THE LEIDEN COLLECTION

**Two Old Men Disputing ("St. Peter and St. Paul")**

Leiden School, possibly Jan Lievens
(Leiden 1607 – 1674 Amsterdam)

ca. 1630
oil on panel
39.1 x 31.9 cm
GD-101

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Resting his hands on the large tome lying open on the table, an elderly man leans toward his bearded companion across the table. Diffuse light streaming in from the left catches books and papers at the corner of the table before illuminating the figures’ faces. The rest of the room remains shrouded in relative darkness. The bearded man whose back is turned to the viewer wears a bright red skullcap and a voluminous red robe with silver decorations beneath his heavy dark cloak, attributes that recall the wardrobe of a cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church.[1] Yet, given the suppression of Roman Catholicism in the Dutch Republic during the early seventeenth century (when this painting was executed), it is unlikely that the scene actually represents a theological exchange from those years. A far more likely scenario is that this is a history painting, evoking an imagined discussion between two elderly churchmen from another time and place.

Most probably, the scene focuses upon the fundamental theological dispute between the apostles Peter and Paul that occurred during the second of their two meetings, which took place in Antioch around the middle of the first century AD.[2] As described in Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians, Paul disputed Peter’s position that Gentile (pagan, non-Jewish) converts to Christianity had to comply fully with the laws of the Torah in order to obtain redemption. Peter’s position was that all converts had to follow Jewish dietary laws and that male converts had to be circumcised, while Paul argued that a non-Jewish convert’s faith in Christ alone was sufficient.[3]

The theological dispute between these two giants of early Christianity over the proper practices of the faithful had great resonance in the Dutch Republic of the 1620s, a period of acrimonious tensions between the moderate Remonstrant and hard-line Counter-Remonstrant factions within the Dutch Calvinist community. One aspect of that controversy concerned the appropriate level of religious tolerance that should be extended to those who practiced faiths other than strict Calvinism. This debate not only echoed the issues discussed by Peter and Paul in Antioch, but the way Dutch theologians framed their arguments may also have had an impact on the composition of this painting. Specifically, in his influential *Vrye godes-dienst* (Free Religion), published in 1627, Simon Episcopius, one of the leading Dutch proponents of religious tolerance, constructed his arguments about the benefits of religious pluralism in the form of a dispute between two men.[4]

The likely visual prototype for this work was Rembrandt van Rijn’s (1606–69) *Two Scholars Disputing* (also called *St. Peter and St. Paul*), 1628, in the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne **(fig 1)**.[5] Not only are the paintings similar in theme and composition, but the man wearing the skullcap in the Leiden Collection painting also echoes—albeit in reverse—the triangular monumentality of the foreground figure in

## Comparative Figures

**Fig 1.** Rembrandt van Rijn, *Two Scholars Disputing*, 1628, oil on wood panel, 72.4 x 59.7 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, inv. no. 349-4

**Fig 2.** Jan Lievens, *A Magus at a Table*, ca. 1631–32, Upton House, Warwickshire, inv. 446728, © National Trust Collections

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the Melbourne painting.[6] The similarities between these works indicate that this painting was also executed in Leiden in the late 1620s, but the artist’s identity still remains in doubt.

The attribution of *Two Old Men Disputing* has, in fact, confounded scholars for generations. The painting has variously been attributed to Rembrandt; Jan Lievens (1607–74); “a follower of Rembrandt, possibly Lievens;” the “immediate circle around Rembrandt, or even more likely, that of Jan Lievens;” and in 2005 it entered The Leiden Collection as “attributed to Gerrit Dou.”[7] This level of uncertainty dates to the painting’s earliest appearance in the literature. When *Two Old Men Disputing* was sold in Paris in 1787, it was attributed to Rembrandt, but it was sold as a work by Lievens when it changed hands the following year. Over one hundred years later, the Duke of Westminster sold it once again as a work by Rembrandt, an attribution that was maintained for the greater part of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[8] By 1980, however, attribution questions resurfaced and the painting was sold as by a “follower of Rembrandt, possibly Lievens.”

In 1982, the Rembrandt Research Project (RRP) called the painting an eighteenth-century “imitation of Rembrandt’s early style, which was not produced in his own circle.”[9] In 2005, however, the RRP reassessed the painting’s attribution and described it as being from the “School of Rembrandt,” proposing that it had “originated in the immediate circle around Rembrandt, or even more likely, that of Jan Lievens.”[10] Whoever the artist, an attribution to Rembrandt cannot be supported: in contrast to Rembrandt’s strong chiaroscuro and balanced and vibrant composition, this mirrored adaptation, with the unseen light source bouncing off the vellum pages and the folds of the tablecloth, is more stilted, more sparse, and more somber, and the figures are not modeled with the forceful three-dimensionality so characteristic of Rembrandt.

The painting has more connections to Jan Lievens’s manner than to that of Gerrit Dou.[11] A close point of reference is *A Magus at a Table*, ca. 1631–32, by Lievens in Upton House, Warwickshire **(fig 2)**.[12] Both works include dramatically dark backgrounds that accentuate the otherwise evenly distributed light’s focus on the figures and the corner of the table, which has documents dangling over the edge of a heavy, green tablecloth. The delicate handling and the figural types in the painting also seem to echo Lievens’s manner. Despite the uncertainty regarding the painting’s authorship, *Two Old Men Disputing* fits comfortably within the vibrant artistic environment of Leiden in the late 1620s.

