
Saint Sebastian Tended by Irene, 1625

Signed and dated at top, left of center: HTBrugghen fecit 1625 (HT in monogram)

Oil on canvas

58 11/16 x 47 in. (149 x 119.4 cm)

R. T. Miller, Jr. Fund, 1953

AMAM 1953.256

The tending of Saint Sebastian by Irene was a popular theme in seventeenth-century art, indicative of a contemporary drive to project Catholicism as a caring faith. The extraordinary power and pathos of Ter Brugghen's painting is largely due to the compact immediacy of the figures, and the artist's skilled manipulation of eerie, crepuscular lighting effects.

The popularity that the story of Saint Sebastian and Irene gained at the beginning of the seventeenth century was due at least in part to the Counter-Reformational focus on the early history of the Church. Saint Sebastian was applauded as a militant defender and martyr of the Church, and as the epitome of steadfast faith; Irene, as a virtuous and pious woman. The increased importance accorded Irene in seventeenth-century depictions may have been fostered by the publication of Caesar Baronius's Annales ecclesiastici (1586), which placed much emphasis on her life. More generally, the seventh-century focus on the tender ministrations of Irene--rather than on the isolated and pathetic figure of the near-martyred (arrow-pierced) saint--expressed the Counter-Reformational desire to project Catholicism as a caring faith, with a visible dimension of social responsibility.

Saint Sebastian's intercession was commonly invoked against the plague, a disease that claimed many victims in pre-modern Europe. In Utrecht, for example, large numbers of people succumbed to the disease in the years 1624-32 and 1634-37. It is quite possible that representations of Saint Sebastian were inspired by particularly virulent outbreaks of the plague.

Although Saint Sebastian appears occasionally in Dutch art prior to the seventeenth century, the theme was decidedly more popular in Catholic countries such as Italy, France, and Flanders. In the northern Netherlands in the seventeenth century, it appears to have enjoyed widespread popularity only in Utrecht, one of the few Dutch cities that was predominantly Catholic.

Several representations of Saint Sebastian are known to have been commissioned by Dutch militia companies (schutterijen) under the patronage of this saint. In Utrecht, however, these companies played a comparatively minor role, and Carr's assertion that Ter Brugghen's painting, now at Oberlin, was commissioned by such a militia company appears to be unfounded.

Like many other early seventeenth-century interpretations of Saint Sebastian tended by Irene, Ter Brugghen's Saint Sebastian adopts the formal conventions of depictions of Christ's Descent from the Cross: a pathetically lifeless, seminude male figure, supported and tended by two or more (female) figures. Compositionally, Ter Brugghen's painting is related to--and probably influenced by--nearly contemporaneous...
representations of the subject by other Utrecht Caravaggisti.

The earliest treatment of the theme by a northern Caravaggeseque painter is the Saint Sebastian, by Gerard van Honthorst (1592-1656), which was possibly painted as early as 1620. Although this work includes only the isolated figure of the wounded saint, Saint Sebastian's slumped, lifeless pose may have been an important source for Ter Bruggen. The more specific subject of Irene tending to Saint Sebastian and removing his arrows was first introduced into the north by Dirck van Baburen (ca. 1595-1624), in a work probably painted in Utrecht shortly before the artist's death in February 1624. Baburen's composition gives equal weight to the motifs of deposition and healing embodied in the Counter-Reformatory vision of the event. Jan van Bylert's (1597/98-1671) Saint Sebastian Tended by Irene, signed and dated 1624, is also indebted to Baburen's innovative composition. In his study of Ter Bruggen's painting at Oberlin, Stechow also drew attention to an anonymous Italian Caravagesque painting of Saint Sebastian Tended by Irene that may have been the model for one or all of these Dutch works.

This enumeration of the formal sources for Ter Bruggen's Saint Sebastian Tended by Irene does not address the unique achievements of his masterful and poetic composition. The powerful immediacy of the three figures within the shallow space is heighted by the close cropping of the composition, and by the figures' seemingly inextricable fusion into a single pyramidal form. This monumental grouping is both softened and sculpted by the cool, silvery light that plays over the greenish forms of Sebastian's flesh, and over the muted tones and simple folds of the women's garments. The parallel alignment of the three heads, and the close proximity of the hands at the upper right, are concise reiterations of the greater pathos projected by the juxtaposition of Saint Sebastian's awkwardly slumped and inert body with the alert and tender efficiency of Irene and her maid. The frail clump of trees in the landscape at the right poses a similarly poignant contrast with the solid, yet equally vulnerable, body of the saint.

