

**A Rembrandt invention:**  
*a new *Baptism of the eunuch**

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PRIMAVERA PERS, LEIDEN 2020

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Cover illustration:

Detail of Rembrandt and workshop, *The baptism of the eunuch*, ca. 1631.

Photography of *The baptism of the eunuch*, ca. 1631,  
(including all details, except nrs. 81-83):

Doro Keman

Design:

Antoinette Hanekuyk (TopicA)

Printing:

Wilco Printing & Binding

# Contents

Preface	9
An early Christian conversion	13
Faithful depictions of the story as told	18
Riff on the theme: the scene as we know it	25
Rembrandt's <i>Baptisms of the eunuch</i>	30
Invented by Rembrandt	47
Formal vocabulary	55
Physical properties, "so typical of Rembrandt"	64
Relation to prints by Johannes Gillis van Vliet and Claes Jansz Visscher	67
The choices of the inventor	71
A provisional conclusion	77







# Preface

## 1

Claes Jansz Visscher  
after Rembrandt  
*The baptism of the  
eunuch*, in mirror  
image, ca. 1650

Inscribed *Rembrandt invent.*  
and *Clvißcher Excudebat.*  
For text in letterpress, see  
pp. 50-51.

Engraving, 37.9 × 51.5 cm

Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans van  
Beuningen, L 2014/1 b 109 (PK).  
Purchased with support of Stichting  
Lucas van Leyden, 2014

## 2

Rembrandt and  
workshop  
*The baptism of the  
eunuch*, ca. 1631

Oil on panel, 64 × 96 cm  
Private collection<sup>1</sup>

About the year 1650, the prominent Amsterdam engraver and publisher Claes Jansz Visscher brought out an engraving of the popular Bible story of the baptism of the eunuch. The print is inscribed with his imprint and with the name of the inventor of the composition. That role is assigned to none other than Rembrandt van Rijn.

Until now, the print has been thought to be a copy after an earlier reproductive print of a lost painting by Rembrandt of the subject (fig. 18). However, there is a painting that provides a much closer model for the print. The emergence of that painting and its first public display in the exhibition *Young Rembrandt: rising star* (Museum De Lakenhal, Leiden, 2 November 2019-9 February 2020) is the occasion for the writing of this small volume. The initiative for this study was taken by the owner of the painting, Bernard Allien, as the culmination of a long campaign of research and restoration. Over the past years, Bernard Allien has manifested himself as a veritable project leader, devoting himself to the care and investigation of the painting. He has had the panel repaired by Jonathan Graindorge Lamour. On the advice of Michiel Franken of the Netherlands Institute for Art History, he had the painting restored. This was carried out by Regina Costa Pinto, under the supervision of Ger Luijten, director of Fondation Custodia, and the scrutiny

of Prof. Fernando García García, a specialist in the creative process. He has had the painting tested by dendrochronology, by Prof. Peter Klein of Hamburg University, and by X-ray and multispectral analysis, at the RAD'ART Institute in Geneva. He has consulted leading experts in France, Spain and the Netherlands, and has performed intensive research of his own on the links between the painting and works by Rembrandt and his master, Pieter Lastman. He gave form to his findings in a number of extensive PowerPoint presentations and a synthetic report. These materials and my own research have been used gratefully and critically by me for the writing of the present text. In my own work I have been greatly helped by Peter van der Coelen of Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam; Laura Ritter of the Albertina, Vienna; Christiaan Vogelaar and Jettie Rozemond of Museum De Lakenhal, Leiden; and Régis Burnet, of the Université Catholique de Louvain.

