



Self-Portrait with Magic Scene

Pieter van Laer
(Haarlem 1599 – 1642 Italy?)

ca. 1635–37

oil on canvas

80 x 114.9 cm

signed on the music sheet, lower left center: “P.V.
Laer”

PvL-100



How to cite

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In one of the most remarkable self-portraits ever created, Pieter van Laer reacts with horror to the frightening claws of the devil that have suddenly come to claim him. Dressed in the black cloak and cap of a magician, the artist, with bulging eyes and open mouth, has witnessed this apparition while standing behind a table filled with books, some with alchemical notations, a variety of vessels, a snuffed-out candle, and a skull resting on hot coals. To emphasize the personal character of this dramatic image, Van Laer prominently signed this work on the musical score lying in the foreground, its lyrics warning that “the devil doesn’t jest.” Clearly, in his conjuring up a world of occult forces, the magician has unleashed realms far beyond his control, and he is about to suffer the consequences of his audacity.

The magician’s identification as Van Laer is without question. His appearance is best known from a moody self-portrait in the Uffizi, Florence (**fig 1**).^[1] That work, which probably dates about 1632–33, records a number of distinctive features similar to those in the present picture: a broad, brushy, upturned mustache, a short beard, a slim nose with a rounded tip, widely arching eyebrows, and a shaggy haircut flaring sideways at the ears.

The darkness of the scene, which is partially lit by a metal oil lamp hanging in the upper left, and the strange array of objects on the magician’s table denote Van Laer’s macabre fascination with the underworld. The extinguished candle in the center of the picture has burned halfway down, perhaps suggesting the arrival of death midway through the course of one’s life. A thin trail of smoke rising from the upside-down skull, which sits on glowing embers, probably indicates that some unsavory concoction is being heated in this morbid cooking pot.^[2] Various vessels contain unidentified liquids—a small mixing bowl filled with a red substance and a square bottle containing a copper-colored fluid—that one can imagine the magician using to create his potions. The eeriest of these vessels is the tapered glass with black creatures crawling on its surface. The creature that resembles a spider in the center foreground is most likely a deadly scorpion.

The pellets or seeds spilling out of a paper cone in the right foreground could be another ingredient for the magician’s brew, or perhaps an allusion to the Parable of the Tares (or Weeds) in Matthew 13:24–30 and 36–43, according to which the devil sows the seeds of sinful men among the seeds of those who will be saved. The parable was frequently employed by preachers of the time and was also treated by artists—for example, by Jacques de Gheyn II (1565–1629) in a drawing of 1603, by Domenico Fetti (1588/89–1623) in a painting of about 1622, and by Abraham Bloemaert (1566–1651) in a painting of 1624.^[3]

The books on the table are not identified by authors’ names or titles, which is to be

Comparative Figures

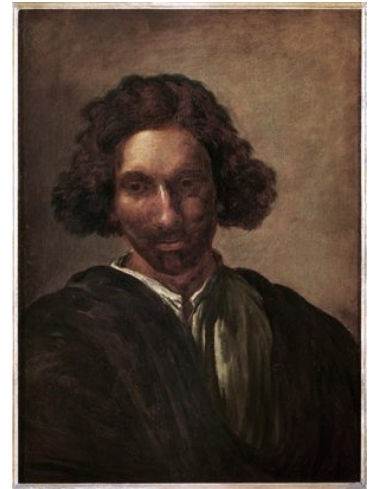


Fig 1. Pieter van Laer, *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1632–33, oil on panel, 72 x 58 cm, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, © 2015, Photo Scala, Florence, courtesy of the Ministero Beni e Att. Culturali



Fig 2. Pieter van Laer, *The Bentveughels in a Roman Tavern*, ca. 1630, brown ink and wash on paper, 20.3 x 25.8 cm, Kupferstichkabinet, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, inv. 5239



Fig 3. Gianlorenzo Bernini, *The Damned Soul*, 1619, marble, Palazzo di Spagna, Rome

expected considering their likely content. Publications dealing with occult knowledge were included among the thousands of works listed in the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (Index of Prohibited Books), which was frequently updated by the Congregation of the Index, the pope, and the Holy Office of the Inquisition; any knowledge of them could have landed Van Laer in difficult circumstances. The handwritten markings on the end of the largest book may be the artist's approximation of Hebrew letters or a magical alphabet, suggesting heretical or esoteric ideas.^[4] The symbols in the open book appear to be associated with magic and witchcraft, although the exact meanings of most of them are no longer understood.^[5] The five-pointed inverted pentagram, however, represents the devil.^[6] The pierced heart likely suggests suffering (especially from love), grief, or death. As is common in alchemical scenes of the seventeenth century, the individual motifs and symbols do not add up to a coherent message but rather create an atmosphere of illicit pursuits.

