

Stichting Victor II
'The penitent St Peter'
by Hendrick ter Brugghen? 161[6]



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This brochure was published
on the occasion of the exhibition
*Stichting Victor II. The penitent St Peter
by Hendrik ter Bruggen? 161[6]*
held at Centraal Museum Utrecht
from 28 August 2004 – 2 January 2005.

The exhibition is the second in a series
of six biannual exhibitions, each marking
a generous subsidy granted by Stichting
Victor Heiloo for restoration and technical
research. Each exhibition will be accom-
panied by its own publication. In 2007
Centraal Museum will publish two works
on this research and restoration work.

Provisional conclusions

After the recent restoration of *The penitent St Peter* by Laurent Sozzani, Albert Blankert and Pieter van Thiel were once more asked to comment on the attribution of the painting to Hendrick ter Brugghen. Neither altered his original opinion.

Albert Blankert: 'There is not a single detail on the painting which even remotely resembles Ter Brugghen's masterly technique, although the piece as a whole does reflect his style and approach. To me this still means that there is only one logical and correct conclusion: that this is a copy of an unknown work. The signature has probably been copied from the original, too – a phenomenon which one does not often come across in old paintings. As a document, this painting is interesting; as an artwork it isn't.'

Pieter van Thiel, 'While it is not a great painting, there is no reason to believe that it was not painted by Ter Brugghen. Peter's head and hands are authentic and show the imperfections of the young, developing painter. Even if a copyist had chosen to copy such an unspectacular work as this, he would have interpreted it and improved it, and not copied it faithfully. The signature is original, and the idea that it was copied along with the rest of the painting is hard to substantiate.'

While neither expert has changed his original opinion, both agree on the fact that *The penitent St Peter* is an early 17th-century painting, that the signature is original, and that the composition is Ter Brugghen's. Blankert's reasons for dismissing the painting as a copy are based solely on its quality. Using this reasoning, the second version of *The penitent St Peter*, which turned up on the Paris art market in 1992, may possibly be the original composition. However, it is neither signed nor dated. Technical analysis of the Paris painting and comparison of the two versions may provide an answer to the question of attribution. Other paintings that were undisputedly painted by Hendrick ter Brugghen are exhibited on the ground floor.

Introduction

Stichting Victor II is the second in a series of six minor biannual exhibitions featuring one or more paintings from the collection of old masters at Centraal Museum Utrecht. The series is occasioned by a generous subsidy provided by Stichting Victor Heiloo for restoration and technical research. A total of 14 paintings will be restored and analysed, each of them part of the Museum's core collection. Some were painted by Jan van Scorel, his group, or contemporaries. Others are by Hendrick ter Brugghen and the other Utrecht Caravaggists, or are otherwise attributed to them.

Each exhibition will focus on a particular art-historical question, and will give visitors insight into the research methods which were used in an attempt to resolve it. These methods will often include X-ray photography and infra-red reflectographic assembly. Upon their completion in 2007, the restoration and research work will be recorded in two volumes published in the Centraal Museum's Agnietenreeks series. The CMU wishes to express its deep gratitude to Stichting Victor Heiloo for its role in bringing about this unique project. For the support they have given this exhibition, the museum would like to thank Albert Blankert, Laurent Sozzani, Pieter van Thiel, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, and the Netherlands Institute for Art History in The Hague.

Hendrick ter Brugghen: biography

Hendrick ter Brugghen was born in 1588. His place of birth is uncertain. In the years up to 1602, however, many documents from The Hague bore references to his father, Jan ter Brugghen, which is why this town is assumed to be where he first saw the light of day.

After an apprenticeship with the Utrecht painter Abraham Bloemaert, Ter Brugghen – like many of his Utrecht colleagues – travelled to Italy. Though it is not known when this journey started, nor how long his sojourn lasted, it is certain that he was in Milan in the summer of 1614. In the autumn of the same year, he and two colleagues from Utrecht travelled over the Saint Gotthard pass, arriving in Utrecht around 1 October.

In 1616, Hendrick ter Brugghen became a member of the Utrecht Saint Lucas guild and married Jacomijna Verbeeck in a Reformed wedding at Utrecht's Geertekerk. The couple had eight children.

The youngest, Hendrickgen, was born in March 1630, five months after her father's death on 1 November 1629 at the age of forty-two. Ter Brugghen was buried in the Buurkerk in Utrecht. The plague is cited as a possible cause of death.