- Henriette Rahusen, 2017

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## Endnotes

1. The *zucchetto* or *pileolus* is a small, round skullcap worn by members of the Roman Catholic clergy. The color red is reserved for the zucchettos of cardinals. (The pope’s skullcap is white, and those worn by archbishops and bishops are purple).
2. The suggestion that the two men represent the apostles Peter and Paul was first made by Christian Tümpel in his discussion of Rembrandt van Rijn’s *Two Scholars Disputing*, 1628 (National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne). Christian Tümpel, “Studien zur Ikonografie der Historien Rembrandts,” *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 20 (1969): 182–87. Tümpel, however, solely focused on the first of the two visits, when Paul stayed at Peter’s house in Jerusalem for fifteen days (Galatians 1:18). The dispute at the heart of this painting actually took place during their second meeting (Galatians 2:11–14).
3. Galatians 2:11–14. Click here for a detailed description of the dispute.
4. For the seventeenth-century debate on tolerance, see Jonathan Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness and Fall, 1477–1806*, The Oxford History of Early Modern Europe (Oxford, 1995), 502–3. Episcopius (1583–1643) was born Simon Bischop, but is known by the Latinized version of his last name.
5. Click here for the object page of the National Gallery of Victoria.
6. For a discussion of Rembrandt’s *Two Scholars Disputing* in Melbourne, see Josua Bruyn et al. *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, Vol. 1: *1625–1631,* Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project (The Hague, 1982), 159–68, no. A 113, repro. See page 165, repro., for Rembrandt’s *Study in Red and Black Chalk* (Staatliche Museen Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin), on which the figure in the foreground of the Leiden Collection painting is based.

   The Rembrandt Research Project’s discussion of the Melbourne painting accepts Christian Tümpel’s interpretation that the two men are the apostles Peter and Paul, representing the Jews and the Gentiles respectively (pp. 166–67). Neither the Rembrandt Research Project nor Tümpel, however, connected the historical dispute in Antioch to the theological debate swirling around the Dutch Republic in the 1620s.
7. Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 vols. (Landau and Pfalz, 1983–94), 4: 2948, states that “according to Gerson [this painting is] a Dou-like adaptation of the Melbourne painting.”
8. Rolf Fritz, *Gemälde alter Meister* (Dortmund, 1967), no. 77, repro., as *Elias and Elisa* by Rembrandt, ca. 1629. Fritz reproduced an aquatint of the painting in reverse, inscribed “Les Docteurs,” by A. Bissel, ca. 1790–1810, as comparative figure to this painting’s entry. “Les Docteurs” in the caption refers to the role of the Book of Kings prophets Elias (Elijah) and his disciple Elisa (Elisha) as Doctors of the Church. The full inscription on the aquatint reads: “Peint par Rembrandt gravé par A. Bissell. Les Docteurs. – Du Cabinet de Monsieur le Baron de Villiez – à Mannheim chez Dom: Artaria.”
9. Josua Bruyn et al. *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, Vol. 1: *1625–1631,* Stichting Foundation

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Rembrandt Research Project (The Hague, 1982), 524–28, no. C513. One year later, Werner Sumowski placed the painting in the “School of Rembrandt” after the Melbourne painting of 1628. Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 vols. (Landau and Pfalz, 1983–94), 4: 2948, no. 1931.

10. Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 4, *Self-Portraits*, ed. Ernst van de Wetering (Dordrecht, 2005), 596, 627–28, no. I C 513 / Br. 424.
11. Ronnie Baer did not include *Two Old Men Disputing* in her catalogue raisonné of Dou in 1990. See Ronni Baer, “The Paintings of Gerrit Dou (1613–1675)” (PhD diss., New York University, 1990).
12. Thanks to Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. for pointing out the resemblances with this painting by Lievens. (Lloyd DeWitt, however, deems the Upton House painting to be “closer to Rembrandt or Dou than Lievens.” Personal communication, 27 May 2013). The Upton House painting is listed as National Trust Inventory Number 446728. According to notes from the National Trust, dendrochronology indicates that the oak panel came from a tree felled after 1660. However, more recent dendrochronological analysis by Ian Tyer indicates that insufficient information exists about the wood rings to determine the felling date of this panel.

