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Fortune Teller

Caspar Netscher
(Prague or Heidelberg ca. 1639 – 1684 The Hague)

ca. 1666–70
oil on canvas
59.5 x 51 cm
CN-111

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In the foreground of Caspar Netscher's (ca. 1639–84) evocative, dusky landscape, a well-dressed young soldier pays rapt attention to a young woman who examines his extended hand, presumably relating the future she divines there. He wears a soldier's buff leather jerkin and gleaming metal breastplate, but his other garments incline more toward flamboyance than battle-ready practicality: unusually lush gold and silver brocade sleeves, shoes rather than sturdy boots, a decorative walking stick, and in the corner, a lavishly plumed hat. The soldier is so mesmerized by the young woman's words—or her beauty—that he is unaware of the child slipping a purse from his coat pocket. An older woman stands just behind the group, calmly surveying the proceedings. In the distance to the right are several soldiers at rest. In contrast to the rich detail lavished on the foreground players, these figures are quickly and summarily drawn, their garments unremarkable.

Dark hair and exotic dress suggest the fortune teller is Romani. The Romani (gypsies) had migrated across Europe from their probable origins in India, arriving in northern Europe by about 1420.[1] Their proud independence, nomadic lifestyle, and unusual costumes and customs prompted curiosity and ultimately, a degree of fear and resentment among many settled Europeans. The majority of Romani in Europe supported themselves with easily portable professions built upon wit and pragmatism—often at the expense of trusting Europeans (*gadjé*)—such as animal training, horse trading, carnival entertainments, magic, and fortune telling. By the late fifteenth century, "gypsies" had gained a widespread reputation for untrustworthiness, trickery, and generally bad behavior; many cities and localities issued orders of expulsion or meted out severe punishments for even minor civil infractions.[2] Existing on the fringes of settled society, the Romani were slow to adopt the behavior and, particularly in the case of women, the dress of their *gadjé* neighbors. Traditional Romani dress for women comprised a long white shift covered by a colorful mantle knotted at one shoulder, which served as both garment and blanket to sleep in, and a wide, disk-like headdress known as a *bern*.[3] Although Netscher's fortune teller lacks this distinctive headgear, the remainder of her garments (described in greater detail below) evoke traditional Romani garb.

The earliest representations of European Romani in Netherlandish art cast them in a fairly positive light. Because they were thought to originate in Egypt (hence the term "gypsy"), they were often included in depictions of biblical events thought to have taken place in Egypt, or in representations of Christian sermons, indicating the Church's mission to reach a broad and diverse audience.[4] By the late sixteenth century, however, the Romani had a growing reputation for being (among other things) tricksy card players and "duplicitous tellers of fake fortunes." In the visual arts, therefore, depictions of individuals with Romani costume and physiognomy

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Jan Cossiers, *The Fortune Teller*, ca. 1630, oil on canvas, 111.9 x 168.6 cm, Musée de Beaux-Arts, Valenciennes, inv. no. P.46.1.45.



Fig 2. Caspar Netscher, *The Fortune Teller*, 1664, oil on panel, 29 x 23.9 cm, present location unknown, RKD – Netherlands Institute for Art History, RKDimages (1001159547).



Fig 3. Iran, *Textile with Design of Wine Bearer in Landscape*, 16th century, silk satin with silk supplementary weft patterning bound in twill (lampas), 83.8 × 71.1 cm, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, inv. no. M.66.74.1.

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triggered stereotypical assumptions that while perhaps intriguingly exotic, such individuals were also patently devious and demonstrably "other."[5]

From the fifteenth century onward, European artists explored the theme of a gullible young man or woman having his or her palm read by a Romani fortune teller—most frequently, one assumes, to know the future of a love affair.[6] Usually the palm reading is accompanied by a theft perpetrated on the client; sometimes, too, the fortune-teller herself is robbed. Part of the appeal of these images lay in the fact that the viewer is made complicit in the deception, as, for example, in Caravaggio's iconic *Fortune Teller*s of about 1595 in Rome and Paris, in which the proximity of the figures to the picture plane forces the viewer's involvement in their exchange.[7] Caravaggesque artists in Italy, France, and the North continued to explore and elaborate upon the theme through the ensuing decades **(fig 1)**. In Netherlandish depictions of palm reading, fortune tellers also proliferated independent of Caravaggio's example.[8] The fortune teller is typically an older woman, wearing the boldly patterned and sometimes ragged garments of a traveler, and the client is a man. Almost always, he is represented as "twice duped": tricked into believing the fortune's veracity, and simultaneously robbed of his purse, jewelry, or other valuable. If the fortune teller is an attractive younger woman, her physical charms help seduce her client into ruinous gullibility. Often, the readings take place in an outdoor setting or a location such as a guardroom or brothel, not only referencing a soldier's desire to know his future in love and war, but also denoting a location distant from civic regulations that would otherwise limit citizens' encounters with marginalized Romani.[9]

