



Simeon in the Temple

Gerbrand van den Eeckhout
(Amsterdam 1621 – 1674 Amsterdam)

1672

oil on canvas

84.5 x 105.1 cm

signed and dated in dark paint, centered along
lower edge: “G. V. Eeckhout fe. A. / 1672. 9o”

GE-100



How to cite

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The Gospel of Luke (2:22–39) tells the story of Mary and Joseph who, according to Jewish law, brought their first-born son to Jerusalem “to present him to the Lord” (Luke 2:22). In the temple they met Simeon, a devout old man to whom the Holy Ghost had disclosed “that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord’s Christ” (Luke 2:26). Simeon recognized the infant as the Savior, took him in his arms, and thanked God with the following words: “Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: For mine eyes have seen thy salvation” (Luke 2:29–30). After giving praise to God, Simeon blessed Mary and revealed to her the first dark prophecy about the fate of her son.

Gerbrand van den Eeckhout’s composition shows the bearded Simeon kneeling in the temple next to a chair on a raised wooden platform with the infant Jesus in his arms. Gazing heavenward, he utters his song of praise (“Nunc dimittis”). Behind him stand three men in oriental attire, one of them in the company of a boy dressed in red, who holds a staff in his right hand. At the far right, a group of five scribes are gathered around a table covered with a number of open books. The two scribes on the left turn toward Simeon, while the other three discuss the event among themselves. Kneeling at the edge of the raised wooden platform across from Simeon are Mary and Joseph, with Joseph holding two sacrificial doves in his left hand. Behind them approaches the prophetess Anna, her hands folded in prayer. The Bible relates that she “was a widow of about fourscore and four years, which departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. And she coming in that instant gave thanks likewise unto the Lord” (Luke 2:37–38).

Van den Eeckhout portrayed this theme a number of times in the 1660s and early 1670s. In addition to this work, other examples of his representations of the Presentation in the Temple are found in Dresden and Budapest.^[1] Yet another version was in the museum in Berlin until the Second World War, but this work has since disappeared.^[2] The present painting, dated 1672, is the latest of the artist’s known versions of the theme.

The Leiden Collection painting is recorded in three Amsterdam auction catalogues of the late eighteenth century: 1776, 1777, and 1797.^[3] All three praise the quality of the picture and commend it as one of the painter’s principal works, noting that its chiaroscuro, draughtsmanship, palette, costumes, and emotional expression all surpass Van den Eeckhout’s other work. The sale catalogues of 1776 and 1777, however, wrongly assert that Arnold Houbraken mentioned this painting in his *Groote Schouburgh* (1718–21). Although Houbraken does discuss a painting by Van den Eeckhout “depicting Jesus in the arms of Simeon,” it was a different work. The painting Houbraken described was in the possession of Jakob Hinlopen, as is evident

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Gerbrand van den Eeckhout, *The Presentation of Christ in the Temple*, ca. 1665, oil on canvas, Gemäldegalerie, Dresden



Fig 2. Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Presentation in the Temple*, ca. 1639, etching and drypoint, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., Rosenwald Collection, 1943.3.7103 (Bartsch 49)

in the poem by Jan Vos that he quotes in its entirety.^[4] Vos's poem, however, first appeared in the 1662 edition of his poetry, that is, ten years before Van den Eeckhout executed the Leiden Collection painting.^[5]

A striking detail in *Simeon in the Temple* is the boy dressed in red holding the hand of the man behind Simeon, but his identity is not known. No child of this age is mentioned in the biblical text nor is such a child featured in prior pictorial traditions. In the auction catalogue of 1776, the two figures are incorrectly identified as Zacharias and his son John (the Baptist). Zacharias was the high priest of the temple of Jerusalem (see Luke 1:5) and, as a priest, he would not be wearing a turban. Moreover, his son John was only six months older than Christ (see Luke 1:26) and therefore he cannot be this boy.