Very little is known about Ter Brugghen's workshop, though it is assumed that Sebastiaen van Hattingh (sometimes also called Hattich), who lived with him for a year, was one of his students. While there is no factual corroboration, it is also assumed that Ter Brugghen collaborated with Dirck van Baburen, whose work shows certain similarities. Equally uncorroborated is the speculation – based on stylistic analysis – that Ter Brugghen made a second journey to Italy sometime between the summers of 1619 and 1621.

Hendrick ter Brugghen (attributed): 'The penitent St Peter' 17th century

Private collection, France



Technical and art-historical analysis since 1986

In anticipation of the exhibition *New Light on the Golden Age* in 1986, the Centraal Museum arranged for *The penitent St Peter* to be analysed in the Rijksmuseum. Pieter van Thiel had X-rays made of details, and also had the painting examined by Martin Bijl, at that time chief restorer there. Bijl concluded that, though it had been touched up, the signature was original, and that the whole of Peter's robe was also likely to have been painted over. In addition, X-ray photographs of the hands and the head showed *pentimenti* (changes made by the artist himself) as well as compositional changes. Comparison with the X-ray photographs of *The adoration of the Magi* shows strong similarities in composition and the use of materials, especially with regard to the somewhat patchy use of white lead. Due to its high lead content, this pigment is easily visible on the X-rays.

Due to the restoration, X-ray photographs were made of the entire painting in 2003. The structure of the canvas – irregular with small knots – is comparable to that on which *The adoration of the Magi* was painted. At first sight there seems to be the form of a downward-looking face to the left of the head, as well as the outlines, possibly of a skull, to the right. However, it would be premature to conclude on this basis that the painting is not a copy, and that these changes were made by Ter Brugghen in his search for the right composition. The smudge to the left of the head might also be an overall ground; similarly, the shape on the right might mean that a partly painted canvas was reused. After all, in terms of the composition it would not have been logical to place the head so far to the right.

In 1992, an as yet unknown version of *The penitent St Peter* came to light in Paris. Not only are its composition and colour practically identical to those of the Utrecht painting, the dimensions are also the same. However, there are some differences. In this version, the keys are positioned on the table by Peter's hands, instead of on the wall to his left; and his robe is draped much higher around his back. The two paintings are being shown here side by side for the first time.

Hendrick ter Brugghen: oeuvre

Like many of his Utrecht colleagues, Hendrick ter Brugghen returned from his stay in Italy deeply impressed by the work of Caravaggio (1571-1610). This Italian master had made a revolutionary break with mannerism, the idealistic style prevalent around 1590, and introduced an unprecedented realism which many experienced as shocking. Caravaggio depicted his figures, often at half-length, as if they were very close, placing the composition tightly within the frame so as to accentuate their proximity. He made space indefinable by depriving his backgrounds – dark or nearly plain – of a sense of depth. He preferred to show a variety of types, ages and expressions, and was meticulous in his attention to pictorial detail. Caravaggio had Italian, French, Spanish and Flemish followers. In the Northern Netherlands, his most important followers were Hendrick ter Brugghen and Gerard van Honthorst.

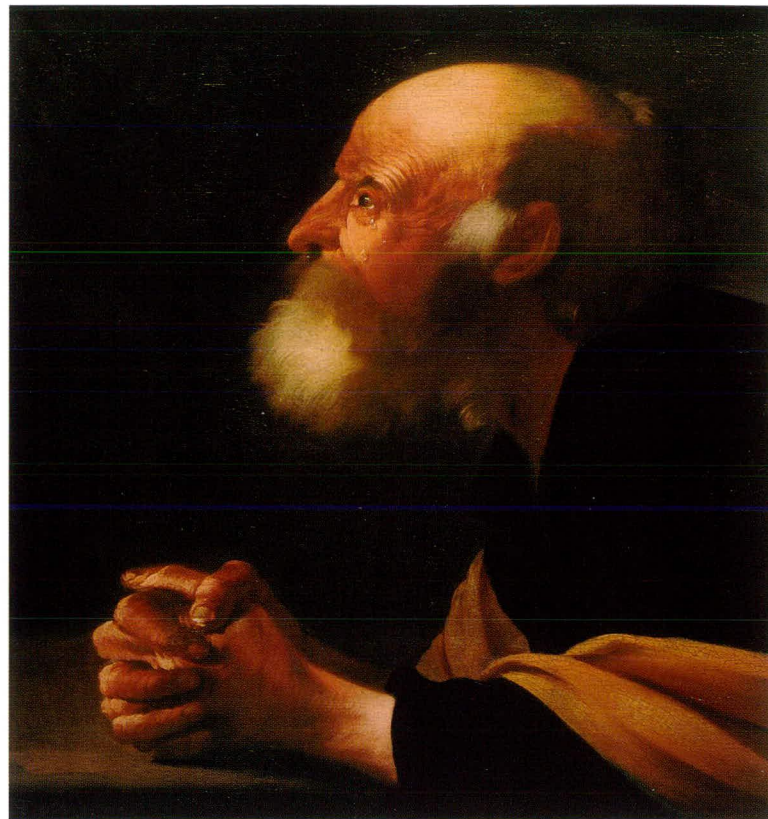
The first monograph on Ter Brugghen, by the English art historian Benedict Nicolson (1914-1978), dates from 1958. The first exhibition of the master's work, *Hendrick ter Brugghen in America* in 1965-1966 (Dayton and Baltimore), was compiled by the American art historian Leonard J. Slatkes (1930-2003). Together with Albert Blankert, Slatkes devised the concept for *New Light on the Golden Age* (Utrecht and Braunschweig) in 1986, an exhibition which more or less marked the end of the research on Ter Brugghen.