## Provenance

- François Leroy de la Faudignère (d. 1786) (his sale, A.J. Paillet, Paris, 8 January 1787, no. 324, as by School of Rembrandt).
- Marquis de Montesquiou (his sale, Lebrun, Paris, 9 December 1788, no. 158, as by Jan Lievens).
- Mr. La Reynière (his sale, Lebrun, Paris, 3 April 1793, no. 99, as by Jan Lievens).
- Duke of Westminster, London (his sale, London, Christie’s, 4 July 1924, no. 90, as by Rembrandt van Rijn [to Wills for £2415]).
- [Paul Bottenwieser, Berlin, 1924–1925].
- Dr. Wolfgang Huck, Berlin, 1925 [to P. de Boer].
- [P. de Boer, Amsterdam (to Dr. Heinrich Becker for DM 120,000, as by Rembrandt van Rijn).]
- Dr. Heinrich Becker, Dortmund, 1955 [to Hans M. Cramer].
- [Hans M. Cramer, The Hague, 1980, as by a follower of Rembrandt, possibly Jan Lievens.]
- [Newhouse Galleries, New York, 1991, as by Rembrandt van Rijn].
- [Bijl-Van Urk B. V., Alkmaar, 2005, as by School of Rembrandt].
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2005.

## Exhibition History

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- Berlin, The Academy of Arts, “Gemälde alter Meister aus Berliner Privatbesitz,” July–August 1925, no. 313 [lent by Dr. Wolfgang Huck].
- Delft, Prinsenhof Museum, “Drie Rembrandts in de jaren 1953–1956 verkocht door de Kunsthandel P. de Boer, Amsterdam,” 10 August–2 September 1956, no. 2 [lent by Dr. Heinrich Becker].
- Oxford, Ashmolean Museum of Art, on loan with the permanent collection, December 2009–January 2011 [lent by the present owner].
- Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, “Dutch Treat,” 11 October 2011–6 January 2012 [lent by the present owner].
- Leiden, Stedenlijk Museum de Lakenhal, “Gerrit Dou: The Leiden Collection from New York,” 9 March–31 August 2014 [lent by the present owner].
- Ithaca, Cornell University, Herbert F. Johnson Museum, “An Eye For Detail: Dutch Painting from the Leiden Collection,” September 2014–May 2015 [lent by the present owner].
- Dordrecht, Dordrechts Museum, “Work, Pray & Admire: New Views on Calvinism and Art,” 11 November 2018–26 May 2019 [lent by the present owner].
- Kingston, Queen’s University, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, “Leiden circa 1630: Rembrandt Emerges,” 24 August–1 December 2019; Edmonton, Art Gallery of Alberta, 7 March–27 September, 2020; Regina, MacKenzie Art Gallery, 5 December 2020–21 February 2021; Hamilton, Art Gallery of Hamilton, 13 March–30 May 2021, no. 14 [lent by the present owner].

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- Vogelaar, Christiaan. “Ten Years of Struggle: Rembrandt in Leiden and Amsterdam, 1624–34.” In *Young Rembrandt*. Edited by Christopher Brown, An van Camp, and Christiaan Vogelaar, 28, fig. 21. Exh. cat. Leiden, Museum de Lakenhal; Oxford, Ashmolean Museum. Oxford, 2019.

## Versions
## Painted Versions:

1. After Rembrandt, probably contemporary, *Two Scholars Disputing*, oil on panel, 39.5 x 33 cm, Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe, inv. no. 1798.
2. After Rembrandt, probably contemporary, *Two Scholars Disputing*, previously Lahmann Collection, Weisser Hirsch, Dresden.

## Print:

1. Pietro Monaco (1707–72), after Rembrandt, *The Prophesy of the Prophet Elisha,* ca. 1730–1739, engraving, 505 x 363 mm, British Museum, London, inv. no. 1865,0520.773.

## Technical Summary

The painting was executed on a single plank with a vertical grain. The plank is oak, from the Baltic region, with a fell date of 1601 and an earliest probable use date of 1609.[1] The panel has been thinned and adhered to a supplemental wooden support, which is comprised of four vertically grained boards. Thin wooden shims have been attached to the left and right edges with tongue and groove joins. There is evidence that a cradle was once attached to the reverse of the supplemental support. Fifteen dark rectangles, indicating the areas of the wood that were not covered by the cradle members, are visible on the reverse of the panel.

The panel was prepared with a light-colored ground that is visible where it stops at the edges of the wood. It was thinly and evenly applied. The paint was built up in successive layers. The X-radiograph shows an earlier composition with a standing figure and a seated figure in larger format than the current composition. It is unclear if this indicates an earlier composition altogether, or just artist’s changes to the current composition. The head of the seated man in the earlier composition is slightly higher and to the right of the head of the seated man in the current composition. There is low impasto along the contours of the earlier figures. In raking light, the contours of another larger standing man are visible between the open book and the man facing the viewer.

Infrared photography[2] reveals several slight artist’s changes: the shape of the upper portion of the figure’s head facing the viewer appears to have been enlarged twice, the same figure’s proper left hand has been

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shifted further toward the back of the book, the beard of the figure seen in profile has been made thinner, and the length of the two pages dangling over the table edge have been shortened and moved to the right.

The painting is in very good condition. There are three previously restored vertical splits along the top and bottom edges of the panel. These were probably created by the cradle, as it would have restricted the panel’s movement. The panel exhibits vertical planar distortion along these splits, creating a washboard effect.

Further technical information about this artwork is available in The Rembrandt Database.

## Technical Summary Endnotes

1. Peter Klein, dendrochronological report, 14 January 2007; Ian Tyers, dendrochronological report, September 2008.
2. Infrared photographs were taken at 780nm, 850nm, and 1000nm.

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