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Finding of Moses

Pieter de Grebber
(Haarlem ca. 1600 – 1652/53 Haarlem)

ca. 1632–34
oil on panel
86.2 x 65.2 cm
PG-100

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On the reedy bank of the Nile River, a young woman tenderly presents the infant Moses to the richly dressed daughter of Pharaoh who reaches forward to accept him in her arms. This biblical scene, described in Exodus 2:1–10, recounts how the abandoned child was discovered in a waterproof basket floating on the river. His Hebrew mother had desperately relinquished him to this fate to spare him an even worse end at the hands of the Egyptians, who were carrying out a murderous purge of Hebrew infant boys. The Pharaoh had ordered this massacre out of fear of the potential threat posed by the growing nation of the Israelites, who were then living in slavery in Egypt. He decreed: “Every son who is born you are to cast into the Nile, and every daughter you are to keep alive” (Exodus 1:22). Though Pharaoh’s daughter recognized that the abandoned baby was Hebrew, she deliberately flouted her father’s wishes and had mercy on the child, adopting him as her own. She gave him the name Moses, because she “drew him from the water” (Exodus 2:10).

This heartwarming and dramatic narrative was of great interest to Christians for many reasons, not least because it was understood as an Old Testament prefiguration of the New Testament story of the Flight into Egypt, which recounts the escape of Jesus from a similar massacre of Hebrew infant boys in Bethlehem after King Herod decreed that all the male children in that town should be killed (Matthew 2:13–15). The story of Moses, who would grow up to lead the Israelites out of bondage when they crossed the Red Sea to the Promised Land of Canaan, resonated with seventeenth-century Dutch people. The United Provinces had recently gained their own liberation from Spanish oppression under the leadership of William the Silent, who was often allegorically associated with Moses. Like Moses, William died before the end of the struggle for liberation, and therefore he was never able to partake of this hard-won freedom.[1]

Pieter de Grebber has cast the key characters in strong, diffused sunlight, and has placed them against a dark background. Most of them are seen in profile and situated along a diagonal that leads from the reeds at the water’s edge at lower right to the Pharaoh’s daughter, who sits on the bank at the left. This compositional arrangement is consistent with De Grebber’s works of the early 1630s, such as *Raising of Lazarus* from about 1632 (Galleria Sabauda, Turin) and *Moses Striking the Rock* from 1630 (**fig 1**).[2]

The narrative clarity of *Finding of Moses* stands in stark contrast to the approach taken by a member of Rembrandt van Rijn’s (1606–69) workshop in a piece executed around this time **(fig 2)**. In this latter painting, the only surviving depiction of the story from Rembrandt’s workshop, nude female bathers peer with great curiosity into Moses’s basket as it floats in the Nile.[3] The artist emphasizes the surprise of their

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Pieter de Grebber, *Moses Striking the Rock*, 1630, oil on canvas, 165 x 132 cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Tourcoing, 876.2.1



Fig 2. Studio of Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Finding of Moses*, ca. 1635–40, oil on canvas, 48.6 x 60.2 cm, John G. Johnson Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Cat. 474



Fig 3. Pieter de Grebber, *The Finding of Moses*, 1634, oil on canvas, 170 x 229 cm, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden

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discovery through their varied expressions and emphatic gestures. For all of its visual appeal, however, that image lacks the *gravitas* that characterizes De Grebber's interpretations of the story, which focus on the solemn moment when the infant is delivered into the arms of Pharoah's daughter. This act mirrors the ascent of Moses from certain death to his honored position at the Egyptian court.

The Leiden Collection painting may be an unfinished work. In comparison to De Grebber's other paintings from this period, the figures are thinly painted, and much of the background is indistinct and unresolved. The rendering of the figures is also less detailed than in other works of the early 1630s, such as *Moses Striking the Rock* **(fig 1**). In the latter work De Grebber labored assiduously to achieve a refined finish, rendering the plasticity of flesh in a manner that recalls the tactile qualities of paintings by his master Hendrick Goltzius (1558–1617).

