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Salmacis and Hermaphroditus

Samuel van Hoogstraten
(Dordrecht 1627 – 1678 Dordrecht)

ca. 1671–76
oil on canvas
95.7 x 75.5 cm
signed in dark paint, lower right corner: “S.v.H.”
SH-101

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In this seemingly idyllic scene, Samuel van Hoogstraten renders a moment leading up to one of the most surprising stories in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (4.308–88), in which a young man is sexually assaulted by a female nymph.[1] Salmacis, one of Diana's vain water nymphs, fell in love with Hermaphroditus, the youthful and beautiful son of the gods Hermes and Aphrodite, when she noticed him traveling through her territory in Asia Minor. After a futile attempt to seduce her introverted heartthrob, she pretended to leave, only to spy on him from behind a tree. Hermaphroditus, unaware of Salmacis's presence and still dumbfounded by the nymph's unabashed flirtation, took off his clothes and bathed in a stream. Unable to control her lust at seeing Hermaphroditus's perfect, naked body, Salmacis jumped into the water and forced herself onto the struggling youth. Before Hermaphroditus could break free, Salmacis asked the gods to unite them forever. Her plea was heard, and the two bodies were molded into a single androgynous being.

The story of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus was a less common subject than were other stories from *Metamorphoses*, such as Apollo and Daphne or Perseus and Andromeda. Nevertheless, Van Hoogstraten was undoubtedly familiar with several depictions of this scene by Jan Gossaert (1478–1532), Bartholomeus Spranger (1546–1611) and Hendrick Goltzius (1558–1617). Unlike these earlier compositions, in which the nude figures of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus are equally visible and often entwined, Van Hoogstraten's depiction focuses instead on the young Hermaphroditus during his last moments as a separate being, blissfully unaware of the imminent peril awaiting him.[2]

Hermaphroditus, seated on the mossy shore of a gently rippling stream, dips the toes of his outstretched right leg into the water. His proper left hand leans on the ground, while his right hand holds up his white undergarment, revealing his smooth, beautifully formed limbs. His downcast eyes and slight smile emphasize his youthful vulnerability. Suspended from the tree branch above his head are his discarded clothes: a red velvet hat adorned with red and white feathers and a bright yellow, heavy satin robe. Salmacis stands behind the tree branch, her body almost entirely concealed behind Hermaphroditus's yellow mantle. Crowned by a garland of flowers, she peers over the branch, with eyes fixated on the youth.

Van Hoogstraten used several means to focus the viewer's attention on Hermaphroditus. In addition to depicting him in a conspicuous white garment, Van Hoogstraten framed his head with the leaves of the bush behind him and placed the red hat directly above him. Lastly, he painted a pale yellow area to the left of Hermaphroditus's robe to set him apart from the dark tree behind him, a visual ploy to allude to the figure's isolation. That this yellow color was Van Hoogstraten's

Comparative Figures

Fig 1. Detail of *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus*, showing Hermaphroditus's right elbow with the yellow brushstroke accentuating the contour of the elbow, actual-state photograph, 2003

Fig 2. Samuel van Hoogstraten, *Triumph of Truth and Justice*, 1670, oil on canvas, 209 x 204 cm, Finspong Castle, Sweden

Fig 3. Samuel van Hoogstraten, *Resurrection of Christ*, ca. 1670, oil on canvas, 81 x 64.9 cm, The Art Institute of Chicago, Sophia P. Morton Purchase Fund, 1969.110

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conscious design element is evident by the yellow brushstroke visible along the contour of the boy's right elbow (**fig 1**).

Salmacis and Hermaphroditus is the only extant painting by Van Hoogstraten with a narrative derived from classical antiquity.[3] Although the artist is known primarily for his trompe l'oeil paintings, portraits and biblical scenes, archival sources reveal that Van Hoogstraten, who had an excellent command of Latin and often alluded to antiquity in his writings, did execute other classical scenes as well.[4] *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus* was deemed lost until it emerged from obscurity in 2003.[5] It is most likely the "Salmasis en Hermaphroditus door [Hoogstraten]" painting listed in a 1721 archival document as having belonged to the prominent Dordrecht physician Johan de Jongh, who died in 1676.[6] De Jongh lived on the Marktveld, very close to the Steegoversloot where Van Hoogstraten had purchased a house in 1671 after his return from The Hague.[7] De Jongh owned four other works by Van Hoogstraten, which were probably executed in or around 1671.[8] It is therefore likely that Van Hoogstraten also painted *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus* after moving back to his native Dordrecht.