The prominent sheet of music that contains the artist's signature is identified as a "Canon a 3 [voci]" (canon, or round, for three voices), specifically three tenors, according to the key indicated on the staff. Van Laer's canon appears to be composed either in the Phrygian mode, which descends in a sequence called a "diabolus in musica," or as the sketch of a "crab canon" (*canon cancrizans*), in which two musical lines reverse each other.^[7] The crab is known for its back and forth movement, just as the devil runs counter to the divine plan.^[8] In either case, the lyrics, "il diavolo no burla no il diav . . . a" (the devil doesn't jest no the devil . . .), leave no doubt as to the warning that the painting conveys.

Although this painting is primarily concerned with the occult and witchcraft, it has certain resonances with alchemy. The alchemist's labors were intimately bound to the study and early practice of chemistry, and a huge amount of literature evolved in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries explaining the types of physical matter and the processes by which one could conduct experiments to transform one element into another. It was, for many, a respectable profession, and its scholarly component is evident in the list of significant scientists who sought to separate the essence of matter from its base components, among them Robert Boyle (1627–91) and Sir Isaac Newton (1642–1727).^[9] Many alchemists made significant scientific contributions to the development of, among other items, medicines and cosmetics, as well as pigments and dyes. Nevertheless, alchemy's ambiguous status in popular culture derived from its origins in natural philosophy, metaphysics, and religion. Alchemists were secretive about the processes that allowed them to make their transformations, and their texts and treatises utilized a wide range of occult signs and symbols similar to those seen in the open manuscript in Van Laer's haunting painting.

Too little is known of Van Laer's life to fully understand the psychological



Fig 4. Angelo Caroselli, *La Negromante*, ca. 1625, oil on canvas, 44 x 35 cm, Pinacoteca Civica "F. Podesti" – Ancona



Fig 5. Pietro Paolini, *Negromante*, ca. 1630, oil on canvas, 70 x 93 cm, Collezione Cavallini Sgarbi, Ferrara



underpinnings that undoubtedly impacted this terrifying vision and drove him to paint it. Perhaps his interest in witchcraft derived from his deformed body—hunchbacked with a lower body three times larger than his torso. In Rome, where he painted this work in the mid-1630s, he was known as “il Bamboccio” (clumsy puppet) because of his stunted torso. In his day, exposure to witchcraft was often said (especially by eager Inquisitors) to result in physical deformity.

Van Laer had a successful career in Rome, but he also seems to have lived a raucous life as part of a group of Netherlandish artists, the *Schildersbent* (painters’ group), who called themselves *Bentvueghels* (usually translated as “birds of a feather,” but in this case meaning “The Bent Flock”). The fraternity was known for its frolicsome meetings in taverns, especially its bacchic initiation rites and its antagonistic stance toward the high-minded Accademia di San Luca. This community of artists, however, also seems to have shared in Van Laer’s fascination with the occult. This interest is seen in an intriguing painting by Van Laer’s brother, Roeland van Laer (1598–ca. 1635), from around 1626, that depicts the *Bentvueghels* wildly drinking and performing a *tableau vivant* in a tavern during some sort of initiation rite.^[10] Graffiti—including proverbs, exhortations, a depiction of a flaming heart pierced by an arrow, and the same musical score that Pieter van Laer included in his painting—covers the back wall of the room. Interestingly, Roeland signed his painting on that score, just as Pieter would later do in *Self-Portrait with Magic Scene*.^[11]