There are also, of course, numerous representations of women having their palms read in seventeenth-century Dutch art, including Netscher's own, earlier treatment of the subject **(fig 2)**. These depictions generally emphasize the client's innocence and naïveté and juxtapose her cultured, refined, and affluent youthful beauty with the natural sensuality (or advanced age) and rough poverty of the fortune teller.[10]

Netscher's *Fortune Teller* retains many of the traditional elements of scenes depicting male clients consulting fortune tellers, but rather than shaping a narrative of malice and trickery, places greater emphasis on the amorous sentiments that appear to flow equally between deceiver and deceived. The fortune teller seems gently melancholic, the young soldier more love-struck than irredeemably naïve. The secondary figures are similarly gentled: the older woman is more a benign chaperone than an avaricious madam, and the thieving child simply matter-of-fact. While this shift is generally in keeping with the gentrifying tendencies prevalent in Dutch high-life genre painting of the second half of the seventeenth century, it might also reflect a specific scene from contemporary literature or theater.



Fig 4. Caspar Netscher, *Portrait of Steven Wolters*, 1683, oil on canvas, 53.5 x 44.5 cm, Private Collection, RKD – Netherlands Institute for Art History, RKDimages (IB00072610).



Fig 5. Caspar Netscher, *Bathsheba Receiving the Letter from King David*, 1667, oil on panel, 42 x 36.1 cm, Alte Pinakothek, Munich, inv. no. 56.



Fig 6. Caspar Netscher, *Sarah Leading Hagar to Abraham,* 1673, oil on canvas, 59.5 x 50.5 cm, The Leiden Collection, New York, inv. no. CN-106.

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One of the most popular literary works to feature Romani protagonists was Cervantes's *La Gitanilla* (1613), a romantic tale of love between a girl raised by Gypsies (Pretiose) and a young cavalier (Don Jan). Translated into Dutch as "Het Spaens Heydinnetje" (1637) and provided with a moralizing gloss by Jacob Cats (1577–1660), in the Netherlands the engaging story inspired plays by Mattheus Gansneb Tengnagel (1613–52) and Catharina Verwers Dusart (1618–84), in 1643 and 1644, respectively, and painted representations by artists such as Paulus Bor (ca. 1601–69), Jan Lievens (1607–74), Jan van Noordt (1623–81), Pieter Quast (1606–47), Godefridus Schalcken (1643–1706), and others.[11] Whether Netscher's *Fortune Teller* was in any way inspired by earlier interpretations of *La Gitanilla* in image or text is difficult to say. Dutch translations of Cervantes's story (such as Cats's) studiously avoided any mention of Pretiose's proficiency in the dubious art of chiromancy, although such episodes are clearly described in the original text. It is conceivable that Netscher might have known either the original Spanish text or the French translation of 1614, both of which include occasions when Pretiose read palms.[12] There is, moreover, no obvious influence on Netscher's painting from other artists' interpretations of Cervantes's tale, although an illustration to "Het Spaans Heydinnetje" by Adriaen van de Venne (1589–1662), also depicting the lovers gazing longingly at each other in an open landscape, projects a similar tone.[13] Romani tricksters and fortune tellers were popular "types" in seventeenth-century theater, and it is entirely possible that Netscher's *Fortune Teller* reflects a contemporary theatrical production that has otherwise been lost.[14]

In his portraits and narrative scenes, Caspar Netscher was extraordinarily attentive to the rendering of textiles: gleaming satins, glittering brocades, crisp linens, and plush velvets are depicted with a mimetic fidelity that stimulates tactile awareness and enhances appreciation of the image. The theme of the *Fortune Teller*—hinting at exoticism, sensuality, and a venture into the unknown—offered a perfect opportunity for the artist to introduce an array of luxurious fabrics. Swathed in layers of silks imported from the East, the figure of the fortune teller represents one of the most striking demonstrations of Netscher's ability to recreate the distinctive properties of these rare and costly textiles. Even judged against the most refined interpretations of the fortune teller theme, the garments worn by Netscher's protagonist are extraordinarily luxurious. She is draped in a heady mix of shimmering imported textiles: the figural motifs on her cloak recall Safavid (sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Iranian) woven textiles, while the cloud motifs on her blue undergarment suggests a Chinese or Japanese silk. Safavid textiles were noted for their exceptional quality and large-scale figural motifs derived from contemporary manuscript illuminations, typically interspersed with stylized floral and animal designs **(fig 3)**.

