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Lucretia

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

ca. 1665–67
oil on panel
28.8 x 24.3 cm
CN-109

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The story of the Roman heroine Lucretia is recounted by Livy.[1] The beautiful wife of Lucius Tarquinius Collatinus, a Roman nobleman of the sixth century B.C., Lucretia was renowned for her virtue and loyalty. She was raped by Sextus Tarquinius, son of Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, the tyrannical Etruscan king of Rome. Lucretia revealed the defilement before her father, husband, and other male relatives and then—to preserve her honor and the good name of her family—committed suicide by stabbing herself in the breast. To avenge the rape, one of Lucretia's kinsman, Lucius Junius Brutus, led a revolt to overthrow the monarchy. Brutus and Lucretia's bereaved husband, Collatinus, subsequently became the first consuls of the Roman Republic.

Lucretia's tragic and emotionally complex story came to exemplify an equally complex array of abstract concepts: patriotism and the victory of liberty over tyranny; love and faithfulness unto death; and virtuous female chastity most of all. Historical reaction to the Roman heroine was not consistently positive, however, and early Christian writers tended to condemn her for choosing the mortal sin of suicide over the lesser evil of adultery. Nonetheless, the story of a woman who chose death over dishonor was steadily popular in a culture that placed such great emphasis on female chastity.[2] Representations of Lucretia's suicide abounded in early sixteenth-century paintings and prints, especially among Northern European artists: Albrecht Dürer, Lucas Cranach, Hans Baldung, Jan van Scorel, Joos van Cleve, Jan Gossaert, and Pieter Coecke van Aelst were among the many that depicted the theme. The majority of these images removed Lucretia from a narrative context and isolated her figure against a neutral background, thus promoting a greater sense of intimacy between the figure and the viewer **(fig 1)**. Although Livy and other classical authors described Lucretia as "modestly clothed," most of these images show her either partially clad or completely nude, perhaps prompted by the recent discovery in Rome of an antique statue of a nude woman believed to represent Lucretia.[3]

The isolation of the figure and the exclusion of narrative context in these images have been linked to the conventions of Christian devotional imagery, which employed similar formal strategies to focus the viewer's meditations on the sufferings of Christ or the particular saint depicted, and thus encourage empathetic response.[4] Adopting these conventions was only logical, as Lucretia herself was often regarded as a sort of secular martyr. Unquestionably, however, the voyeuristic appeal of intimate engagement with a (semi)nude woman—no matter how noble or virtuous—and the illicit eroticism of Lucretia's rape were the key factors in the continued popularity of the theme.

It is not surprising that Caspar Netscher chose the story of Lucretia for what was

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Lucas Cranach, *Lucretia*, 1533, oil on panel, 37 x 24 cm, Staatliche Museen, Berlin, Inv. No. 1832



Fig 2. Guido Reni, *Lucretia*, ca. 1625, oil on canvas, 215 x 151 cm, Staatliche Schlösser und Gärten, Neues Palais, Potsdam-Sanssouci, inv. GK I 5388

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probably his first attempt at a historical subject. Although Gary Schwartz and others have convincingly proposed that Rembrandt's intensely charged *Lucretia* paintings of 1664 and 1666 might have been inspired by contemporary political events and the concomitant parallels drawn between the foundation of the Roman and Dutch Republics,[5] it is not at all clear that Netscher intended his painting, made during this same period, to embody similar associations. Like many genre painters who also turned their hand to painting small-scale history pieces during the 1660s and 1670s (FM-103), he chose a well-known subject that lent itself to a genre-like approach in terms of clothing, setting and accessories, and that afforded an opportunity to depict a voluptuous semi-clad figure under a cloak of historical respectability.[6] Here, posed before a curtained bed in a darkened interior, Lucretia bares her breast to receive the dagger's thrust, her tear-filled eyes rolled heavenwards. In general terms, Netscher's decision to isolate the figure before a barely visible background recalls the sensuous Lucretias created by sixteenth-century Northern artists, but the sharp turn of the figure's head and her pathetic upward gaze seem to have been more directly inspired by Guido Reni's numerous depictions of Lucretia and the equally tragic Cleopatra (**fig 2**).[7] In both instances, the artist has deliberately eliminated any possibility of eye contact between figure and viewer, allowing the viewer to intrude freely upon an intensely private scene. In analyzing the voyeuristic appeal of Reni's paintings specifically, Richard Spear has noted that the eroticism of his Lucretias "derives less from nakedness than from their vulnerability and the violation done to them: from the pending plunge of a cold, sharp dagger into pale unblemished flesh."[8] The same might be said of Netscher's *Lucretia* as well.