In about 1630 Pieter van Laer made a fascinating drawing of the *Bentvueghels* in a tavern, which also includes motifs also relevant to the present painting (**fig 2**).^[12] The drawing depicts members of the *Bentvueghels* drinking, smoking, playing backgammon, and vocalizing in a room decorated with numerous line drawings on the back wall. Two figures stand apart from the revelers, one pointing at the word “BAMBOO” (an abbreviation for *Bamboccio*), and the other leaning against the back wall. Between them two drawings on the back wall depict Van Laer, one a geometric cartoon of his short figure as seen from behind and the other a caricature of his head in profile. Ominously, however, on the right side of the wall is a drawing of a large skeleton (Death) holding up an hourglass, and next to it a large, full-length horned figure with satyr’s legs and wings holding out a claw-like hand not unlike the outstretched claws in the painting.^[13] The overall appearance of this creature is in complete accord with contemporary illustrations of the devil, such as those in the 1608 “book of witches,” titled *Compendium Maleficarum*, by the Italian priest Guaccius (Francesco Maria Guazzo).^[14] This macabre juxtaposition of a festive gathering with drawings of Death and the devil suggests that complex feelings and emotions were ingrained in the lives of the *Bentvueghels*, not just in Van Laer’s experience.



Van Laer's self-portrait shares an interest in rendering the passions then current in Italian and Netherlandish studios in Rome. Caravaggio (1571–1610), in particular, was fascinated by the challenge of depicting the emotions of fear and surprise.^[15] Van Laer would have known and admired Caravaggio's *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* of about 1593–94 (National Gallery, London); *Head of Medusa*, of 1596–98 (Uffizi, Florence); the astonished Assyrian in *Judith and Holofernes*, of about 1598–99 (Palazzo Barberini, Rome); and his later *David with the Head of Goliath*, of 1605–10 (Galleria Borghese, Rome).^[16] One of the most important antecedents for Van Laer's screaming self-portrait was probably the famous marble bust by Gianlorenzo Bernini (1598–1680), *The Damned Soul* of 1619 (**fig 3**), in which the artist also employed his own features in his representation of a mortal on his way to hell.^[17]

Paintings from the 1620s and early 1630s depicting scenes of the occult by Angelo Caroselli (1585–1653) and his student and collaborator Pietro Paolini (1603–81) must have also influenced Van Laer.^[18] Caroselli and Paolini, who worked together in Rome in the 1620s, painted necromancers, or practitioners of black magic, whose facial expressions are reminiscent of Caravaggio's *Boy Bitten by a Lizard*.^[19] Their depictions of the occult reflect Bartolomeo Manfredi's (1582–1622) manner of painting genre scenes, which are imbued with emotion, fantastic elements, and moralistic undertones.^[20] The influence of this pictorial tradition is strikingly evident in Van Laer's self-portrait.

In Caroselli's paintings, female necromancers express fear as they recoil with raised hands, open mouths, and furrowed brows.^[21] For example, the sorceress in his *Negromante* of about 1625 (**fig 4**) exclaims in terror as she turns away from the spindly claws that enter the composition at left. These claws would have been understood as manifestations of the evil spirit invoked by the ritual.^[22] In the foreground, a skull rests upon burning embers beside an open book displaying symbols of the occult. A lit candle protrudes from the center of a geometric diagram on one page that likely represents a maze or labyrinth.^[23] Behind the necromancer, a nude figure carries a child toward sacrificial flames, reinforcing the sorceress's malevolent intentions.

In his *Negromante* of about 1630 (**fig 5**), Paolini reimagined Caroselli's subject as a male protagonist with outstretched arms, recoiling in fear from claws entering from the right.^[24] Like Caroselli, Paolini included a skull and a book, a page of which is partially turned, suggesting that the figure's pursuit of magic has been interrupted by the sudden appearance of a clawed specter. The motif of the skull on burning coals, present in all three artists' compositions, suggests the relationship between the black arts and death, and also serves as a link between the practitioner and the realm of the spirits.^[25] In his rendering of the subject, Van Laer heightened the sense of surprise



and immediacy through virtuosic chiaroscuro, particularly evident in his terrified expression and the chaotic arrangement of foreboding still-life elements that occupy the foreground.