Fig 4. Samuel van Hoogstraten, *The Annunciation of the Death of the Virgin*, ca. 1670, oil on canvas, 66 x 52.7 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Purchase, Rogers Fund and Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, 1992.133, www.metmuseum.org

A dating of around 1671–76 fits within Van Hoogstraten's oeuvre. The smooth finish and palette of evenly distributed reds, greens and blues in *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus* are comparable to the finish and coloring of three other late works by the artist, the 1670 *Triumph of Truth and Justice* in Sweden **(fig 2)**, the Chicago *Resurrection of Christ* dated to ca. 1670 **(fig 3)**, and the New York *Annunciation of the Death of the Virgin* dated to ca. 1670 **(fig 4)**.[9] More specifically, the foliage and the facial features of Justice in the painting in Sweden are similar to the foliage and features of Salmacis. Furthermore, the execution of the angel's yellow robe in the Chicago *Resurrection*, with the distinct light-yellow highlights on the edges of the folds, corresponds closely to Hermaphroditus's yellow garment.

Around the same time that Van Hoogstraten executed *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus*, he was also working on his famous handbook for young painters, *Inleyding tot de Hooge Schoole der Schilderkonst*, which he completed just before his death in 1678.[10] Although his first biographer and former student Arnold Houbraken observed that in his late history paintings Van Hoogstraten would sometimes paint in ways he himself condemned in his handbook, in *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus* the artist generally followed his own instructions.[11] With regard to landscapes, Van Hoogstraten advised young artists to render carefully foreground vegetation and to execute background elements with much looser brushwork. He also recommended that painters include a winding road receding into the background and adorn clear pools of water with rocks.[12] Adherence to these three instructions can be observed in *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus*.

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Despite these recommendations to record nature accurately, including knowing which types of trees grow in mountainous or swampy settings, Van Hoogstraten firmly believed that artists should carefully select which landscape elements to render.[13] Nature should be depicted in a beautiful and idyllic way, where one might imagine nymphs and satyrs roaming the countryside. This classicizing impulse is fully evident in the generalized landscape Van Hoogstraten painted for *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus*. Trees, fields and distant hills, as well as the quiet waters of the stream, have an idealized character appropriate for the mythological story being depicted. This restrained, arcadian setting accords well with the demeanor of the two protagonists, as Hermaphroditus tests the still waters with his bare foot, unaware that Salmacis hides behind a tree, entranced by his beautiful body.