It is likely that De Grebber painted *Finding of Moses* for a commission that he, for some reason or other, did not complete. In 1634 he excuted a larger, and very different, version **(fig 3)**, now in Dresden, with a more centralized, symmetrical composition. Peter Sutton has suggested that the Dresden painting's arrangement was modeled on the traditional Italian Renaissance *Sacra Conversazione*, in which the enthroned Madonna and Child are surrounded by saints.[4] Although the Leiden Collection painting is loosely brushed and seemingly unfinished, it cannot be a preliminary study for the Dresden version. Not only does the Dresden painting have a horizontal format rather than a vertical one, its composition is reversed. Another difference is that the Pharaoh's daughter in the latter work is accompanied by European attendants instead of African ones. The compositional differences between these two works are revealing, and point to the evolution of De Grebber's style from frieze-like and diagonal compositions in the early 1630s to grander, more hieratic and symmetrical arrangements of figures in the mid-1630s.

De Grebber, who was devoutly Catholic and painted many religious images throughout his career, trained in Haarlem with Goltzius soon after that master had begun to paint in a classicizing style. De Grebber followed this approach and looked for inspiration to the art of classical antiquity and the High Renaissance. He valued ideal forms and standards of beauty, and sought to articulate in word and image the underlying rules and principles of art.[5]

The narrative clarity, lavish modeling and beautiful light of De Grebber's paintings caught the attention of important patrons such as Constantijn Huygens (1596–1687), who helped De Grebber earn a number of important commissions, including *Apotheosis of Frederik Hendrik* for Amalia van Solms in the Oranjezaal in the Huis ten Bos, which he completed in 1649. He painted these commissions according to rules he articulated in a broadsheet published in 1648

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entitled: “Rules, which need to be observed and followed by a good draftsman and painter.”[6] A number of these principles are evident in *The Finding of Moses,* including rule number three, which states: “The main element of the story must be foregrounded in the most attractive part of the work.” In the Leiden Collection painting De Grebber placed the presentation of the child in the center foreground, and bathed that area in glowing light. Rule seven reads: “Care must be taken to ensure that the figures do not merely stand there, isolated from one another, but they must be connected with one another so that they come to life through their interaction.” In *Finding of Moses* each of the characters are connected to one another through their movements, glances, and gestures.[7]

The two versions of the Finding of Moses offer two very different, but equally effective solutions to the problem of telling this biblical story with grace and lucidity—the first more frieze-like, the second more hieratic. De Grebber’s achievements have a clarity and order that epitomizes the classical tradition in Dutch art in the early decades of the Golden Age.

- Lloyd DeWitt, 2017

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Endnotes

1. Simon Schama, *The Embarassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (New York, 1987), 109–20, Peter C. Sutton, "Finding of Moses," in *Dutch Classicism in Seventeenth-Century Painting,* ed. Albert Blankert et al. (Exh. cat. Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen; Frankfurt am Main, Städelsches Kunstinstitut) (Rotterdam, 1999), 128–30.
2. Peter C. Sutton, correspondence August 30, 1999, on file at The Leiden Collection. Pieter de Grebber, *Raising of Lazarus*, see Herwig Guratzsch, *Die Auferweckung des Lazarus in der niederländischen Kunst von 1400 bis 1700: Ikonographie und Ikonologie*, 2 vols. (Kortrijk, 1980), 2: no. 260, plate 122. Albert Blankert et al., eds., *Dutch Classicism in Seventeenth-Century Painting* (Exh. cat. Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen; Frankfurt am Main, Städelsches Kunstinstitut) (Rotterdam, 1999), no. 15, 125.
3. Ernst van de Wetering et al., *Rembrandt: Quest of a Genius*, ed. Bob van den Boogert (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis; Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) (Amsterdam, 2006), 32, fig. 22.
4. Peter Sutton, "Rembrandt and Peter de Grebber," in *Shop Talk: Studies in Honor of Seymour Slive*, ed. Cynthia P. Schneider, William W. Robinson, Alice I. Davies (Cambridge, 1995), 241. Peter Sutton, correspondence, 30 August 1999, on file at The Leiden Collection, also detected the influence of Rembrandt in the use of strong chiaroscuro to highlight the central figures in both paintings.
5. Albert Blankert et. al., eds., *Dutch Classicism in Seventeenth-Century Painting* (Exh. cat. Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen; Frankfurt am Main, Städelsches Kunstinstitut) (Rotterdam, 1999), 15, 21.
6. Albert Blankert et. al., eds., *Dutch Classicism in Seventeenth-Century Painting* (Exh. cat. Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen; Frankfurt am Main, Städelsches Kunstinstitut) (Rotterdam, 1999), 15, 21.
7. De Grebber published his broadsheet, "Regulen: Welcke by een goet Schilder en Teykenaer geobserveert en achtervolght moeten warden," in 1648. See Albert Blankert et al., eds., *Dutch Classicism in Seventeenth-Century Painting* (Exh. cat. Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen; Frankfurt am Main, Städelsches Kunstinstitut) (Rotterdam, 1999), i, 26; and Pieter J. J. van Thiel, "De Grebbers regels van de kunst," *Oud Holland* 80 (1965): 126–31.
8. Albert Blankert et al., eds., *Dutch Classicism in Seventeenth-Century Painting* (Exh. cat. Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen; Frankfurt am Main, Städelsches Kunstinstitut) (Rotterdam, 1999), i.

