During this banquet, Esther disclosed her Jewish identity and told Ahasuerus of Haman's plan to kill her people. The enraged Ahasuerus had Haman executed and appointed Mordecai as his minister instead. The brave Esther thus prevented the annihilation of the Jews.

Jan van Staveren has situated the scene in a grand hall with red and grey marble columns and multiple arches receding into the background. Seated in an elaborate golden throne decorated with lush ornamental curls and impressive lion-shaped armrests, the powerful king towers above the disproportionately small figure of the queen.[1] Wearing a turban adorned with feathers and a jeweled ornament consisting of a ruby and three pearls, Ahasuerus is clad in a fur-trimmed, red velvet robe with gold-brocade patterns identical to those of the cushion beneath his golden slippers. Esther, who gracefully bows her head as she touches the tip of the scepter, is lavishly attired in "her royal robes" (Esther 5:1). Her silver satin dress is trimmed with gold brocade and adorned with precious stones, and her crown is decorated with feathers and an ornament identical to that in her husband's turban. Nevertheless, by portraying Esther in a light-colored dress separating her from the crimson, brown, and golden hues surrounding her, and by placing her alone in the center of the composition, Van Staveren poignantly emphasizes her fragile circumstances in this courtly drama.

Signed "Johannes Staveren" on the cartouche held by the sculpted angel on Ahasuerus's armrest, Van Staveren probably executed this work, which is one of his most ambitious paintings, in the first half of the 1640s.[2] The composition strongly relates to his *Circumcision of Christ*, dated 1640 **(fig 1)**.[3] Both paintings are executed in a similar palette and depict a grand, lofty space with arches and ornamental pillars.

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Jan van Staveren, *The Circumcision of Christ*, 1640, oil on panel, 9.2 x 56.8 cm, Sale, Sotheby's, London, 1 November 2007, no. 94



Fig 2. Jan van Staveren, *A Hermit at Prayer in a Grotto with Classical Ruins*, 1641, oil on panel, 61 x 47 cm, Private Collection, photo © Christie's Images / Bridgeman Images



Fig 3. Jan van Staveren, *Praying*

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Hermit, ca. 1645, oil on panel, 33 x 27 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, SK-C-228



Fig 4. Philips Galle after Maarten van Heemskerck, *Esther before Ahasuerus*, 1564, engraving, 200 x 245 cm, London, The British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings, inv. 1923,1106.4, © Trustees of the British Museum

In each instance three separate groups, two on the main floor and one in an elevated marble courtyard in the background, witness the main scene in the foreground. A similar background with a multi-arched edifice also appears in Van Staveren's *Hermit at Prayer in a Grotto with Classical Ruins*, dated 1641 **(fig 2)**, and in his *Praying Hermit*, dated to the mid-1640s **(fig 3)**.[4] The face of the hermit in this latter work is similar to the old man standing directly behind Ahasuerus's scepter, suggesting that Van Staveren worked with the same model or prototype in this period of his career.

Several elements of the composition are reminiscent of Gerrit Dou's (1613–75) work of the 1640s, suggesting that Van Staveren adopted them from his fellow townsman and possible teacher.[5] The prominent, dark blue parasol in the background of Van Staveren's painting, no doubt a reference to the exotic setting of the story, appears in Dou's work from the mid-1630s until well into the 1650s.[6] The reliefs of dancing, naked putti surrounding the bottoms of the grey marble columns in the background of *Esther before Ahasuerus* also feature in several works by Dou, such as his 1646 portrait of Johan Wittert van der Aa in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.[7]