No information is known about the original destination of Van Laer's remarkable self-portrait, but it seems probable that he created this frightening image from some inner motivation rather than to fulfill a commission. Nevertheless, during the early seventeenth century a painting like this would have appealed to Van Laer's Roman patrons because of the wider artistic interest in intense visual drama and personal expression. In Rome, as well, the theme of magic as a dangerous temptation was particularly apt: in no other city did curiosity about the natural world so often collide with orthodox belief.^[26]

- Walter A. Liedtke, Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., 2017; revised Alexa J. McCarthy, 2019

Endnotes

1. See Karla Langedijk, *Die Selbstbildnisse der holländischen und flämischen Künstler in der Galleria degli Autoritratti der Uffizien in Florenz* (Florence, 1992), 61–63, where Van Laer's earlier self-portrait in the Galleria Pallavicini, Rome, and other evidence for his appearance are also discussed.
2. Mario G. Genesi, "Per una decodifica dei dettagli magico-musicali nella *Scena Magica con Autoritratto* di Pieter Bodding van Laer," *Music in Art* 30, nos. 1–2 (2005): 89, suggested that the smoke was from burning incense.
3. De Gheyn's drawing is in the Kupferstichkabinet, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin; Bloemaert's painting is in the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore; Fetti's is in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid. In the case of De Gheyn, the subject seems of a piece with several scenes of witchcraft he drew at about the same time. On this point see Linda C. Hults, *The Witch as Muse: Art, Gender, and Power in Early Modern Europe* (Philadelphia, 2005), 152–57.
4. The Kabbalah, along with magic and astrology, was one of the many controversial interests that doomed Giordano Bruno (burned at the stake in Rome on 17 February 1600), as discussed in Karen Silvia de León-Jones, *Giordano Bruno and the Kabbalah: Prophets, Magicians, and Rabbis* (Lincoln, NE, 2004). All of Bruno's writings were placed on the Index in 1603. Similarly, German theologian Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim was named a heretic for his *De occulta philosophia* (1533), in which he argued that through magic one could come to better understand God and the natural world. In his analysis, Agrippa drew upon the Hebrew alphabet and Pythagorean numerology, among other sources.
5. The numbers in a column (6?, 4, and 7) could be the beginning of a magic square (in which the numbers in each column, row, and main diagonal yield the same sum).
6. Kathryn Paulsen, *The Complete Book of Magic and Witchcraft* (New York, 1980), 149. When the point is at the top it represents the deity.
7. These alternatives are described in Mario G. Genesi, "Per una decodifica dei dettagli magico-musicali nella *Scena Magica con Autoritratto* di Pieter Bodding van Laer," *Music in Art* 30, nos. 1–2 (2005): 91–95.
8. As suggested in Laurence Wuidar, "Magie démoniaque et allégorie de l'ouïe: Le canon musical dans les vanités de Breughel, Natali et Van Laer," *Annales d'histoire de l'art et d'archéologie* 27 (2005): 106–7, where crabs are also said to be associated with love and fortune because of their reversals and conflicts.
9. For this history, see, among others, H.A.M. Snelders, *De geschiedenis van de scheikunde in Nederland*, vol. 1, *Van alchemie tot chemie en chemische industrie rond 1900* (Delft, 1993), 11–25; Lawrence M. Principe and Lloyd DeWitt, *Transmutations—Alchemy in Art: Selected Works from the Eddleman and Fisher Collections at the Chemical Heritage Foundation* (Philadelphia, 2002); and Lawrence M. Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy* (Chicago, 2013), especially chapter 5: "The Golden Age: Practicing Chemistry in the Early Modern Period."