Provenance

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- Gilbert de Poulton Nicholson, Berlin (his sale, Lepke, Berlin, 8 April 1924, no. 66).
- Julio Alejandro da Cunha, Greenville, DE, by 1993 [Johnny van Haeften, Ltd., London, 2005].
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2005.

Exhibition History

- Amsterdam, Hermitage Amsterdam, "Rembrandt and his Contemporaries: History Paintings from The Leiden Collection," 4 February–27 August 2023, no. 31 [lent by the present owner].

References

- Sutton, Peter C. "Rembrandt and Peter de Grebber." In *Shop Talk: Studies in Honor of Seymour Slive*. Edited by Cynthia P. Schneider, William W. Robinson, and Alice I. Davies, 241–44. Cambridge, 1995.
- Sutton, Peter C. "Finding of Moses." In *Dutch Classicism in Seventeenth-Century Painting.* Edited by Albert Blankert et al., 130, under no. 16, fig. 16a. Exh. cat. Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen; Frankfurt am Main, Städelsches Kunstinstitut. Rotterdam, 1999.
- 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, 138–41, no. 31. [Exhibition catalogue also published in Dutch.]

Technical Summary

The support is a rectangular composite panel comprising three vertically grained oak planks: a wide central plank flanked by two similarly sized narrower planks.[1] Diagonal rasp marks along the entire reverse as well as three exposed dowel channels perpendicular to the join between planks 1 and 2 and two dowel channels perpendicular to the join between planks 2 and 3 indicate the location of previous panel cleats and that the panel was thinned prior to being cradled. There are no bevels, wax seals, stencils, labels, or panel maker's marks.

A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied followed by paint applied thinly and smoothly, wet into wet, with low brushmarks along the folds of the Pharaoh's daughter's white drapery, the blue drapery with gold fringe the daughter is seated on, and the green foliage along the lower right corner. The ground is allowed to show through along the foreground and along the diagonally oriented green foliage on the

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mountainside, which has been stippled in. The blue-gray paint above the figures has been applied more opaquely, and a halo of ground has been allowed to remain exposed surrounding the figures.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers, although the eyes of the woman presenting Moses and the mouth of the woman to her left may have been underdrawn in a dark medium. Further investigation with an InGaAs camera, which reaches further into the infrared spectrum, may provide additional information. The images and X-radiograph reveal compositional changes to the group of figures in the center of the composition. The gaze and profile of the woman presenting Moses to Pharaoh's daughter have been shifted, and the woman to her left, depicted in shadow, appears to have been added later in the paint stage.

The painting is unsigned and undated.

The painting was cleaned and restored in 2005 and remains in good state of preservation, although the left panel join is slightly out of plane and remains visible in raking light.[2]

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. The characterization of the wood is based on visual examination only. Viewed from the front: plank 1 is approximately 20 cm wide; plank 2, approximately 28 cm wide; and plank 3, approximately 18 cm wide. Worm holes are present along plank 1 only.
2. The painting was examined on-site without a stereomicroscope. Magnification provided by 5X Optivisor.

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