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Sarah Leading Hagar to Abraham

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

1673
oil on canvas
59.5 x 50.5 cm
signed and dated in light paint along upper edge, right of center: “CNetfcher. fecit 1673.”
CN-106

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After many years of marriage, the biblical patriarch Abraham and his wife, Sarah, were unable to conceive a child.[1] In the hope that they might yet beget an heir, Sarah suggested that Abraham try to have a child with her beautiful, young Egyptian maid Hagar. Hagar became pregnant and gave birth to a son, Ishmael, when Abraham was eighty-six years old. When, several years later, Sarah eventually became pregnant and had a son, Isaac, household relations soured. Ishmael began to tease his younger half-brother, leading Sarah to insist that Abraham banish Hagar and Ishmael from the family home; the latter were forced to wander in the desert.

Sarah Leading Hagar to Abraham is one of only two biblical subjects painted by Caspar Netscher (the other is *Bathsheba*, dated 1667).[2] The subject is not only an unusual choice for Netscher, but is generally quite rare in seventeenth-century Dutch art.[3] By contrast, other episodes from the Old Testament story of Hagar were fairly common. The Dismissal of Hagar, when Abraham is later forced to expel the Egyptian concubine and his first-born son, was treated on numerous occasions by Pieter Lastman (1583–1633) and his contemporaries, by Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69), and by artists of the Rembrandt school.[4] The appeal of that particular episode lay largely in the complex web of emotions it presented for both artist and audience: Abraham rendered indecisive by conflicting loyalties—faithful to his wife Sarah yet feeling compassion for Hagar and Ishmael; and Hagar, sorrowful, bereft, and fearful of what the future might hold for herself and her young son. In its contrasting of the comforts of the home with the harsh uncertainties of the desert wilderness, the story served a moralizing purpose as well, reinforcing the primacy of the nuclear family and the importance of maintaining domestic order.[5]

For artists, however, depicting the moment when the aged Sarah introduces her maidservant to her husband with the proposal that he impregnate her in order to fulfill God's will, offered quite a different set of interpretive possibilities. Rather than exploring wrenching emotions and complex familial relationships, artists appear to have been attracted primarily to the story's salacious aspects; many used it as an opportunity to depict a partially clad or nude young woman in an acceptable historical context. The sixteenth-century German printmakers Hans Sebald Beham (1500–50) and Georg Pencz (1500–50) made engravings of the subject, which may in turn have influenced Crispijn de Passe the Elder's engraved illustration for the 1616 edition of the *Liber Genesis*, a widely circulated book of biblical prints. Not until the late 1630s did the subject appear in paintings: three works by the Caravaggesque painter Matthias Stom (ca. 1600–after 1652) highlight the stark contrast between youth and old age, and, with Sarah cast as the aged procuress, Abraham as the client, and Hagar as the compliant prostitute, present a Biblical take on the perennially popular Dutch genre theme of mercenary love.[6]

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Caspar Netscher, *Musical Company,* 1665, oil on panel, 44 x 36 cm, Mauritshuis, The Hague, inv. 125

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Netscher's *Sarah Leading Hagar to Abraham* appears to be the first rendering of the subject in Dutch art for more than two decades, and takes the story in a rather different direction. Like Stom, Netscher's depiction is influenced by contemporary genre paintings, but rather than looking to bold Caravaggesque scenes of prostitutes, procuresses and their lusty clients, Netscher's painting fits comfortably in the rarified world of his own elegantly appointed portraits and domestic interiors. Compare, for example, the highly decorative effect of the lush *Portrait of Caspar Ingels and Maria Christina Bartolotti van den Heuvel*, 1672, or a genteel genre scene such as *Musical Company* of 1665 (**fig 1**).[7]

Traces of the forbidden sensuality and questionable morality that characterize Stom's dramatic depictions of Sarah, Hagar and Abraham still linger in Netscher's painting, though they are far more discreetly packaged. Perhaps taking his cue from the Bible, which states that Abraham "was very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold" (Genesis 13:2), Netscher envelops the figures in luxury: shimmering bed curtains, a massive gold ewer and shallow basin, plush carpets on the table and floor, and fine silk and velvet garments for the figures themselves. Sarah is no longer a haggard crone with clear links to the stereotypical image of the procuress, but a dignified and mature woman, an image more in keeping with her status as the mother of the Jewish nation. Hagar, posed frontally and gazing directly at the viewer, appears oddly disconnected from the transaction that soon dramatically alters her life. Indeed, her attention seems focused entirely on the viewer.

Hagar's utter passivity and coy outward gaze are expressly designed to entice the viewer, and her half-hearted attempts to preserve her modesty by covering her breasts and grabbing at her white satin gown to prevent it from sliding completely to the floor in fact only draw attention to the voluptuous body beneath. A servant peers from behind the canopied bed curtains at right, her eager spying echoing our own voyeuristic anticipation. The emphasis of Netscher's painting is on lush visual delights and titillating sensuality; emotions are politely held in check, and the conversation between Sarah and Abraham seems simple and pragmatic, with little evident concern for future repercussions.

