



Lovers (Prodigal Son)

Godefridus Schalcken
(Made 1643 – 1706 The Hague)

ca. 1692–1706

oil on canvas

76.5 x 63.8 cm

signed in light-colored paint, lower right corner:
“G. Schalcken.”

GS-129



How to cite

Jansen, Guido. “Lovers (Prodigal Son)” (2017). . In *The Leiden Collection Catalogue*, 4th ed. Edited by Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. and Elizabeth Nogrady with Caroline Van Cauwenberge. New York, 2023–. <https://theleidencollection.com/artwork/the-lovers-the-prodigal-son/> (accessed July 04, 2025).

A PDF of every version of this entry is available in this Online Catalogue's Archive, and the Archive is managed by a permanent URL. New versions are added only when a substantive change to the narrative occurs.

By the light of a single candle, we see a young woman holding a blue ribbon in her right hand. Her rather revealing dressing gown of orange and yellow satin trimmed with ermine, and her double pearl bracelet suggest her comfortable circumstances. She looks at a young man who is rendered in lost profile, his gesturing hand indicating that they are deep in conversation. In this darkened interior, one can barely make out the young man's notched beret and the elegant red-brown garment he wears over a white shirt trimmed with lace at the neck. He also wears a blue shawl and a gold-colored armband above his left elbow. Barely visible at the left is an old woman, seen in profile. She has placed her left hand on the young woman's shoulder while simultaneously holding the veil draped over the girl's hair, having pulled it back to reveal the young woman's beautiful face.

The candle is situated on a table covered with a dark green cloth, and lying next to the simple brass candleholder are gold coins and a string of jewels. Considering the expensive items on the table, one can only assume that the picture depicts a young man visiting a woman of easy virtue, a reading that is corroborated by the presence of the old procuress standing behind her. Godefridus Schalcken made deliberate use of his specialty—the illumination of a setting with the light of a burning candle—to accentuate the intimacy and sexual innuendo of the scene. This setting immediately defines the encounter as one that cannot take place by the light of day, as something furtive and immoral. Schalcken painted a large number of erotic scenes, which is remarkable considering that he came from a prominent Dordrecht family of rather dogmatic clergymen and theologians who certainly would have frowned on such themes. Nevertheless, the good family relations, to which the archival documentation testifies, were in no way spoiled by the artist's choice of subject matter.

Bearing in mind Schalcken's background, it is probable that this brothel scene portrays the Prodigal Son squandering his inheritance "with riotous living" (Luke 15:13). An additional important clue is the old-fashioned notched beret worn by the young man, which immediately calls to mind Caravaggesque interpretations of this New Testament parable that were produced from the 1620s to the 1640s by Utrecht artists such as Jan van Bijlert (1597/98–1671) and especially Gerrit van Honthorst (1592–1656).^[1] In Van Honthorst's paintings, moreover, candlelight often plays an important role, and Schalcken doubtless took note of his manner of portrayal. An interesting example is Van Honthorst's *Merry Company* of 1622 in Munich, a painting first documented in 1719 in Düsseldorf in the collection of Johann Wilhelm, Elector Palatine, as "The Prodigal Son in the brothel, succumbing to the temptations of drinking and caressing."^[2]

A later, thematically related composition by Van Honthorst, *The Procuress*, is

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Gerrit van Honthorst, *The Procuress*, 1625, oil on panel, 71 x 104 cm, Centraal Museum, Utrecht, inv. 10786



Fig 2. Godefridus Schalcken, *Self-Portrait by Candlelight*, 1659, oil on canvas 109.5 x 88.5 cm, Leamington Spa Art Gallery & Museum, Acc. no. LEAMG: A452.1953

preserved in Utrecht (**fig 1**). On this panel of 1625 we see, just as in Schalcken's painting, three figures at a table on which stands a lighted candle partly concealed by the young man (whether or not identifiable as the Prodigal Son).^[3] The depictions of the procuress in these two paintings are strikingly similar.^[4] By highlighting the low neckline of the strumpet's dress, her lute, and the feathers adorning her hair, however, Van Honthorst leaves no doubt about her dishonorable profession. Schalcken, by contrast, portrayed his young lady with greater subtlety, even though his contemporaries would have had no trouble understanding what his painting depicted. Schalcken's wealthy international clientele undoubtedly preferred his sophisticated and veiled interpretation of a visit to a courtesan over Van Honthorst's more plebeian portrayal of the same subject.