The fact that Netscher included comparable fabrics in several other works over the

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course of his career suggests that he owned a selection of these imported textiles **(fig 4)**.[15] Beginning in the early seventeenth century, silks from China and Japan were among the most prized commodities imported by the V.O.C. (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie) into the Netherlands; in the early 1620s, the V.O.C. established a factory in Persia and began to import quantities of Persian silk for Dutch trade.[16] Although Asian silks were initially quite expensive on the Dutch market, as availability increased, prices dropped accordingly. By the 1630s, there were several shops in Amsterdam devoted to selling East Indian goods imported by the V.O.C. By 1677 (and perhaps earlier), there was a shop in The Hague specifically devoted to selling East Indian textiles.[17]

Although it is not known for certain that Netscher owned Safavid or other Asian textiles, the inventory of the estate of his widow, Margaretha Godijn (d. 1694), taken in September 1694 mentions "several lengths of silk and satin in the painting studio" ("*eenige lappen van zijde en satijn totte schildercamer*") as well as four silk robes ("*vier zijde roken*" [*sic*]), presumably the Japanese padded silk robes so fashionable among the elite in the latter part of the seventeenth century.[18] Given Netscher's avowed interest in the depiction of textiles, it would have been curious if he had not sought out these beautiful and sophisticated materials to enhance the appeal of his paintings.

The saturated colors, refinement, and portrait-like characterization of the figures in the *Fortune Teller* suggest a date in the late 1660s, when Netscher was shifting his attention from high-life genre scenes to painting sophisticated historical subjects and elegant portraits of the international elite. The luxurious textiles, as well as individual figure types and the choice of a theme brimming with exotic sensuality, are particularly close to Netscher's *Bathsheba Receiving the Letter from King David*, dated 1667 **(fig 5)**.[19] As well as in the *Bathsheba*, the dark-haired model for the fortune teller appears in several other of Netscher's paintings from the mid to late 1660s, including *Two Women in an Interior with a Basket of Lemons* in The Leiden Collection. The older woman and the young pickpocket also bear a passing resemblance to the figures of Sarah and the eavesdropping child in Netscher's *Sarah Leading Hagar to Abraham* of 1673, now also in The Leiden Collection **(fig 6)**.

When the *Fortune Teller* was in the collection of the Duc d'Orléans in the early eighteenth century, and until sold separately from the collection of William Wilkins in 1820 and 1830, it was in fact pendant to *Sarah Leading Hagar to Abraham* (see Provenance). The paintings are of similar dimensions and exhibit certain narrative and compositional parallels: a scene of implicit sexual attraction involving a woman in shimmering silk garments standing before a seated man, accompanied by an older woman and with a child as bit player in the drama. However, the works were executed some years apart, and it is unlikely that Netscher himself would have

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intended the two paintings as a pair. They were probably made into “pendants” in the eighteenth century while in the Orléans collection.[20] It is delightful coincidence that the two works are now together once again.