10. Roeland van Laer, *Bentveughels in a Roman Tavern*, ca. 1626, oil on canvas, 88.5 x 147.5 cm (Museo di Roma, Rome). For a discussion of this painting, see Thomas Kren, “Chi non vuol Baccho: Roeland van Laer’s Burlesque Painting about Dutch Artists in Rome,” *Simiolus* 11 (1980): 63–80; and David A. Levine, Giulio Briganti, and Ekkehard Mai, eds., *I Bamboccianti: Niederländische Malerrebellen im Rom des Barock* (Exh. cat. Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum; Utrecht, Centraal Museum) (Milan, 1991), 209–11, no. 20.1.
11. Associations between the texts in these two paintings were first made in David A. Levine, Giulio Briganti, and Ekkehard Mai, eds., *I Bamboccianti: Niederländische Malerrebellen im Rom des Barock* (Exh. cat. Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum; Utrecht, Centraal Museum) (Milan, 1991), 199–201, no. 19.7.
12. David Levine, “Pieter van Laer’s Artists’ Tavern: An Ironic Commentary on Art,” in *Holländische Genremalerei im 17. Jahrhundert: Symposium Berlin 1984*, ed. Henning Bock and Thomas W. Gaehtgens, special issue no. 4, *Jahrbuch Preussischer Kulturbesitz* (1987): 175–76.
13. A figure or other form in the center of the wall has been rubbed out, perhaps because of some obscene aspect, as suggested by Holm Bevers, *Aus Rembrandts Zeit: Zeichenkunst in Hollands Goldenem Jahrhundert* (Exh. cat. Berlin, Kupferstichkabinet, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) (Berlin, 2011), 95, under no. 66.
14. The figure has been identified in the past as either Pan or Chronos, whose attributes include satyr’s legs or wings, respectively (though neither bears these traits in combination). Many of Guaccius’s woodcut illustrations are reproduced in Emile Grillo de Givry, *Illustrated Anthology of Sorcery, Magic and Alchemy* (London, 1991). Compare also the devil with wings, horns, and satyr’s legs in Willem van Swanenburgh’s engraving of 1609, *A Beardless Youth and the Devil at an Easel*, which is compared with a similar print, of 1550, by D.V. Coornhert after Maarten van Heemskerck, in Claudia Swan, *Art, Science, and Witchcraft in Early Modern Holland: Jacques de Gheyn II (1565–1629)* (Cambridge, 2005), 184–85, fig. 67. The devil and Death (in the form of a skeleton) appear as a pair in numerous sixteenth-century prints, such as *Death and the Devil Come for the Card Player* in Hans Holbein the Younger’s famous series of woodcuts *The Dance of Death* (1523–26). The group to the right in Van Laer’s drawing bears some resemblance to Holbein’s ensemble, especially as seen in the reversed version by the monogrammist GS.
15. See Jennifer Montagu, *The Expression of the Passions* (New Haven and London, 1994), chapter 5, on this tradition, mainly in Rome; and Dagmar Hirschfelder, *Tronie und Porträt in der niederländischen Malerei des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 2008), 321–34. On the theoretical background, see Franziska Gottwald, *Das Tronie: Muster, Studie und Meisterwerk* (Berlin and Munich, 2011), chapter 2.
16. Interestingly, Van Laer originally included a raised hand in the left background of *Self-Portrait with Magic Scene*, as in *Boy Bitten by a Lizard*, although such excited gestures are common in Italian baroque art.
17. Irving Lavin, “Bernini’s Bust of the Medusa: An Awful Pun,” in *Docere, delectare, movere: Affetti, devozione e retorica nel linguaggio artistico del primo barocco romano. Atti del convegno organizzato*

dall'Istituto olandese a Roma e dalla Bibliotheca Hertziana (Max-Planck-Institut) in collaborazione con l'Università cattolica di Nijmegen. Roma, 19–20 gennaio, 1996 (Rome, 1998), 165, fig. 20, relates *The Damned Soul* to other expressive heads by Bernini and to the sculptor's admiration of the ancient *Laocoön*.

18. The Leiden Collection is grateful to Bert Schepers, senior editor, Centrum Rubenianum, Antwerp, for drawing our attention to these paintings. At least three compositions are closely related to Van Laer's *Self-Portrait*: Angelo Caroselli, *Negromante*, ca. 1620–25, oil on canvas, 60 x 65 cm (formerly in Galerie Canesso, Lucano and Paris, now in an unknown location); Angelo Caroselli, *Negromante*, ca. 1625, oil on canvas, 44 x 35 cm (Pinacoteca Civica Francesco Podesti, Ancona) (fig 4); and Pietro Paolini, *Negromante*, ca. 1630, oil on canvas, 70 x 92 cm (Collezione Cavallini Sgarbi, Ferrara) (fig 5).