Lovers was long part of one of England's most important private collections: the Cook Collection at Doughty House, Richmond. This collection was formed by Sir Francis Cook (1817–1901) with the help of Sir John Charles Robinson (1824–1913). The years from 1868 to 1876 were particularly rich in acquisitions; indeed, in the latter year Sir Francis had no fewer than 510 paintings in his possession.^[5] Schalcken's work, too, probably entered his collection in that period, when the artist's reputation was particularly strong.^[6] In 1880 Schalcken's fame as a candlelight painter was given an additional boost in England by the publication of a widely read ghost story about the Dordrecht artist written by Sheridan La Fenu (1814–73).^[7] Cook even acquired a second painting by Schalcken, a self-portrait of the artist holding his palette and brushes by candlelight (**fig 2**).^[8] This painting, dated 1695, originated during Schalcken's stay in London.^[9] It is possible to date *Lovers* to the same period, 1692–96, but its origin in the painter's last period, when he was living in The Hague, cannot be ruled out. At any rate, its execution on a rather large canvas, its light palette, the uniform and thin application of paint, and the woman's trappings and her high forehead clearly show that the picture originated some time between 1692 and 1706.

- Guido Jansen, 2017

Endnotes

1. On Van Bijlert, see Paul Huys Janssen, *Jan Van Bijlert (1597/98–1671): Painter in Utrecht* (Amsterdam, 1998), nos. 22 and 147, with illustrations. On Van Honthorst, see J. Richard Judson and Rudolf E. O. Ekkart, *Gerrit van Honthorst, 1592–1656* (Doornspijk, 1999), nos. 282, 283, and 284. Judson and Ekkart prefer to call the subject a “Merry Company.” Just how closely the subjects of a Merry Company and the Prodigal Son were related emerges from Paul Huys Janssen, *Jan Van Bijlert (1597/98–1671): Painter in Utrecht* (Amsterdam, 1998), no. 22, in which the scene of the expulsion of the Prodigal Son from the brothel appears in the background, to make the subject of the painting abundantly clear.
2. “Der verlorhne Sohn welcher in dem Bordello mit Trincken und Caessiren sich verführen läst.” Karsch, 1719, unpaginated, *Das zweyte Zimmer N. 148*. See J. Richard Judson and Rudolf E. O. Ekkart, *Gerrit van Honthorst, 1592–1656* (Doornspijk, 1999), no. 282, for their interpretation of the picture. With regard to this discussion, see also Albert Blankert and Leonard J. Slatkes, eds., *Nieuw licht op de gouden eeuw: Hendrick ter Brugghen en tijdgenoten* (Exh. cat. Utrecht, Centraal Museum; Braunschweig, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum) (Utrecht, 1986–87), no. 63.
3. J. Richard Judson and Rudolf E. O. Ekkart, *Gerrit van Honthorst, 1592–1656* (Doornspijk, 1999), no. 292. For a discussion of the interpretation of the picture as the Prodigal Son in the brothel, see Liesbeth Helmus, *Schilderkunst tot 1850*, in *Verzamelingen van het Centraal Museum Utrecht*, no. 5 (Utrecht, 1999), 169–72, 975–77, no. 293.
4. Thierry Beherman, *Godfried Schalcken* (Paris, 1988), nos. 174 and 177, where both paintings are dated to 1685–90. On the painting in Salzburg, see also Peter Hecht, ed., *De Hollandse Fijnschilders, van Gerard Dou tot Adriaen van der Werff* (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum) (Amsterdam, 1989), 208–11, no. 44. In fact, Schalcken’s earlier work also displays the motif of the old woman, who appears in the same place in the composition in such paintings as *Virginity Threatened* in Salzburg and *The Useless Lesson* in Antwerp.
5. Elon Danziger, “The Cook Collection, Its Founder and Its Inheritors,” *The Burlington Magazine* 146, no. 1216 (July 2004): 448.
6. Elon Danziger and John Somerville, “The Cook Collection Archive” (2004) <http://www.burlington.org.uk>, no. 355, according to whom *Lovers* entered the Cook Collection by 1914; they apparently overlooked W. Cook, *Catalogue of the Art Collection: 8, Cadogan Square, SW*, (London, 1904); see Provenance.

The painting was seen by Abraham Bredius in 1888 in Richmond and described in his notebook (now in the Museum Bredius) on folio 201 as: *Schalcken, groote dame bij kaarslicht, rechts 2^e dame, de andere met blauw bandje*.
7. The story, titled “Strange Event in the Life of Schalken [sic] the Painter,” first appeared as part of “The Purcell Papers” in May 1839 in the *Dublin University Magazine*. It was reprinted in 1851, but did not

become widely known until *The Purcell Papers* were reprinted in three volumes in London in 1880. See Gary William Crawford, *J. Sheridan La Fenu: A Bio-Bibliography* (Westport, 1995), passim.

8. Thierry Beherman, *Godfried Schalcken* (Paris, 1988), no. 57, where it is dated to between 1692 and 1699. See also Elon Danziger and John Somerville, “The Cook Collection Archive” (2004), no. 354, who state that Cook most likely acquired the *Self-Portrait* from Robinson in 1882. This painting was purchased from the Cook Collection in 1953 by the museum in Leamington Spa in Warwickshire.
9. Sonia Roe and Pat Hardy, *Oil Paintings in Public Ownership in the City of London* (London, 2009), 170, where the painting is dated 1695. See also the BBC website, where all the paintings (more than 125,000) published in the large series of *Oil Paintings in [British] Public Ownership* can be viewed. Schalcken’s *Self-Portrait* is no. 54466 and has a good color image that can be enlarged. Christopher Wright, *Dutch Painting in the Seventeenth Century: Images of a Golden Age in British Collections* (London, 1989), no. 37, does not mention a date.