- Marjorie E. Wieseman, 2020

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Endnotes

1. The standard reference on the Romani (Roma) migration to and presence in Europe is Jean-Paul Clébert, *The Gypsies*, trans. Charles Duff (Harmondsworth, UK, 1967); on Romani in the Netherlands, Olav van Kappen, *Geschiedenis der zigeuners in Nederland: de ontwikkeling van de rechtspositie der 'Heidens' of 'Egyptenaren' in de noordelijke Nederlanden (1420–1750)* (Assen, 1965).
2. Jean-Paul Clébert, *The Gypsies*, trans. Charles Duff (Harmondsworth, UK, 1967), 87–119; John F. Moffitt, "Caravaggio and the Gypsies," *Paragone* 53, nos. 623–25 (January–March 2002): 139–48.
3. Marieke de Winkel, *Fashion and Fancy: Dress and Meaning in Rembrandt's Paintings* (Amsterdam, 2006), 266; see also François de Vaux de Foletier, "Iconographie des 'Egyptiens': Precisions sur le costume ancien des Tsiganes," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 68 (September 1966): 165–72. Netscher's other representations of fortune tellers, a painting of 1664 (fig 2) and a related drawing, *Fortune Teller*, 1664 (Hamburger Kunsthalle) also omit the *bern*; see Marjorie E. Wieseman, *Caspar Netscher and Late Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting* (Doornspijk, 2002), 185, no. 28.
4. Among many examples: Lucas van Leyden, *Moses and the Israelites after the Miracle of Water from the Rock*, 1527 (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston); Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Preaching of John the Baptist*, 1566 (Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest).
5. John F. Moffitt, "Caravaggio and the Gypsies," *Paragone* 53, nos. 623–25 (January–March 2002): 148.
6. Peter Bell and Dirk Suckow, "Lebenslinien: Das Handlesemotiv und die Repräsentation von 'Zigeunern' in der Kunst des Spätmittelalters und der Frühen Neuzeit," in *"Zigeuner" und Nation: Repräsentation—Inklusion—Exklusion*, ed. Iulia Patrut and Herbert Uerlings (Frankfurt am Main, 2008), 499 ff.
7. Museo Capitolini, Rome, and Musée du Louvre, Paris.
8. Italian and French Caravaggesque artists exploring the theme include Georges de la Tour (1593–1652), Simon Vouet (1590–1649), Bartolomeo Manfredi (ca. 1582–1622), Nicolas Regnier (1591–1667), Lionello Spada (1576–1622), and others. See John F. Moffitt, "Caravaggio and the Gypsies," *Paragone* 53, nos. 623–25 (January–March 2002); and Gail Feigenbaum, "Gamblers, Cheats, and Fortune-Tellers," in *Georges de La Tour and His World*, ed. Philip Conisbee (Exh. cat. Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art; Fort Worth, Kimbell Art Museum) (Washington, D.C., 1996), 168–77. For examples in Netherlandish art, see Peter Bell and Dirk Suckow, "Lebenslinien: Das Handlesemotiv und die Repräsentation von 'Zigeunern' in der Kunst des Spätmittelalters und der Frühen Neuzeit," in *"Zigeuner" und Nation: Repräsentation—Inklusion—Exklusion*, ed. Iulia Patrut and Herbert Uerlings (Frankfurt am Main, 2008); Ivan Gaskell, "Transformations of Cervantes's 'La Gitanilla' in Dutch Art," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 45 (1982): 263–70; David de Witt, "A Scene from Cervantes in the Stadholder's Collection: Lievens's Gypsy Fortune-Teller," *Oud Holland* 113 (1999), 181–86; and Cordula Bischoff, "Zigeunerin, Wahrsagerin, weise Frau? Willem van Mieris, 'Die

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Wahrsagerin' von 1706," in *Die Freiheit der Anderen: Festschrift für Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff*, ed. Annegret Friedrich (Marburg, 2004), 145–55.

9. For example, Jan Steen, *The Fortune Teller*, ca. 1650–54 (Mauritshuis, The Hague); David Teniers the Younger, *The Village Feast*, 1646 (The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg); Philips Wouwerman, *Travelers at a Gypsy Camp* (Staatliches Museum, Schwerin); and others, which depict hunters or travelers encountering Romani fortune tellers in an open landscape.

10. See Cordula Bischoff, "Zigeunerin, Wahrsagerin, weise Frau? Willem van Mieris, 'Die Wahrsagerin' von 1706," in *Die Freiheit der Anderen: Festschrift für Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff*, ed. Annegret Friedrich (Marburg, 2004); and Peter Bell and Dirk Suckow, "Lebenslinien: Das Handlesemotiv und die Repräsentation von 'Zigeunern' in der Kunst des Spätmittelalters und der Frühen Neuzeit," in *"Zigeuner" und Nation: Repräsentation—Inklusion—Exklusion*, ed. Iulia Patrut and Herbert Uerlings (Frankfurt am Main, 2008).

11. See Ivan Gaskell, "Transformations of Cervantes's 'La Gitanilla' in Dutch Art," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 45 (1982); and David A. de Witt, "A Scene from Cervantes in the Stadholder's Collection: Lievens's Gypsy Fortune-Teller," *Oud Holland* 113 (1999).