Fig 3. Caspar Netscher, *Woman at Her Toilet*, ca. 1665, oil on panel, 42.5 x 33 cm, Private Collection, London, courtesy Johnny Van Haeften Ltd.

Lucretia, which is in good condition, was probably painted about 1665–67.[9] The same model appears in Netscher's genre paintings of the mid-1660s (**fig 3**), many of which project a similar sensual and sensorial appeal. In these works, Netscher often combined discreet glimpses into private domestic worlds with a detailed attention to the tactile surfaces of fabric and flesh (see also CN-108). Were it not for Lucretia's artfully disheveled garments and the slim dagger clutched in her outstretched hand, she could easily be mistaken for one of these pampered seventeenth-century beauties. By limiting accessories to a generous swag of green drapery and a pillow hinting at the presence of a bed in the right background, Netscher avoids tying his representation to a specific time and place. Some have faulted Netscher's history paintings for lacking a certain dignified historicism; the nineteenth-century critic Charles Blanc, for example, remarked, "the notion of the antique, the sublime conventions which form the ideal in art, were too elevated for his spirit. . . . [He] did not forego [using] some pretty Hague lady as the model for his Cleopatra, or Cleopatra herself as the pretext for a beautiful satin robe."[10] Nevertheless, the very contemporaneity of Netscher's Lucretia is what contributes most significantly to her

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sensual appeal.

- Marjorie E. Wieseman, 2017

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Endnotes

1. Livy (Titus Livius), *The Early History of Rome*, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt (London, 1960), 98–99. The story is also told by Ovid (*Fasti* II: 721–853); see Ian Donaldson, *The Rapes of Lucretia: A Myth and Its Transformations* (Oxford, 1982), 5–8.
2. Carol Schuler, "Virtuous Model/Voluptuous Martyr: The Suicide of Lucretia in Northern Renaissance Art and Its Relationship to Late Medieval Devotional Imagery," in *Saints, Sinners and Sisters: Gender and Northern Art in Medieval and Early Modern Europe,* ed. Jane L. Carroll and Alison G. Stewart (Aldershot, 2003), 7–25.
3. Wolfgang Stechow, "Lucretia Statua," in *Essays in Honor of Georg Swarzenski*, ed. Oswald Goetz (Chicago, 1951), 114–24. Another, more emotionally charged and less overtly erotic tradition exists in depictions of the theme by Titian and other Venetian painters, culminating in Rembrandt's remarkable and intensely moving late paintings of Lucretia from 1664 (National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.) and 1666 (Minneapolis Institute of Art).
4. Carol Schuler, "Virtuous Model/Voluptuous Martyr: The Suicide of Lucretia in Northern Renaissance Art and Its Relationship to Late Medieval Devotional Imagery," in *Saints, Sinners and Sisters: Gender and Northern Art in Medieval and Early Modern Europe,* ed. Jane L. Carroll and Alison G. Stewart (Aldershot, 2003), 7–25.
5. Gary Schwartz, *Rembrandt: His Life, His Paintings* (New York, 1985), 330; see also Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., *The Collection of the National Gallery of Art Systematic Catalogues: Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century* (Washington, D.C., 1995), 283.
6. Marjorie E. Wieseman, *Caspar Netscher and Late Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting* (Doornspijk, 2002), 75–77; on the blurring of the distinction between genre and history, see especially Lyckle de Vries, "Jan Steen zwischen Genre- und Historienmalerei," *Niederdeutsch Beitragen zur Kunstgeschichte* 22 (1982): 113–28.
7. Reni's depictions of Cleopatra and Lucretia were exceedingly popular throughout Europe, and a number of contemporary copies survive, as well as engravings after the compositions. A Lucretia by Reni was in the sale Johan Cau, Lord of Domberg, Amsterdam, 7 May 1710; see Gerard Hoet, *Catalogus of naamlyst van schilderyen, met derzelver pryzen, zedert een langen reeks van jaaren zoo,* 3 vols. (The Hague, 1752), 1 :137.
8. Richard E. Spear, *The "Divine" Guido: Religion, Sex, Money, and Art in the World of Guido Reni* (New Haven, 1997), 85.
9. From at least 1953 until 1999, when it was cleaned and restored, the painting was attributed to Jacob Ochtervelt on the basis of a false signature and date (J. Ochtervelt / 1676) at center left. See Susan Donahue Kuretsky, *The Paintings of Jacob Ochtervelt, 1634–1682: With Catalog Raisonné* (Montclair, 1979), 27–28, 91, no. 91.