It is apparent to me that the painting here presented for the first time is the most likely candidate to be the model for Claes Jansz's engraving, and I take seriously the inscription *Rembrandt invent.* Neither I nor Bernard Allien is out to prove that this means that Rembrandt was the maker of the panel, though without eliminating that possibility, which is after all suggested by Claes Jansz Visscher. In any case, the evident





4

Pieter Lastman  
*The baptism of the  
eunuch, 1623*

Oil on panel, 85 × 115 cm  
Karlsruhe, Staatliche Kunsthalle  
Karlsruhe, 772



close ties of the work to Rembrandt's production in the years about 1630 demand explanation. With this impetus, I have delved into the representation, its history and its place in Rembrandt's training and production. Of great importance to this study was an unexcelled, unpublished M.A. thesis on the baptism of the eunuch that Odilia Bonebakker submitted in Queen's University, Canada, in 1998.<sup>2</sup>

In the course of work, it became apparent that there is a major, barely acknowledged mismatch between the Bible story and its representation in Dutch art of the seventeenth century, the place and time of its greatest popularity. The realization that Dutch artists were not putting the actual Bible text into visual form called for a good look at what they *were* visualizing. Seen in this way, the works show interests and intentions of different

kinds. Take only these two paintings, both by Dutch Catholic artists, both painted in the early 1620s.

Bloemaert makes a Hollywood blaxploitation picture of the scene. His St. Philip, performing the baptism, has the stature and air of an Old Testament prophet. His raised left finger is not so much a gesture of speech as to point to the Holy Spirit, of which he is the conduit. The Ethiopian eunuch who is being baptized is a histrionic convert, colorful in every imaginable way. His large entourage is pushed aside as he and Philip act up a storm; his blackness is accentuated, his campy glamour exaggerated. This is a scene of heroic excess, in which the main actors are raised above the status of common humanity. The theme of the painting is less religious inspiration than dramatic flair.

3

Abraham Bloemaert  
*The baptism of the  
eunuch, ca. 1620-25*

Oil on canvas,  
219 × 153.6 cm  
Utrecht, Museum Catharijne-  
convent, 11225<sup>3</sup>

The Bible translation used is the King James Version of 1611, based on the Bishop's Bible of 1568. Modern translations may be more fluent, but in their aim of maximum readability they tend to read things into the text that aren't there. For example, the first sentence of our story in the King James Version reads

<sup>26</sup> And the angel of the Lord spake unto Philip, saying, Arise, and go toward the south unto the way that goeth down from Jerusalem unto Gaza, which is desert.

while the widely accepted New Revised Standard Version says:

<sup>26</sup> Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south[g] to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.)

This formulation takes sides in a lengthy debate in the critical literature as to whether the designation "desert" refers to the road or the place Gaza. In the King James Version both readings are possible, as in the Septuagint. The King James Version is not only more literal, it is also closer to the Dutch Bible Rembrandt would have read, the Protestant Deux-Aes Bible of 1562. It must be admitted, though, that some of the passages concerning the baptism of the eunuch in that Bible are erroneous or obscure to the point of incomprehensibility. This is however not an issue for the iconography of the subject, since as we shall see, whatever reading Rembrandt did in the Bible had no bearing on the pictures under study.

Pieter Lastman achieves more or less the opposite. Philip and the eunuch are upstaged by a skinny dog who looks out at us appealingly and a horse who hogs the middle of the composition. The deacon and the convert are modest souls who are no more serious than the eunuch's companions on their way to Africa. The eunuch is hardly more dark-skinned than Philip; the drivers of his chariot not at all. Only a boy page is characterized as a black African. Nothing in the painting exudes the show of royalty, wealth or self-importance with which the Bloemaert runs over. The hillside and waterfall are the most dynamic parts of the picture. All in all, the painting poses more of a question than a certainty.

What I wish to say with this comparison is that the motif of the baptism of the eunuch was not an unequivocal given. It left an artist and a patron considerable leeway. At the end of this book, I will say what I think the painter of the new *Baptism of the eunuch* was aiming at in his version of the scene. But first I will interrogate the text that provides the source for the scene; sketch the development of the iconography in Netherlandish art; and review the depictions of the scene by Rembrandt.