In 1958 Nicolson reckoned Ter Brugghen's oeuvre to consist of 77 paintings. By 1986, the total was estimated at eighty. Ter Brugghen signed his work quite consistently with his complete name *HTBrugghen*, or with his initials *HTB*; in the latter, the capitals were always signed as a monogram. For a long time no early work was known, making it possible to determine only a tentative chronology for the years between 1620 and 1629. Though a few art historians consider *The penitent St Peter* of 161[6] to be from the artist's own hand, this view is not shared by the majority of their colleagues.

'The penitent St Peter': controversy

In 1938, several Dutch newspapers carried a story that J.B.V.M.J. van de Mortel, the mayor of Noordwijk, had been surprised to discover that he was the owner of painting by Hendrick ter Brugghen. For decades, this work, *The penitent St Peter*, had hung at Huize Ter Baast, a manor deep in the woods at Oirschot. Cleaning by C.B. van Bohemen revealed Ter Brugghen's signature and a date, 1610 or 1616, at lower left. In 1938, the painting was shown to the public in an exhibition at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven.

In 1967, the work was acquired for 80,000 guilders by the Centraal Museum, whose collection at that time contained four masterpieces that were undisputedly by Ter Brugghen. By then, the discussion on the attribution of *Peter* had been in full swing for years. In his monograph, Benedict Nicolson (1958) stated his opinion – which he based on a photograph – that the painting was certainly not an original. He reiterated this position in 1960 after having analysed the original work, which by then had been cleaned for a second time. However, art dealer Hans M. Cramer from The Hague, from whom the Utrecht museum had purchased the painting, was convinced of its authenticity. Because Leonard J. Slatkes and Albert Blankert, the organisers of *New Light on the Golden Age*, concurred with Nicolson, the painting was not included in the catalogue for this exhibition in Braunschweig in 1986. It was hoped that restoration and further analysis would finally resolve the debate around the painting's attribution.



Hendrick Bloemaert (circle): 'St Peter at prayer', 1630-1650

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'The penitent St Peter': the opponents

Benedict Nicolson, author of 'Hendrick Terbrugghen' (1958) and specialist in the field of international Caravaggism:

'The modelling is too soft for this to be one of Ter Brugghen's own works, especially as the painting must be given an early date. The drawing of the eyes, nose and hands – especially the long left thumb – is not sufficiently expressive. Due to the untidy signature *HT Brugghen*, which is strange both for its light colour and for the distance between the HT and the B, it is probably a forgery. With regard to its subject and composition, however, the painting is both characteristic and impressive. The shadow thrown by the nose onto the moustache is a prominent and individual characteristic of Ter Brugghen, just as it is in his other early works. This means that the painting is a significant document of Ter Brugghen's early style, and is very possibly a copy of a lost original. In this case, the signature might have been copied from the original, making sense of the date 1616.'

Leonard J. Slatkes, compiler of 'Hendrick ter Brugghen in America' in 1965-1966 (Dayton and Baltimore) and co-compiler of 'New Light on the Golden Age' in 1986 (Utrecht and Braunschweig); also author of an unfinished and unpublished monographic manuscript on Ter Brugghen:

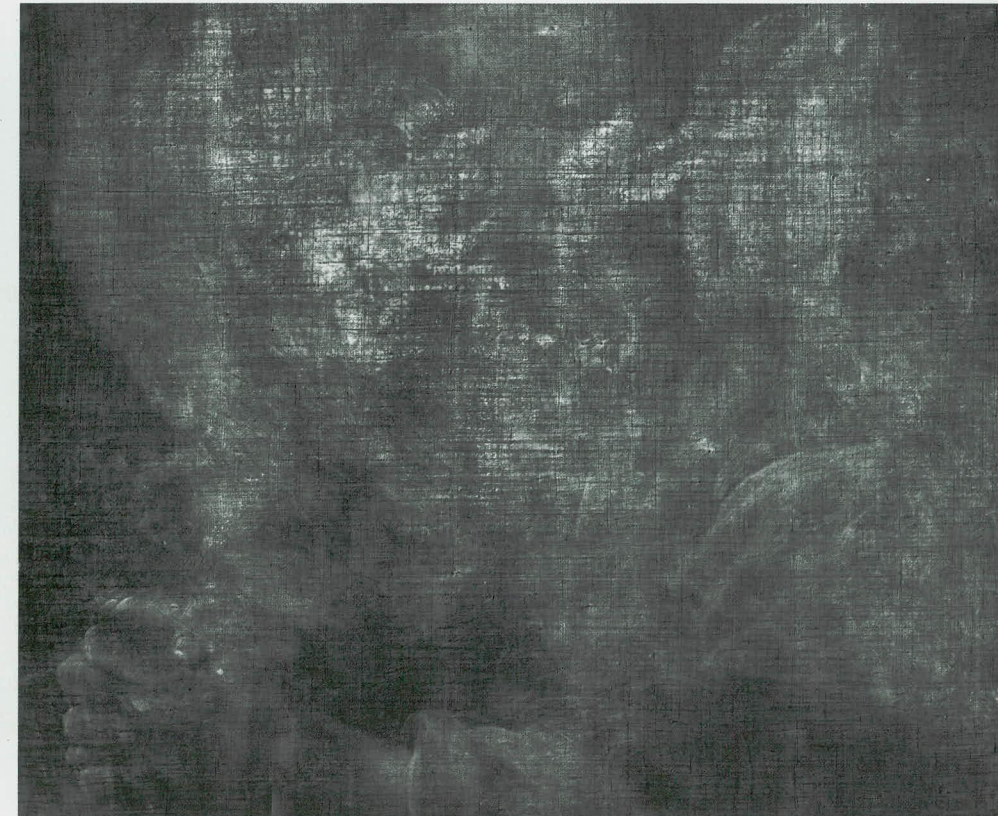
'The soft modelling, the formless depiction of the hands, the downy depiction of the beard, and especially the rather dull, unexciting colouring of the painting all make it impossible to suppose that Ter Brugghen could have been directly involved in its execution. *The penitent St Peter* is not a copy, but a repeat version of an original from Ter Brugghen's workshop that is now lost.'

Albert Blankert, co-compiler of 'New Light on the Golden Age' in 1986 (Utrecht and Braunschweig) and expert on and author of many publications on Caravaggism in Utrecht:

'The painting is clearly a copy. In my opinion, the rejection by Slatkes and others of the attempt to pass off the painting as a work by Ter Brugghen himself is entirely justified.'

Hendrick ter Brugghen (attributed): 'The penitent St Peter' 161[6]

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'The penitent St Peter': a supporter

The purchase in 1970 of Ter Brugghen's *The adoration of the Magi* (1619) by the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam decided Pieter van Thiel, then director of the paintings department, to conduct new research into the master's early work. His findings were published in the *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* (1971) and in a monographic article entitled 'In quest of the early Ter Brugghen'. In both cases, his verdict was positive.

'Although the painting has suffered a bit here and there, Ter Brugghen's mark is still clearly visible, especially in the keys – which could never have been depicted so freely and accurately by a copyist – and also in the hands and the areas around the nose and eyes. The thick edges bordering the brushstrokes, the characteristic way the cheeks have been set against the nose, the shape of the ear, the treatment of the hair, and the fine contour of the skull all correspond closely with the depiction of the head of the kneeling king on *The adoration of the Magi* from 1619.

'During my research, I found that the signature in light ochre on dark brown is written in a less firm hand than Ter Brugghen's later signature, but I see no reason to believe that it is a fake. It says "HT brugghen fecit", with HT in monogram and the surname without a capital. The gap between the monogram and the surname is not impossible, as the painter wrote his name in practically the same way in 1619, but with a capital.'

What Van Thiel did not know at the time is that the recent restoration has proved the signature to be original, and identical to the one on *The adoration of the Magi* from 1619 in the collection at the Rijksmuseum: 'HT Brugghen fecit' (where the surname has a capital).

Hendrick ter Brugghen: 'The adoration of the Magi', 1619

© Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam / X-ray