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10. Charles Blanc, *Histoire des peintres de toutes les écoles*, vol. 11, *École Hollandaise* (Paris, 1863), 8: “Les notions de l’antique, les sublimes conventions dont se compose l’idéal de l’art, étaient trop au-dessus de son esprit et lui demeurent inconnues. . . . [Il] n’a pas manqué quelque jolie femme de La Haye pour le modèle de sa Cléopâtre, et sa Cléopâtre elle-même pour le prétexte d’une belle robe de satin.”

Provenance

- Thomas François Joseph, Count de Fraula (1647–1738), Brussels (his sale, Brussels, 21 July 1738, no. 71 [for 105 florins]).[1]
- Possibly Christian Josi (1768–1828) (his sale, Christie’s, London, 26 February 1796, no. 85 [to Thomas Chippendale Jr. for £2.15]).[2]
- Admiral Algernon Walker-Heneage-Vivian (1871–1952), Clyne Castle, Blackpill, Wales (his sale, Sotheby’s, London, 3 December 1952, no. 104, as Jacob Ochtervelt [to Dent]).
- Leander McCormick-Goodhart, Alexandria, Va., by 1954; by descent until 1999 (sale, Christies, London, 9 July 1999, no. 166, as Jacob Ochtervelt [to Johnny Van Haeften Ltd., London, and Otto Naumann, Ltd., New York]).
- [Johnny Van Haeften Ltd., London, and Otto Naumann, Ltd., New York].
- From whom acquired by present owner in 2004.

Provenance Notes

1. Frans van Mieris’s *Death of Lucretia*, now in The Leiden Collection, was also sold in the Count of Fraula’s sale (no. 245).
2. The present painting may also have been in one or both of the following sales, in both cases as by “Mieris” and as the property of Thomas Chippendale Jr.: sale, Christie’s, London, 18 November 1797, lot 33 (for £1.11); and sale, Christie’s, London, 22 December 1798, lot 46 (to Welch[?], for £1.16). Thomas Chippendale Jr., son of the famous furniture maker, was also an artist and occasional dealer in pictures.

Exhibition History

- Amsterdam, Hermitage Amsterdam, “Rembrandt and his Contemporaries: History Paintings from The Leiden Collection,” 4 February–27 August 2023, no. 17 [lent by the present owner].

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Versions

Versions

1. After Caspar Netscher, *Lucretia*, oil on panel, 35.5 x 26.5 cm, Peter Hecht, Utrecht.
2. After Caspar Netscher, *The History of Lucretia*, oil on panel, approx. 38.1 x 45.7 cm, previous sale, Lienau, Hamburg, 13–14 April 1790, no. 248.
3. Circle of Jacob Ochtervelt, *Lucretia*, oil on panel, 30.5 x 25 cm, previous sale, Sotheby's, London, 2011.
4. After Caspar Netscher, *Lucretia*, oil on panel, 29.2 x 25.4 cm, previous sale, Duncan Macalester Loup et al., Bosboom, The Hague, 20 August 1806, no. 193.
5. Variant copy by Toussaint Gelton, *Lucretia*, 1671, panel, Ham House, Surrey (National Trust).

Print

1. Cornelis Henricus van Meurs (b. 1680), after Caspar Netscher, *Lucretia*, engraving, 282 x 250 mm.[1]

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Versions Notes

1. Cornelis Henricus van Meurs also engraved the following paintings in The Leiden Collection: Frans van Mieris, *Woman Reading and a Man Seated at a Table*, probably 1676; Frans van Mieris, *Death of Lucretia*, 1679; and Gerrit Dou, *A Young Woman Playing a Clavichord*, ca. 1665.

Technical Summary

The support, a single plank of vertically grained, rectangular oak, has bevels on all four sides.[1] The panel is unthinned and uncradled and has machine tool marks and three red wax seals but no import stamps or panel maker's marks.

A red-brown ground has been thinly and evenly applied followed by a blue-gray layer. The paint has been thinly and smoothly applied with no use of impasto but with low brush markings along the swags of drapery, garment folds, and dagger contours.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers, and no compositional changes are noted aside from slight shifts in the position of Lucretia's proper left pinky and the contour of her proper right thumb.

The painting is unsigned and undated. A false Jacob Ochtervelt signature and 1676 date were removed during a past conservation treatment.[2]

The painting was cleaned and restored in 1999 prior to its acquisition in 2005. The painting remains in a good state of preservation.

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. The characterization of the wood is based on visual examination only.
2. According to documents provided by Sara Smith, collections manager, The Leiden Collection. The restorer is not named, and this painting is not included on the list of paintings restored for the Gallery by Nancy Krieg in New York.

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