An important visual source for Van Staveren's interpretation of this biblical narrative was undoubtedly a 1564 engraving of *Esther before Ahasuerus* by Maarten van Heemskerck (1498–1574) **(fig 4)**. In Van Heemskerck's composition, the scene is set in a similar grand space with arches and columns in the background, and shows Esther kneeling obediently on the steps of Ahasuerus's high throne.[8] It is also possible that Van Staveren drew inspiration from the theater. Indeed, the red velvet curtain hanging from the top and sides of the painting, as well as the rhetorical gestures and expressive glances of the onlookers, suggest that we are watching a theatrical scene.[9] There were several Dutch plays devoted to the story of Esther that Van Staveren could have known, for instance Jacob van Zevecote's 1621 play *Esther*, or Nicolaes Fonteyn's 1638 play *Esther, ofte 't beeldt der ghehoorsaamheid* (Esther, or the Picture of Obedience).[10]

Two figures on the left of Ahasuerus's throne, the seated, somewhat stern-looking man in a blue-feathered turban and the stodgy man in a fur bonnet holding a letter, look as though they might represent specific characters in the story. It is possible that they depict, respectively, Mordecai, who incited Haman's rage by refusing to stand up in his presence, and Haman. Although Mordecai does not appear in court and Haman is not present during the meeting between Esther and Ahasuerus in the Book of Esther, it is likely that Van Staveren combined various elements of the story or referenced a play in which the playwright had taken certain liberties.[11] For instance, in Joannes Serwouter's 1659 play, *Hester, oft verlossing der Jooden* (Esther, or the Deliverance of the Jews), Haman is present during the encounter between Esther and Ahasuerus.[12] It is also possible that the man holding the letter is Ahasuerus's

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chamberlain Thares, a character from the theater that does not feature in the Book of Esther. In Serwouter's description of this scene, and possibly in earlier plays as well, Thares hides a letter containing a plot to kill the king under his garments. When Ahasuerus finds out about the letter he orders Haman to read it out loud. If this figure in Van Staveren's painting depicts Thares, Haman could be the seated man in the blue-feathered turban.[13]

The large number of Dutch plays devoted to the story of Esther stems from the parallels the Dutch saw between Esther's triumph over Haman, which saved her people from the threat of extinction, and their own victory over Spain.[14] This connection would undoubtedly have appealed to the first owner of Van Staveren's painting.

- Ilona van Tuinen, 2017

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Endnotes

1. For the throne, Van Staveren was clearly inspired by the legendary throne of King Solomon, described in Kings 1:18–20 as being covered in gold and having six steps and the figure of a lion on each side of the throne. Because of their similar subject matter, this throne often appears both in scenes of the Queen of Sheba before King Solomon and of Esther before Ahasuerus. For an elaborate depiction of the throne, which was probably not known to Van Staveren but illustrates the pictorial tradition, see Artus Quellinus, *The Queen of Sheba before King Solomon*, oil on canvas, 151 x 237 cm, Vienna, Liechtenstein Collection. Quellinus even included the multiple lions that allegedly stood next to Solomon's throne. Already in the sixteenth century, Maarten van Heemskerck (1498–1574) incorporated elements of the Bible's description of Solomon's throne, especially the lion armrests and the six steps, in his 1564 engraving *Esther before Ahasuerus* (see fig. 4).
2. For a similar dating, see Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 vols. (Landau and Pfalz, 1983–94), 6: 3743, 4066, no. 2447, who makes a stylistic comparison between *Esther before Ahasuerus*, Van Staveren's 1640 *Circumcision of Christ* (fig. 1), then in the Galerie Caretto-Turin, and his 1646 *Noli me Tangere* in the Cevat Collection.
3. Although the painting was said to be monogrammed by Gerrit Dou when it was sold at auction in 2007, this work is now rightly attributed to Van Staveren. There is no reason to question the authenticity of the date.
4. The first painting was sold at Christie's, New York, 4 April 2007, as no. 53. For the second of these paintings (Rijksmuseum), see Eric Jan Sluijter et al., *Leidse Fijnschilders: van Gerrit Dou tot Frans van Mieris de Jonge, 1630–1760* (Exh. cat. Leiden, Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal) (Zwolle, 1988), 227, no. 77. Sluijter dates this painting to the mid-1640s based on a stylistic comparison with Staveren's two paintings with hermits, one in the Národni Galerie in Prague, dated 1644, and the other in the Statens Museum in Copenhagen, dated 1650.
5. See Piet Bakker's biography of Jan van Staveren in this catalogue, in which he discusses the uncertainty surrounding our knowledge of the relationship between Dou and Van Staveren. Although the similarities between Dou's and Van Staveren's work suggest a teacher-pupil relationship, both artists were around the same age.
6. For instance, in ca. 1635 Dou included a closed, dark blue parasol in the background of his *Scholar Interrupted at His Writing* in the present collection (see GD-102), and an open parasol in his *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1645, oil on panel, 12.4 x 8.3 cm, Kremer Collection, and *Quack*, 1652, oil on panel, 112.4 x 83.4 cm, Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, inv. St.4. See Dominique Surh's entry on GD-102 for a symbolic reading of the parasol. In *Esther before Ahasuerus*, Van Staveren appears to have included the parasol only as a reference to the exotic locale. For other paintings with scenes set in the Far East and including parasols, see, for instance, Moyses van Wtenbrouck, *Moses Found by the Daughter of Pharaoh*, 1623, oil on panel, 50 x 74.5 cm, sale, Servarts, Brussels, 11 September 1999, no.