The exceptional state of preservation of *Sarah Leading Hagar to Abraham* allows us to fully appreciate Netscher's delicate touch and skillful application of paint. His ability to distinguish the varied tactile surfaces within this richly appointed interior enhances the work's overall sensuality. Although it is not known for whom Netscher painted *Sarah Leading Hagar to Abraham*, this work was later acquired by Philippe II, duc d'Orléans (1674–1723), Palais Royal, Paris, and stayed in that family's collection until the late eighteenth century.

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- Marjorie E. Wieseman, 2017

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Endnotes

1. The story of Hagar is recounted in Genesis 16 and Genesis 21.
2. Oil on panel, 42 x 36 cm, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich, inv. 1400. Marjorie E. Wieseman, *Caspar Netscher and Late Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting* (Doornspijk, 2002), no. 61.
3. Christine Petra Sellin, *Fractured Families and Rebel Maidservants: The Biblical Hagar in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art and Literature* (New York, 2006), 69 and ff., identifies only 11 examples.
4. Richard Hamann, "Hagars abscheid bei Rembrandt und im Rembrandt-Kreise," *Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft* 8–9 (1936): 471–578; and Christine Petra Sellin, *Fractured Families and Rebel Maidservants: The Biblical Hagar in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art and Literature* (New York, 2006), 106–32.
5. Christine Petra Sellin, *Fractured Families and Rebel Maidservants: The Biblical Hagar in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art and Literature* (New York, 2006), 119–24.
6. Matthias Stom, *Sarah Leading Hagar to Abraham*, 1640s, oil on canvas, 81.5 x 100 cm, Göteborgs Konstmuseum, Göteborg, inv. GKM 1496. See Christine Petra Sellin, *Fractured Families and Rebel Maidservants: The Biblical Hagar in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art and Literature* (New York, 2006), 76–77.
7. Marjorie E. Wieseman, *Caspar Netscher and Late Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting* (Doornspijk, 2002), nos. 118 and 52 respectively.

Provenance

- Philippe II, duc d'Orléans (1674–1723), Palais Royal, Paris; by descent to his son, Louis, duc d'Orléans (1703–52), Paris (sale, Paris, 9 June 1727, unsold [as "Une jeune Femme & un Viellard"]); by descent to his son, Louis Philippe, duc d'Orléans (1725–85), Paris; by descent to his son, Louis Philippe Joseph, duc d'Orléans (1747–93), Paris [Thomas Moore Slade, London, 1792, purchased in association with the 7th Baron Kinnaird (1754–1805), W. Morland and Thomas Hammersley (Orléans sale, London, April 1793, no. 86)].
- Col. Le Blanc, London (sale, Christie's, London, 27 May 1820, no. 97, as companion to no. 98 [CN-111], unsold; sale, Christie's, London, 16 June 1820, no. 122, as companion to no. 123 [CN-111] [for £36.15 to Wilkins]).
- William Wilkins (1778–1839), London (his sale, Christie's, London, 22 May 1830, no. 4 [for £157.10 to Bone for Neeld]).
- Joseph Neeld (1789–1856), Grittleton House, Wiltshire, by 1830; by descent to his brother, Sir John

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Neeld, 1st bt. (1805–91), Grittleton House; by descent to his son, Sir Algernon William Neeld, 2nd bt. (1846–1900), Grittleton House; by descent to his brother, Sir Audley Dallas Neeld, 3rd bt. (1849–1941), Grittleton House; to Joseph Neeld's descendant via an illegitimate daughter, Lionel William [Inigo-Jones] Neeld [d. 1956], Grittleton House (Neeld sale, Christie, Manson & Woods, London, 13 July 1945, no. 76 [for £189 to Betts]).

- [Eugene Slatter Gallery, London, 1950].
- D. Molyneux-Cohan (sale, Sotheby's, London, 2 December 1964, no. 93).
- [H. Shickman Gallery, New York, by 1967 to Sardinsky].
- Sol Sardinsky, Philadelphia, 1967–2005 [Noortman Master Paintings, 2005].
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2005.

Exhibition History

- London, Royal Academy, "The Orléans Gallery Now Exhibiting at the Great Rooms," April–June 1793, no. 86.
- London, British Institution, "Catalogue of Pictures by Spanish, Flemish, Dutch, and English Masters with which the Proprietors Have Favoured This Institution," June 1829, no. 183 [lent by William Wilkins].
- London, Eugene Slatter, "1950 Exhibition of Dutch and Flemish Masters," 10 May–8 July 1950, no 22 [lent by Eugene Slatter].
- New York, H. Shickman Gallery, "Exhibition of Dutch Seventeenth-Century Paintings," October 1967, no. 12 [lent by H. Shickman].
- Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, on loan with the permanent collection, October 2002–August 2005 [lent by Sol Sardinsky].
- Maastricht, European Fine Arts Fair, March 2005 [exhibited by Noortman Master Paintings].
- New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, on loan with the permanent collection, February–September 2014 [lent by the present owner].
- Paris, Museé du Louvre, "Masterpieces of The Leiden Collection: The Age of Rembrandt," 22 February–22 May 2017 [lent by the present owner].
- Beijing, National Museum of China, "Rembrandt and His Time: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection," 17 June–3 September 2017 [lent by the present owner].
- Shanghai, Long Museum, West Bund, "Rembrandt, Vermeer and Hals in the Dutch Golden Age: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection," 23 September 2017–25 February 2018 [lent by the present owner].
- Moscow, The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, "The Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer: Masterpieces