- Ilona van Tuinen, 2017

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Endnotes

1. For an English translation of this passage, see Paul Negri, ed., *The Metamorphoses: Selected Stories in Verse* (Mineola, NY, 2003), 38–42.
2. In Antonio Tempesta's *Metamorphoseon Ovidianarum*, which was published in Amsterdam in 1606 and provided an important source for visual representations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in the seventeenth century, Hermaphroditus and Salmacis are depicted embracing in a stream, with a deer in the background. See the facsimile edition with a preface by Stephen Orgel (New York and London, 1976), pl. 36. In Jan Gossaert's *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus*, ca. 1520, oil on panel, 32.8 x 21.5 cm, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam, the two naked bodies are entwined. In Bartholomeus Spranger's *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus*, ca. 1585, oil on canvas, 110 x 81 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, which Van Hoogstraten could well have seen during his stay in Vienna in the early 1650s, Salmacis's nude body functions as a *repoussoir* in the left foreground as she spies on Hermaphroditus bathing in the right background. For Van Hoogstraten's sojourns in Vienna, see the artist's biography in this catalogue. For Goltzius's engraving, in which the nude Hermaphroditus has just noticed the nude Salmacis behind him, see his *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus*, 1617, 17.9 x 25.4 cm. The relatively uncommon occurrence of this scene in the visual arts is also emphasized by its absence from the Christianized version of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the so-called *Ovide Moralisé*. For the 1484 Burges edition, see M. D. Henkel, ed., *De houtsneden van Mansion's Ovide Moralisé, Bruges 1484* (Amsterdam, 1922).
3. Van Hoogstraten also painted a bust of the Greek philosopher *Heraclitus*, 1660, oil on panel, 40 x 30 cm, Mittelrhein-Museum, Koblenz, Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 vols. (Landau and Pfalz, 1983–94), 2:1292, no. 825.
4. For a discussion of Van Hoogstraten's erudition as a painter and poet, see Michiel Roscam Abbing, *De schilder & schrijver Samuel van Hoogstraten 1627–1678: Eigentijdse bronnen & oeuvre van gesigneerde schilderijen* (Leiden, 1993), 13–14. In his writings, Van Hoogstraten frequently makes reference to classical authors. As for other classical scenes by Van Hoogstraten, see for instance the archival documents mentioning two other scenes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: Michiel Roscam Abbing, *De schilder & schrijver Samuel van Hoogstraten 1627–1678: Eigentijdse bronnen & oeuvre van gesigneerde schilderijen* (Leiden, 1993), 94, no. 36, listed as "1 stuk uit Ovidius van Hoogstraten" from the domestic inventory of Elisabeth Pauli, widow of Alexander de Hoogh, 9 October, 1705, and p. 90, no. 8, "In the beste camer, een van Perseus gedaen door Hoochstraten," taken from the inventory of Maria van Neurenberch, wife of merchant Dirck de Sondt, 11 July 1663. Both documents are kept at the Dordrecht City Archives.
5. See the Provenance section; the painting was auctioned at Sotheby's, London on 10 July 2003 as lot 24.
6. For a transcription of the relevant passages in this document, currently held in the Old Notarial Archive at the Dordrecht City Archives, no. 851, fol. 105r-v and 106r-v, dated 21 June 1721 and describing the household effects of Johan de Jongh's daughter, Johanna de Jongh, see Michiel Roscam Abbing, *De*

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schilder & schrijver Samuel van Hoogstraten 1627–1678: Eigentijdse bronnen & oeuvre van gesigneerde schilderijen (Leiden, 1993), 94–95, no. 39. See also pp. 73–74, no. 107, for a document of 9 October 1676, kept in the Old Notarial Archive at Dordrecht City Archive, no. 197, fol. 33, listing Johan de Jongh's household goods at the time of his death. This document does not list the paintings his daughter Johanna inherited.

7. See Michiel Roscam Abbing, *De schilder & schrijver Samuel van Hoogstraten 1627–1678: Eigentijdse bronnen & oeuvre van gesigneerde schilderijen* (Leiden, 1993), 73–74, no. 107. According to the archival document of 1676, De Jongh lived on the Marktveld close to the stock exchange and the Orangieboom pub ("een geheel huijs ende erfve met allen sijn toebehooren, staende en[de] gelegen opt'Marcktvelt bij de Beurs, tusschen de huijs ende brouwerije genaempt den Orangieboom"). As for Van Hoogstraten's purchase of a house on the Steegoversloot, see the artist's biography in this catalogue.
8. See Michiel Roscam Abbing, *De schilder & schrijver Samuel van Hoogstraten 1627–1678: Eigentijdse bronnen & oeuvre van gesigneerde schilderijen* (Leiden, 1993), 94–95, with commentary. The document mentions a "Sibilla Pithia," a "Royal Wedding," a "Rest on the Flight to Egypt," and a "Hunting Scene" by Van Hoogstraten, as well as a portrait by Van Hoogstraten's father. The "Hunting Scene" is possibly the "Hunting Scene" dated 1676 and auctioned on 20 August 1806, no. 177.
9. For *Triumph of Truth and Justice*, signed and dated, bottom right, "S. v. Hoogstraten / 1670," oil on canvas, 209 x 204 cm, Finspong Castle, Sweden, see Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 vols. (Landau and Pfalz, 1983–94), 2: 1293, 1313, no. 830. For the *Resurrection*, ca. 1670, signed "S.v.H," oil on canvas, 78.7 x 63.2 cm, Chicago Institute of Arts, see ibid., no. 835, where Sumowski dates it to ca. 1665–75. For the *Annunciation of the Death of the Virgin*, ca. 1670, oil on canvas, 66 x 52.7 cm, signed lower left, "S.v.H," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, see Walter Liedtke, *Dutch Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 2 vols (New York, 2007), 1:374–76, no. 91, where Liedtke dates it to ca. 1670.
10. Samuel van Hoogstraten, *Inleyding tot de Hooge Schoole der Schilderkonst: Anders de Zichtbare Werelt* (Rotterdam, 1678). For an elaborate critical discussion of Van Hoogstraten's art theory, see Thijs Weststeijn, *The Visible World: Samuel van Hoogstraten's Art Theory and the Legitimation of Painting in the Dutch Golden Age* (Amsterdam, 2008).
11. "en hy in de laatste jaren van zyn leven, om onverstandigen tot zyn voordeel te vleyen, somtyds dingen in zyn stukken gebragt heeft, die hy in zyn Boek van de gronden der Schilderkonst wraakt." 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), 1:158–59.
12. "Neem naukeurich acht op de klaere voorgront, met Doornen en Distelen en breede blaren bewerkt, laet ze klaer en groot, vry een hoek van uw werk vervullen, en beeldt de verre gezichten met een zachte handt uit"; "Laet het kromme wagespoor, of ter rechter of slinkerhandt, zachtelijk rijzen, hier week en flikkerich, en ginder ten heuvel op, of in mulle zanden, of barre heyden, vlak leggen"; "Laat de klaere beeken met keyen, en de mosachtige poelen en slooten met Endefroost, Kannebladeren, en Biezen versiert zijn." Samuel van Hoogstraten, *Inleyding tot de Hooge Schoole der Schilderkonst: Anders de*