12. There is no mention of any edition of Cervantes, or of Cats, among the books listed in the 1694 inventory of Netscher's widow's estate. See Marjorie E. Wieseman, *Caspar Netscher and Late Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting* (Doornspijk, 2002), 147–48 (Haags Gemeentearchief, Notariële Archieven, no. 919, 515–19).

13. Jacob Cats, "Selsaem Trou-geval tvsschen een Spaens edelman, ende een heydinne," *Trouringh* (Dordrecht, 1637), 487. My thanks to Lara Yeager-Crasselt for drawing my attention to the print's similarities with Netscher's painting.

14. Marjorie E. Wieseman, *Caspar Netscher and Late Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting* (Doornspijk, 2002), 70–71. Netscher's residence in The Hague was just a few blocks from the popular theater established in 1659 by the actor and impresario Jan Baptist van Fornenbergh (1624–97); from what is known of Fornenbergh's repertoire, it seems no version of Cervantes's tale was presented at his theater, although the list of performances is not complete. In 1680, Netscher purchased a house and garden adjacent to Fornenbergh's property on the Spekstraat. Marjorie E. Wieseman, *Caspar Netscher and Late Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting* (Doornspijk, 2002), 28, 183 (Haags Gemeentearchief, Notariële Archieven, no. 919, 489). On Fornenbergh, see Ben Albach, *Langs Kermissen en Hoven: Ontstaan en kroniek van een Nederlands toneelgezelschap in de 17de eeuw* (Zutphen, 1977), esp. 85–91.

15. For example, *Woman Playing a Chitarrone*, ca. 1668–72 (present location unknown); *Portrait of Margareta Godijn*, ca. 1680 (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam); and *Portrait of Steven Wolters*, 1683 (Private Collection). See Marjorie E. Wieseman, *Caspar Netscher and Late Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting* (Doornspijk, 2002), 252, no. 119; 302, no. 201; 309–10, no. 214.

16. See K. Glamann, *Dutch-Asiatic Trade 1620–1740* (Copenhagen, 1958), 135; and Femme S. Gaastra, "De textielhandel van de V. O. C.," *Textielhistorische bijdragen* 34 (1994), 56–57.

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17. On the Amsterdam trade, see Jaap van der Veen, “East Indies Shops in Amsterdam,” in *Asia in Amsterdam: The Culture of Luxury in the Golden Age*, ed. Karina H. Corrigan, Jan van Campen, and Femke Diercks (Exh. cat. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Mass.) (New Haven, 2015), 137. On the shop in The Hague, see Danielle van de Heuvel, “Changes in the Dutch Textile Trades, c. 1650–1750,” in *Selling Textiles in the Long Eighteenth Century: Comparative Perspectives from Western Europe*, ed. Jon Stobart and Bruno Blondé (London, 2014]), 125, citing an unpublished paper by Thera Wijsenbeek-Olthuis, “Winkelen in Den Haag 1575–1795. Ontwikkeling van de detailhandel.”
18. See examples: Frans van Mieris, *Portrait of a Thirty-Year Old Man*, 1669; Frans van Mieris, *Man Tuning a Violin*, 1680; Willem van Mieris, *Portrait of Samuel van Acker*, 1683; Michiel van Musscher, *Portrait of Pieter Ranst Valckenier (1661–1704)*, 1687; Michiel van Musscher, *Portrait of the Artist in His Studio* , 1673; Cornelis de Man, *Portrait of the Pharmacist Dr. Ysbrand Ysbrandsz. (1634/35–1705) in an Interior*, ca. 1667; Peeter Leermans, *Portrait of a Man*, 1684; and Pieter Cornelisz van Slingelandt, *Portrait of a Man Reading a Book*, 1668 (all in The Leiden Collection, New York). See Marjorie E. Wieseman, *Caspar Netscher and Late Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting* (Doornspijk, 2002), 143 (Haags Gemeentearchief, Notariële Archieven, no. 919, 499).
19. Marjorie E. Wieseman, *Caspar Netscher and Late Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting* (Doornspijk, 2002), 212, no. 61.
20. This may have been done in order to produce the sort of symmetrical hang that was popular in the eighteenth century. On the Dutch and Flemish paintings in the Orléans collection, see most recently: Vanessa I. Schmid, “New Trends and Old: Rubens and the Dutch and Flemish School at the Palais-Royal,” in *The Orléans Collection*, Vanessa I. Schmid and Julia I. Amstrong-Trotten (Exh. cat. New Orleans Museum of Art) (Lewes, 2018), esp. 139–41.