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414, and Jan Victor's much later *Portrait of a Family in Eastern Attire*, 1670, oil on canvas, 99 x 133.5 cm, sale, Sotheby's, London, 3 July, 1997, no. 225.

7. Gerrit Dou, *Portrait of Johan Wittert van der Aa*, 1646, oil on panel, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Dou continued to use this motif throughout the rest of his career. See also *The Doctor*, 1653, oil on panel, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum; *Young Mother*, 1658, oil on panel, The Hague, Mauritshuis; and *Astronomer by Candlelight*, ca. 1665, oil on panel, 32 x 21.1 cm, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. Interestingly, the putti in Dou's painting are facing outward, whereas Van Staveren's figures are seen from the back.

8. For a later depiction of this scene that more or less follows Heemskerck's composition, see Jan Steen's *Esther Before Ahasuerus*, ca. 1665, oil on panel, 106 x 39 cm, The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, inv. 878.

9. See also Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "The Wrath of Ahasuerus," in H. Perry Chapman, Wouter Th. Kloek, and Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., *Jan Steen, Painter and Storyteller*, ed. Guido Jansen (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum) (New Haven, 1996), 241–44, for his discussion of Jan Steen's painting *The Wrath of Ahasuerus* dated to ca. 1671–73, in which Steen's similarly dramatic representation can be explained by the artist's reliance on Serwouter's play.

10. According to Ceneton, the Leiden University database of Dutch theater plays, there are no known copies of Jacob van Zevecote's *Esther*; the 1623 edition of this play, printed in Antwerp, has copies in the Stadsbibliotheek Antwerpen and the Gent University Library. According to Ceneton, there are two copies of Nicolaes Fonteyn, *Esther, ofte 't beeldt der ghehoorsaamheid* (Amsterdam, 1638), one in the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris (inv. F: Yi. 626), and one at the Leiden University Library (inv. 1091 D 13 : 2). The present author has not had the opportunity to consult the plays by Zevecote and Fonteyn. As for other plays about Esther written before 1650, Ceneton further lists *Hester en Assverus*, written by an anonymous author in around 1599, a copy of which is in the Rijksarchief in Hasselt, the Netherlands; and Joris Berckmans's 1649 *Esther*, a copy of which is in the Royal Library in Brussels. See also Theodor Dunkelgrün, "Neerlands Israel: Political Theology, Christian Hebraism, Biblical Antiquarianism, and Historical Myth," in *Myth in History, History in Myth*, ed. Laura Cruz and Willem Frijhoff (Leiden, 2009), 201–36, esp. n. 23, for the mention of two additional plays: Abraham de Koning's 1618 *Esther* and Jacob Revius's 1630 *Haman, a Tragedy*, not listed in Ceneton or Digital Library for Dutch Literature (DBNL).