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Zichtbare Werelt (Rotterdam, 1678), fifth chapter of fourth book, 140–41.

13. Samuel van Hoogstraten, *Inleyding tot de Hooge Schoole der Schilderkonst: Anders de Zichtbare Werelt* (Rotterdam, 1678), 138, where he also laments the fact that most landscape painters do not share this ideal: “Duizent ongemeense aerdicheden zien wy dagelijks in dit aengename deel der Natuer, maer men behoorde altijts na ‘t schoonste uit te zien, en, indien ‘t aen my lach, ik zouw veel Landschapschilders van haere al te gemeene en slechte verkiezingen afleiden.”

Provenance

- Probably Johan de Jongh (d. 1676), Dordrecht; by descent to his daughter, Johanna de Jongh (1661–1739), Dordrecht, by 21 June 1721; by descent to her son, Abraham Wensch.
- Possibly Captain Oulsing, Amsterdam (his sale, Hotel Drouot, Paris, 12 February 1853, no. 18).
- Private collection (sale, Sotheby’s, London, 10 July 2003, no. 24 [to Jack Kilgore & Co., Inc., New York]).
- Private collection, Europe [Jack Kilgore & Co., Inc., New York, 2007].
- From whom acquired by the present owner.

Exhibition History

- Poughkeepsie, New York, “Changing Forms: Metamorphosis in Myth, Art, and Nature 1650–1700,” 28 September–19 December 2021, no. 16 [lent by the present owner].
- Amsterdam, Hermitage Amsterdam, “Rembrandt and his Contemporaries: History Paintings from The Leiden Collection,” 4 February–27 August 2023, no. 29 [lent by the present owner].

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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, 132–36, no. 29. [Exhibition catalogue also published in Dutch.]

Technical Summary

The support, a single piece of medium-weight, plain-weave fabric with an arched upper edge, has been lined. The tacking margins have been removed except for a narrow remnant of primed canvas along the arched upper edge, and paper tape extends into the face of the paintings along all four sides.

The lined painting was previously vandalized and sustained two punctures where the central figure's eyes were poked out. A rectangular strip of paper tape along the upper left quadrant of the lining reverse reinforces the repair. There are no wax seals, canvas stamps, stencils, inscriptions, or labels along the lining or stretcher.

A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied followed by a brown underlayer, which remains exposed along the arched upper edge. The paint has been applied smoothly in opaque layers blended wet into wet with no use of impasto except for an area of slightly raised brushwork in the areas of highlight along the gold drapery that hangs over the tree branch on the right side of the composition.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers. Minor compositional changes are revealed along the contours of the central figure's white garment, legs, and proper right foot.

The painting is signed in dark paint along the lower right corner but undated.

The painting was cleaned and restored in 2003 and remains in a good state of preservation.

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