Provenance

- Philippe II, duc d’Orléans (1674–1723), Palais Royal, Paris; by descent to his son, Louis, duc d’Orléans (1702–52), Paris (his sale, Paris, 9 June 1727, unsold); by descent to his grandson, Louis Philippe, duc d’Orléans (1747–93), Paris [to Thomas Moore Slade].
- [Thomas Moore Slade (1749–1831), London, 1772 (Orléans sale, London, April 1793, no. 85)].
- Col. Le Blanc, London (sale, Christie’s, London, 27 May 1820, no. 98, as a companion to no. 97 [CN-106], unsold; sale, Christie’s, London, 17 June 1820, no. 123, as a companion to no. 122 [CN-106] [to William Wilkins for £57.15]).
- William Wilkins (1778–1839), London (to E. Grey)
- E. Grey, by 1834.
- Meates (sale, Christie’s, London, 14 February 1835, no. 29, unsold; sale, Christie’s, London, 4 April

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1835, no. 63, unsold).

- (Possible sale, Christie's, London, 15 April 1901, no. 81 [to Miller for £19.19]).
- (Sale, Christie's, London, 2 July 1920, no. 62).
- [Duits, Ltd., London].
- Private collection, Amsterdam, by 1922.
- Private collection, Monaco (sale, Sotheby's, London, 5 July 2018, no. 164 [to Johnny van Haeften, Ltd]).
- [Johnny van Haeften, Ltd., London].
- From which acquired by the present owner in 2018.

Exhibition History

- London, Royal Academy, "The Orléans Gallery Now Exhibiting at the Great Rooms," April–June 1793, no. 85 [lent by Thomas More Slade].
- 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, no. 69 [lent by the present owner].
- Amsterdam, Hermitage Amsterdam, "Rembrandt and his Contemporaries: History Paintings from The Leiden Collection," 4 February–27 August 2023, no. 18 [lent by the present owner].

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the Great Masters into England since the French Revolution. London, 1824, 1: 207.

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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, 84–87, no. 18. [Exhibition catalogue also published in Dutch.]

Versions

Version

1. After Caspar Netscher, *Fortune Teller*, oil on canvas, 56 x 46 cm, previous sale, Berlin, 16 October 1934, no. 398.

Drawing

1. French School, *Fortune Teller*, 18th century, drawing, 410 x 340 mm, previously Chaucer and Van Dam Galleries, London, 1981.

Print

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1. Louis-Michel Halbou (1730–1809), after Caspar Netscher, *Les Bohémiennes*, 1794, etching and engraving, 257 x 196 mm, RKD – The Netherlands Institute for Art History, The Hague, inv. no.BD/0676.

Technical Summary

The painting is on a plain-weave canvas support that has been lined using a glue-paste adhesive. The canvas exhibits cusping along all four sides, indicating that it has not been cut down or reduced in size.

The painting has an overall white ground. A gray-brown priming was brushed on top of the ground to establish an overall tonality. Infrared photographs indicate that the artist broadly laid out the composition on top of the priming by sketching in rough forms with a brush.[1] Finer lines define delicate features, such as in the figures' faces. This preparatory sketch was approximate, and the artist adjusted its contours and resolved details in the final composition. For instance, Netscher lowered and more clearly defined the lower contour of the young man's jerkin. He also painted out several of the young pickpocket's fingers that he had initially sketched in, ultimately leaving only the upper hand and pinky finger visible. The artist appears to have adjusted the hue of at least part of the sky as well. He painted a darker gray paint layer up to the longest curls of the young man's hair while leaving the underlying lighter color visible in the area closest to his head.

In general, the paint is thinly applied; the highlights are the most thickly painted areas. The young man's armor and metal thread–embroidered sleeve, which give the illusion of light reflecting off their lustrous surfaces, feature the thickest impasto in the work.

The painting is in very good condition despite abrasion in some of the glazes and dark paint layers, such as in the old woman's red shawl, the shadows of the rocks, and the dark tones of the sky and foreground. There is very little paint loss and limited retouching.[2]

– Gerrit Albertson, 2020

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. Infrared photographs were taken by TSR Imaging Ltd. and examined by Simon Howell.
2. This summary is based on an examination report by Simon Howell, Shepherd Conservation in London, dated December 7, 2018. The report also includes an X-radiograph. The painting was not examined in person by the author.

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