Caroselli revisited the themes of witchcraft and magic throughout his career, and his depictions of these subjects were popular among Roman patrons. The 28 August 1687 Roman inventory of Caterina Chellini's estate taken upon her death includes a *Donna impaurita* (a scared woman) by Caroselli (Getty Provenance Index databases, J. Paul Getty Trust, Archival Inventory I-942 [Chellini], item 262). A painting by an unidentified artist described as depicting a "*negro mante*" appears in the Roman inventory of Cardinal Francesco Barberini's (1597–1679) wardrobe, compiled between 10 December 1626 and 15 November 1631 (Getty Provenance Index databases, J. Paul Getty Trust, Archival Inventory I-3715 [Barberini], item 266); see also Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, *Seventeenth-Century Barberini Documents and Inventories of Art* (New York, 1975), III, inv. 26–31, 74, no. 266. Marta Rossetti has suggested that this description could refer to either Caroselli's Ancona canvas, or the painting formerly with Galerie Canesso in Lucano and Paris. Marta Rossetti, "L'Arcano Angelo Caroselli," in *L'Incantesimo di Circe: Temi di magia nella pittura da Dosso Dossi a Salvator Rosa*, ed. Stefania Macioce (Rome, 2004), 118; Marta Rossetti, *Angelo Caroselli 1585–1652: Copista, pasticheur, restauratore, conoscitore* (Rome, 2015), 178–82, no. 19; 182–89, no. 20.

19. Caroselli introduced Paolini to themes of witchcraft and alchemy when they worked together in the 1620s. Marta Rossetti, "L'Arcano Angelo Caroselli," in *L'Incantesimo di Circe: Temi di magia nella pittura da Dosso Dossi a Salvator Rosa*, ed. Stefania Macioce (Rome, 2004), 117–18, cited in Barbara Savina, "Pietro Paolini, *Negromante*," in *La Collezione Cavallini Sgarbi Da Niccolò dell'Arca a Gaetano Previati*, ed. Pietro di Natale (Exh. cat. Ferrara, Castello Estense) (Ferrara, 2018), 174, no. 56.

After working in both Rome and Venice, Paolini returned to his native Lucca, where he established an academy in ca. 1652. His works figure in Lucchese inventories, including those of Mansi and Buonvisi. See Patrizia Giusta Maccari, "Documenti," in *Pietro Paolini pittore lucchese, 1603–1681* (Lucca, 1987), 191–94.

20. Barbara Savina, "Pietro Paolini, *Negromante*," in *La Collezione Cavallini Sgarbi Da Niccolò dell'Arca a Gaetano Previati*, ed. Pietro di Natale (Exh. cat. Ferrara, Castello Estense) (Ferrara, 2018), 174, no. 56.
21. For these paintings by Caroselli, see note 18.
22. Vittorio Sgarbi, *Il Male: Esercizi di Pittura Crudele*, 2 vols. (Exh. cat. Turin, Palazzina Di Caccia Di Stupinigi) (Milan, 2005), 1: 332, no. 92.



23. David Fontana, *The Secret Language of Symbols: A Visual Key to Symbols and Their Meanings* (San Francisco, 1994), 62.
24. Marta Rosetti, “L’Arcano Angelo Caroselli,” in *L’Incantesimo di Circe: Temi di magia nella pittura da Dosso Dossi a Salvator Rosa*, ed. Stefania Macioce (Rome, 2004), 118; Marta Rosetti, *Angelo Caroselli 1585–1652: Copista, pasticheur, restauratore, conoscitore* (Rome, 2015), 107–9. In 1597, King James VI (1566–1625) first published his highly influential *Daemonologie* in three parts, discussing magic, sorcery, demonology, and witchcraft. This text distinguished the male magician from the female witch. The magician’s interest in the dark arts stems from a quest for knowledge, whereas the witch’s motives are vindictive and self-serving. Indeed, depictions of female necromancers warned men against the powerful wiles of women. Marta Rosetti, “L’Arcano Angelo Caroselli,” in *L’Incantesimo di Circe: Temi di magia nella pittura da Dosso Dossi a Salvator Rosa*, ed. Stefania Macioce (Rome, 2004), 107–8. Caroselli’s female subjects would have been viewed as complicit, willing participants, whereas Paolini and Van Laer’s male subjects would have been considered victims who were not entirely aware of magic’s potential outcomes. Vittorio Sgarbi, *Il Male: Esercizi di Pittura Crudele*, 2 vols. (Exh. cat. Turin, Palazzina Di Caccia Di Stupinigi) (Milan, 2005), 1: 332, no. 92.
25. Charles Zika, *The Appearance of Witchcraft: Print and Visual Culture in Sixteenth-Century Europe* (London and New York, 2007), 127.
26. See the case of Giordano Bruno mentioned in note 4 above. Galileo was tried and convicted by the Inquisition in Rome in 1633. See also David Freedberg, *The Eye of the Lynx: Galileo, His Friends, and the Beginnings of Modern Natural History* (Chicago and London, 2002), esp. 59–62, on “Cassiano’s drawings and beliefs.”