Provenance

- Sir Francis Cook, Bt. (1817–1901), Doughty House, Richmond, Surrey, until 1901; Sir Frederick Cook, Et. (1844–1920), Doughty Richmond, Surrey, bequest from Sir Francis Cook, 1901–20; Sir Herbert Cook, Et. (1868–1939), Doughty House, Richmond, Surrey, bequest from Sir Frederick Cook, 1920–39; Sir Francis Ferdinand Maurice Cook, Bt. (1907–78), Doughty House, Richmond, Surrey, bequest from Sir Herbert Cook, 1939–58 (sale, London, Sotheby’s, “The Cook Collection Sale,” 25 June 1958, no. 120, £70 to Lubin).
- David Benedict (sale, Doyle, New York, 21 January 2004, no. 85 [Johnny van Haeften Ltd, London, 2004]).
- From whom purchased by the present owner.

Exhibition History

- Sheffield, Graves Art Gallery, “Dutch Masterpieces: An Exhibition of Paintings,” 3 March 1956–5 April 1956, no. 47 [on loan from Sir Francis Cook, Bt., and The Trustees of the Cook Collection].
- Norfolk, Virginia, The Chrysler Museum, on loan with the permanent collection, 2010–2011 [lent by the present owner].
- Wellesley, Davis Museum at Wellesley College, on loan with the permanent collection, 1 August 2016–1 August 2017 [lent by the present owner].
- Amsterdam, Hermitage Amsterdam, “Rembrandt and his Contemporaries: History Paintings from The

Leiden Collection,” 4 February–27 August 2023, no. 24 [lent by the present owner].

References

- Cook, Sir Francis. *Abridged Catalogue of the Pictures at Doughty House, Richmond*. London, 1903, 34, no. 155.
- Krönig, J. O. *A Catalogue of the Paintings at Doughty House, Richmond, and Elsewhere in the Collection of Sir Francis Cook, Bt. Visconde de Monserrate*. London, 1913–15, 96, no. 335.
- Cook, Sir Herbert. *Abridged Catalogue of the Pictures at Doughty House, Richmond, Surrey, in the Collection of Herbert Cook, Bart.* London, 1932, 38, no. 355.
- Graves Art Gallery. *Dutch Masterpieces: An Exhibition of Paintings*. Exh. cat. Sheffield, Graves Art Gallery. Sheffield, 1956.
- Danziger, Elon, and John Somerville. “The Cook collection, its founder and its inheritors.” *Burlington Magazine* 146, no. 1216 (July 2004): concordance.
- Franits, Wayne. *Godefridus Schalcken: A Dutch Painter in Late Seventeenth-Century London*. Amsterdam, 2018, 117–18, fig. 60.
- Van Cauwenberge, Caroline. “Godefridus Schalcken, *Lovers (Prodigal Son)*.” In *Rembrandt and His Contemporaries: History Paintings from The Leiden Collection*. Edited by Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. and Caroline Van Cauwenberge, 108–11, no. 24. Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Hermitage Amsterdam. Zwolle, 2023. [Exhibition catalogue also published in Dutch.]
- Franits, Wayne. *Godefridus Schalcken: A Late 17th-century Dutch Painter in Pursuit of Fame and Fortune*. London, 2023, 128–29, fig. 69.

Technical Summary

The support, a fine, plain-weave handkerchief linen, has been lined. Linear creases 1.5 cm into the face of the painting along all four edges suggest the tacking margins have been turned out.^[1] Paper tape extends into the face of the painting along all four edges. There are two paper labels and white chalk inscriptions but no wax collection seals or import stamps along the lining or stretcher.

A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied. Scientific analysis of paint cross-sections indicate “the oil ground consists of a single buff, or brown, mixed from lead white, charcoal black, and various iron oxides.”^[2] The paint has been applied wet-into-wet extremely thinly and smoothly, with areas of low impasto created by lead white highlights along the female figure’s pearl bracelet, the flame tip, the upper candle edge, the candleholder base, and the highlight along the male figure’s proper left sleeve.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers. Compositional



changes visible in the images include alterations to the width and angle of the blue ribbon between the female figure's proper right pointer finger and the back of her proper left hand. This section of ribbon was originally wider and sloped further to the right, toward the figure's wrist.

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. Or that the painting was previously stretched onto a smaller stretcher. There is no X-radiograph of the painting.
2. Undertaken in 2004 by Catherine Hassall Paint Analysis, 5 Patshull Road, London NW5 2JX.