When painting the Dresden version of this subject (**fig 1**), which dates from the mid-1660s, Van den Eeckhout looked carefully at Rembrandt van Rijn's (1606–69) etching *The Presentation in the Temple* of ca. 1639 (**fig 2**). Several motifs in the Leiden Collection painting also recall that etching, among them the disposition of the figures, with the main scene taking place in the right fore- and middle ground. As in Rembrandt's etching, a view opens up at the left into the depths of the temple. Other similarities include the group formed by the kneeling Simeon and the Christ child, and the prophetess Anna, approaching from the left.

This painting is one of the principal pieces of Van den Eeckhout's last working years, particularly notable for the way he has dramatized the scene by allowing light to fall on Simeon and the Christ child. He gave further prominence to these figures through the white robe that Simeon wears and the radiant white swaddling clothes of Christ. These two figures almost seem to glow, a visual reference to Simeon's characterization of the Child as "a light to lighten the Gentiles" (Luke 2:32). Moreover, in contrast to other pictures made in Van den Eeckhout's later years, in which he experimented—not always convincingly—with compositions featuring a few nearly life-size figures,^[7] the painting in the Leiden Collection depicts a scene rich in figures, in which the painter's narrative qualities come to the fore. Worthy of comparison are *The Denarius of Caesar* of 1673 in Lille and *The Calling of Matthew* of 1674 in Munich.^[8] In these small-figure works, Van den Eeckhout displays his talent as a compelling storyteller and subtle colorist, which made him one of the most successful and most versatile painters in Rembrandt's immediate circle.

Endnotes

1. 67.5 x 84 cm, oil on canvas, Dresden, Gemäldegalerie, inv. 1638 (see Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 vols. [Landau and Pfalz, 1983–94], 2: no. 456); Budapest, Szépművészeti Muzéum, inv. 3828, panel, 59 x 48.5 cm, signed and dated 1671 (see Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 vols. [Landau and Pfalz, 1983–94], 2: no. 476); see also Ildiko Ember and Zsuzsa Urbach, eds., *Old Masters' Gallery: Summary Catalogue*, vol. 2, *Early Netherlandish, Dutch and Flemish Paintings* (Budapest, 2000), 57; whereabouts unknown, panel, 36.3 x 31.2 cm, the remnants of a signature: *Eeck...*(?) (see Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 vols. [Landau and Pfalz, 1983–94], 2: no. 450).
2. Present whereabouts unknown, until the Second World War in Berlin, Kaiser Museum, inv. 820, canvas, 83 x 100 cm (see Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 vols. [Landau and Pfalz, 1983–94], 2: no. 435).
3. See Provenance.
4. 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), 2:101. As usual, Jan Vos's poem is very general in tone and reveals little about the work's iconography.
5. See *Alle de gedichten van den Poët Jan Vos* (Amsterdam, 1662), 360–61.
6. Ph. van der Land, Amsterdam (de Winter, B. van Keyserwaart, J. Yver), 22 May 1776, lot 24: "In het midden van het stuk ziet men den Gryzen Simion, het Kindeken, op zyne hande hebbende, zynen Lofgevang, tot het Opperste Wezen uitgalmen; in het byzyn van den Hooge-Priester Zacharias, die Johannes by de hand heeft" (In the middle of the piece one sees old Simeon holding the child in his hands, shouting his Song of Praise to the Supreme Being; in the presence of the high priest Zacharias, who holds John by the hand).
7. See, for example, the two versions of *Samson and Delilah*: the 1667 version in the Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart (see Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 vols. [Landau and Pfalz, 1983–94], 2: no. 465) and the 1668 version in the Kunsthalle in Bremen (see Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 vols. [Landau and Pfalz, 1983–94], 2: no. 466).
8. Lille, Musée des Beaux-Arts, canvas, 90 x 106.4 cm, signed and dated 1673 (see Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 vols. [Landau and Pfalz, 1983–94], 2: no. 486) and Munich, Alte Pinakothek, canvas, 92 x 107 cm, signed and dated 1674 (see Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 vols. [Landau and Pfalz, 1983–94], 2: no. 487).