Provenance

- Marquis Cosimo Dragonetti de Torres (1945–2005), Rome [to Richard L. Feigen & Co., 1972]
- [Richard L. Feigen & Co., New York].
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2005.

Exhibition History

- Princeton, Princeton University Art Museum, “Dutch and Flemish Paintings from New York Private Collections,” 12 April–14 June 1987 [lent by Richard L. Feigen].
- Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, “I Bamboccianti: Niederländische Malerrebellen im Rom des Barock,” 28 August–17 November 1991; Utrecht, Centraal Museum, 6 December 1991–9 February



1992, no. 19.7 [lent by Richard L. Feigen].

- Cremona, Santa Maria della Pietà, “Dipingere la musica: Strumenti in posa nell’arte del Cinque e Seicento,” 12 December 2000–18 March 2001, no. I.33; Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Palais Harrach, 4 April–1 July 2001, no. I.33 [lent by Richard L. Feigen].
- Bartlesville, Oklahoma, The Price Tower Arts Center, “Music’s Power: Great European Paintings on Musical Themes,” 28 May–July 10, 2002, no. 4 [lent by Richard L. Feigen].
- Hartford, Wadsworth Atheneum, on long-term loan, September 2002–December 2003 [lent by Richard L. Feigen].
- London, National Portrait Gallery, “Self-Portrait: Renaissance to Contemporary,” 20 October 2005– 29 January 2006; Sydney Art Gallery of New South Wales, 17 February–14 May 2006, no. 15 [lent by the present owner].
- Greenwich, Bruce Museum, “Alchemy: Magic, Myth, or Science?” 26 September 2009–3 January 2010 [no number, lent by present owner].
- New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, on loan with the permanent collection, 2006–15 [lent by the present owner].
- Paris, Petit Palais, “The Baroque Underworld: Vice and Destitution in Rome,” 24 February–24 May 2015 [lent by the present owner].
- New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, on loan with the permanent collection, June 2015–May 2016 [lent by the present owner].
- Paris, Musée 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 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].
- Utrecht, Centraal Museum, “De Bentvueghels: Een berucht kunstgenootschap in Rome, 1620–1720,” 11 February–4 June 2023 [lent by the present owner].
- West Palm Beach, Norton Museum of Art, “Art and Life in Rembrandt’s Time: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection,” 25 October 2025–29 March 2026 [lent by the present owner].

References

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Technical Summary

The support, a single piece of coarse, plain-weave fabric with tacking margins almost entirely removed, has been lined. The threads are irregular in size and contain numerous slubs. Cusping along all four edges indicates the original dimensions have been retained. A paper label has been adhered to the stretcher but there are no wax collection seals, import stamps, stencils or inscriptions along the lining or stretcher reverse.

A dark red-brown preparatory layer has been applied and a narrow band remains exposed along the length of the left vertical edge. The paint has been applied quite freely; many details were worked wet into wet with loose, broad brushstrokes. Some details, particularly the highlights in the objects on the table, were added later with a drier brush. Slight impasto was used to draw attention to the highlights along the skull and the



devil's hands. Thin glazes of black paint have been applied along the music score.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 900–1700 nanometers, though dark paint can obscure carbon-containing underdrawings.

The painting has not undergone conservation treatment since its acquisition in 2005 and remains in a good state of preservation.^[1]

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. Entry based on a 2012 examination report by Sophie Scully, paintings conservation department intern, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.