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of The Leiden Collection," 28 March 2018–22 July 2018 [lent by the present owner].

- St. Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum, "The Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer: Masterpieces of The Leiden Collection," 5 September 2018–13 January 2019 [lent by the present owner].
- 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 [lent by the present owner].
- Amsterdam, Hermitage Amsterdam, "Rembrandt and his Contemporaries: History Paintings from The Leiden Collection," 4 February–27 August 2023, no. 19 [lent by the present owner].

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1837–39, 1:339.

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[Exhibition catalogue also published in French and Arabic.]

- Ducos, Blaise, and Lara Yeager-Crasselt, eds. *Rembrandt, Vermeer and the Dutch Golden Age. Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection and the Musée du Louvre*. Exh. cat. Abu Dhabi, Louvre Abu Dhabi. London, 2019, 146, no. 68. [Exhibition catalogue also published in French and Arabic.]
- 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, 88–91, no. 19. [Exhibition catalogue also published in Dutch.]

Versions
Engraved

1. Louis-Michel Halbou, *Sarah Leading Hagar to Abraham*, 1794, engraving and drypoint, 194 x 161 mm; in Abbé de Fontenai, *Galerie du Palais Royal gravée d'après les tableaux des différentes Écoles qui la composent, avec un abrégé de la vie des peintres* (Paris, 1786–1808), 3: under "Gaspard Netscher."

Versions and Copies

1. After Caspar Netscher, *Sarah Leading Hagar to Abraham*, canvas, 60 x 50 cm, formerly King of Wurtemburg, sale, Residenzschloss, Stuttgart, 27–29 November 1919, no. 95 (as by Eglon van der Neer, "Der orientalische Sklavenhändler mit Kupplerin").
2. After Caspar Netscher, *Sarah Leading Hagar to Abraham*, support unknown, 23 x 18 pouces, formerly Berger, sale, Paris, 20 October 1817, no. 58.
3. School of Caspar Netscher, *Sarah Leading Hagar to Abraham*, support and dimensions unknown, formerly De Vauglas, Samson et al., sale, Paris, 28–30 September 1818, no. 99.
4. After Caspar Netscher, *Sarah Leading Hagar to Abraham*, support unknown, 76.2 x 66 cm, formerly Field Marshal Andoche Junot, Duke of Abrantes; his sale, Christie's, London, 7 July 1817, no. 26; his sale, Christie's, London, 4 May 1818, no. 49; sale LNV PA 24 12 1822 no 16.
5. After Caspar Netscher, *Sarah Leading Hagar to Abraham*, canvas, 20 x 18 pouces, formerly Comte de Walterstorff, sale, Paris, 27–28 March 1821, no. 89.
6. After Caspar Netscher, *Sarah Leading Hagar to Abraham*, canvas, 55.9 x 40.6 cm, sale, Cologne, 28 June 1890, no. 62.
7. Attributed to Constantijn Netscher, *Sarah Leading Hagar to Abraham*, canvas, dimensions unknown, formerly P. J. Herrenschwand Collection, sale, Paris, 24 January 1810, no. 101.
8. After Caspar Netscher, *Sarah Leading Hagar to Abraham*, support and dimensions unknown, formerly Dufresne, sale, Destouches, Paris, 26 March 1810, no. 123.

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Technical Summary

The support, a single piece of fine-weight, plain-weave fabric with tacking margins removed has been lined and mounted to a stretcher over a rigid paperboard. Cusping along the upper, left and lower edges indicates the support's original dimensions have not been significantly altered, other than perhaps along the right edge. There is a paper label and a pencil inscription but no wax collection seals, stencils or import stamps along the paperboard or stretcher reverse.

A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied followed by opaque layers of smoothly applied paint blended wet-into-wet with slightly raised brushwork along the gold pitcher and the underplate's highlights. Delicate dabs of paint create the illusion of the pile of the carpet draped over the table.

An underdrawing is visible along Abraham's neck, beard, and drapery in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers, and compositional changes evident in the X-radiograph include shifts in the position of Abraham's head and gaze.

The painting is signed and dated in light paint along the upper edge, just right of center.

The painting was cleaned and restored in 2006 and remains in an excellent state of preservation.[1]

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. The painting was examined on-site without a stereomicroscope. Magnification provided by a 5x Optivisor.

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