Provenance

- (Sale, Philips van der Land, Amsterdam [De Winter, B. van Keyerswaard, J. Yver], 22 May 1776, no. 24; sale, Nicolaas Nieuhoff, Amsterdam, 14 April 1777, no. 50; sale, Pieter Cornelis Hasselaar, Amsterdam, 28 November 1797, no. 4).
- John Crichton-Stuart, 2nd Marquess of Bute (1793–1848); (his sale, Christie's, London, 7 June 1822, no. 78).^[1]
- Private collection; by family descent until 2007 (sale, Sotheby's London, 5 December 2007, no. 28).
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2007.

Provenance Notes

1. It is unclear precisely when the painting entered the Bute collection. According to the 2007 Sotheby's sales catalogue, it was passed to John Crichton-Stuart by descent and the catalogue lists two probable prior owners from the family: John Stuart, 3rd Earl Bute (1713–92), Luton Park, Bedfordshire; by descent to John Stuart, 1st Marquess of Bute (1744–1814), Luton Park. Volker Manuth's research, however, revealed three eighteenth-century auction listings for the painting (above), which conflict with this earlier provenance. Nicole Cook, curatorial assistant at the Leiden Collection, confirmed Manuth's findings and surmises that GE-100 probably entered the Bute collection at some point after 1797.

Exhibition History

- 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].
- Amsterdam, Hermitage Amsterdam, "Rembrandt and his Contemporaries: History Paintings from The Leiden Collection," 4 February–27 August 2023, no. 13 [lent by the present owner].

References

- Yeager-Crasselt, Lara. "Simeon in the Temple." In *Rembrandt and His Time: Masterpieces from The*

Leiden Collection. Edited by Lara Yeager-Crasselt, 68; 177, no. 24. Translated by Li Ying. Exh. cat. Beijing, National Museum of China. Beijing, 2017.

- Long Museum, West Bund. *Rembrandt, Vermeer and Hals in the Dutch Golden Age: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection*. Exh. cat. Shanghai, Long Museum, West Bund. Shanghai, 2017, 78–79.
- Yeager-Crasselt, Lara. “Simeon in the Temple.” In *The Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer: Masterpieces of The Leiden Collection*. Edited by Polina Lyubimova, 228–29; 248, no. 81. Translated by Daria Babich and Daria Kuzina. Exh. cat. Moscow, The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts; St. Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum. Moscow, 2018.
- 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, 66–67, no. 13. [Exhibition catalogue also published in Dutch.]

Technical Summary

The support, a single piece of medium-weight, plain-weave fabric with tacking margins removed and paper tape along the edges, has been lined. There is slight cusping along the left and right vertical edges and a cluster of heavier-weight, horizontal threads cross the canvas width at the height of the standing child dressed in red's forehead and the upper edge of Simeon's white beard.^[1] There are numbers in white chalk along the stretcher but no wax collection seals, stencils, import stamps or labels along the lining or stretcher.

A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied. The paint has been smoothly applied along the architecture, drapery, candlesticks, and pitcher on the altar. A fine network of drying cracks through the elements allows a light brown underlayer to show through. The figures and foreground have been painted opaquely in a paste consistency, with low rounded brushwork through the fleshtones and highlights along the drapery and turbans.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers. The images and X-radiograph reveal an additional figure that was previously located to the left of the standing child. The figure's head and shoulders are visible in the infrared images, and the figure's drapery folds are visible in the X-radiograph. A pentimento of the figure's foot, toe pointing to the left, is located along the diagonally oriented cane held by the standing child. A radio-opaque braided “halo” is visible above Simeon's turban.

The painting is signed and dated in dark paint along the center of the lower edge.

The painting was cleaned and restored in 2008 and remains in a good state of preservation.

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. Located 37.5 cm up from the lower stretcher edge.