11. Esther 5: "Mordecai sat outside the king's gate, since he was not authorized to appear in the king's court. Haman was not present either, but was later summoned by Ahasuerus."

12. Joannes Serwouter, *Hester, oft verlossing der Jooden* (Hester, or the Deliverance of the Jews) (Amsterdam, 1659). According to Ceneton, the Leiden University database of Dutch theater plays, Serwouter's play appears to have been very popular: it was reprinted five times, in 1662, 1667, 1698, 1732, and 1751.

13. Joannes Serwouter, *Hester, oft verlossing der Jooden* (Hester, or the Deliverance of the Jews) (Amsterdam, 1659), 27–30, in the third act. Without knowledge of the contents of the earlier plays by

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Fonteyn and Van Zevecote, however, it remains impossible to ascertain whether Thares appears in these plays as well, and thus whether Van Staveren could have known about Thares in the 1640s.

14. For the connection between Esther's triumph and the Dutch victory, see, for instance, Theodor Dunkelgrün, "Neerlands Israel: Political Theology, Christian Hebraism, Biblical Antiquarianism, and Historical Myth," *Myth in History, History in Myth*, ed. Laura Cruz and Willem Frijhoff (Leiden, 2009), 201–36, and Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches* (London, 1987), 102–3.

Provenance

- (Sale, Dorotheum, Vienna, 3 December 1959, no. 109 [for 35,000 Austrian shillings]).
- (Sale, Am Kinsky, Vienna, 15 March 2005, no. 1 [Jack Kilgore & Co., Inc., New York]).
- From whom acquired by the present owner, 2005.

Exhibition History

- Dordrecht, Dordrechts Museum, "Work, Pray & Admire: New Views on Calvinism and Art," 11 November 2018–26 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. 26 [lent by the present owner].

References

- Sumowski, Werner. *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*. 6 vols. Landau and Pfalz, 1983–94, 6: 3743, 4066, no. 2447.
- 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, 118–21, no. 26. [Exhibition catalogue also published in Dutch.]

Technical Summary

The support is a rectangular composite panel comprising three vertically grained oak planks of three

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different widths and two vertical shims.[1] There are no bevels or machine tool marks. A traditional cradle has been removed and a spring-loaded, wooden, secondary support adhered.[2] There is one red wax collection seal and one import stamp, but no stencils, labels, or panel maker's marks.

Under magnification, there appear to be two thinly and evenly applied light-colored ground layers separated by paint. The paint along the architecture and swags of drapery in the background has been applied smoothly and opaquely. Details along Esther's garment edge, elaborate jewels, and Ahasuerus's garment and throne have been applied with low rounded brushwork and delicate impasto.

A network of drying cracks across the left plank suggests a compositional change. The X-radiograph reveals two narrow arches along the upper half of the left plank, where the marble columns and architectural elements below the red drapery are located in the final composition. The right side of the the right arch forms an abruptly cropped vertical line directly at the join between the left and central planks, rather than extending onto the central plank in a diffuse way. Further investigation is required to determine whether the left plank had been previously used or if it was added and the composition widened on the left side during the paint stage.

No underdrawing is evident in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers. The images suggest a compositional change to Esther's proper right sleeve. Additional drying cracks suggest changes during the paint stage to the left and right side of Ahasuerus's head, along the small figures' heads to the left and right of the base of the gray column, along Esther's proper right sleeve, and in a circular pattern in Ahasuerus's red garment, directly below his outstretched gold staff.

The painting is signed and dated in light paint along the angel's shield on the armrest of the King's throne.

The painting underwent panel work and was cleaned and restored prior to acquisition in 2005. It is in good condition and in a good state of preservation.

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. The characterization of the wood is based on visual examination only.
2. A small wood patch has also been applied to the reverse of a knot in the central plank. The panelwork was undertaken by George Bisacca, paintings conservator, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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