M. E. Wieseman

Biography
The date and place of Hendrick Jansz ter Brugghen's birth are not securely documented; he seems to have been born either in The Hague or possibly Utrecht, probably about 1588. He was a pupil of Abraham Bloemaert (1564-1651) in Utrecht, then traveled in Italy to complete his artistic training, spending most of his time in Rome. There he was profoundly influenced by the tenebrism and often brutal realism of paintings by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610) and his followers. Ter Bruggen was recorded in Milan on his way back to Holland in 1614, and was back in Utrecht before April 1615. He entered that city's Guild of Saint Luke in 1616 or 1617; from 1620 or '22 until 1624 he was closely associated with, and may have shared a studio with, the painter Dirck van Baburen. Aside from a possible return visit to Italy between 1619 and 1621, he lived the remainder of his life in Utrecht, and was buried in the Buurkerk there on 7 November 1629.

Ter Bruggen was one of the leading representatives of Caravagesque painting in the Netherlands. His sensitive and poetic style combines chiaroscuro lighting and simple, monumental forms with subtle painterly effects. Though clearly influenced by Italian painting, his work also carries echoes of Northern Renaissance traditions. Ter Bruggen painted mostly religious subjects and genre scenes (musicians and drinkers), as well as a few mythological and literary subjects.

General References


Provenance
Collection Pieter Fris, Amsterdam ("Een Sint Sebastiaen van Ter Brugghe")

http://www.oberlin.edu/amam/TerBrugghen.htm
Given by Fris to Jan de Waale (Walé) in payment of a debt, 30 August 1668 12

Collection Jan de Waale

His sale, Amsterdam, 12 May 1706, lot 43 ("Een doode St. Sebastiaen van TerBrugge")

Private collection, Rouen, by 1841 13

Château de Laroque, Sarlat, Dordogne (former residence of the Archbishop of Beaumont)

Sale Sarlat, 11 May 1952 14

With Rolan Robert, Nice (1952)

With Frederick Mont, Inc., New York, from whom purchased in 1953

**Exhibitions**


Fort Worth Art Center, 1954. *Inaugural Exhibition*. 3 - 20 October. Cat. no. 98.


Urbana, University of Illinois Department of Art, 1955. *Great Traditions in Painting from Midwestern Collections*. 23 October - 27 November. Cat. no. 34.

Malmö, Sweden, Radhüs, 1956. *Masterworks from American University Museums* (sponsored by the College Art Association). 30 June - 15 July (also shown at Utrecht, Centraal Museum; Birmingham; London, University of London, Senate House; Durham, University of Durham; Kings College; Brussels, Palais des Beaux-Arts; Liège, Musée des Beaux-Arts; Lyon, Musée des Beaux-Arts [as no. 37]; Marburg, University Museum; Tübingen, Tübingen University Museum; and Besançon). Cat. no. 45.


The Dayton Art Institute, 1966. *Hendrick Terbrugghen in America*. 15 October - 28 November (also shown at The Baltimore Museum of Art). Cat. no. 10.


Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art, 1996-97. Georges de la Tour and his World. 6 October - 5 January (also shown at Fort Worth, Kimbell Art Museum). Cat. no. 39.


**Literature**


Hendrick Terbrugghen in America. Exh. cat., The Dayton Art Institute, 1965, pp. 8-9, 31-33 n. 10.


Rzepinska, Maria. "Obraz Georges’a de la Toura w Muzeum Berlinskim: Ze studi-w nad siedemnastowieczna


Hoving, Thomas. "How many sublime works of art are there in American public collections?" *Connoisseur* (July 1984), pp. 45-46.


**Technical Data**
The painting was cleaned by William Suhr in 1952-53, before it entered the museum's collection. Narrow strips added at the top, left, and bottom of the canvas (probably fairly modern), which incorporated some "pictorial extensions" (tree trunks, leaves) and additions, were removed at this time. The painting is structurally sound. There is a vertical seam at about the center of the original canvas support. The painting was lined with a glue-paste adhesive, apparently in 1952-53. All original tacking margins have been removed. Along the top and left sides, margins of about 2 cm have been made up with gesso and painted in order to extend the margins of the painting. The texture of the paint surface has been flattened through excessive ironing, and there are some losses to the paint layer, most notably associated with two tears in the original canvas near the head and in the neck of Saint Sebastian.

In the lower right of the composition, Irene's gown was painted using the fugitive pigment smalt; the blue of the smalt has degraded and taken on a typically uneven, blanched appearance. The underlying reddish ground has been exposed over time through numerous abrasions in the paint layer in this area. There are pentimenti throughout the composition, most visible in the figure of Saint Sebastian (along his left leg, in the folds of his garment, along his waist and chin, etc.) and in the hands of the two women.

The painting was most recently cleaned and treated by John Brealey, Conservator of Paintings at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, in 1982-83. Treatment involved removing discolored and opaque natural resin varnish, and correcting and toning discolored inpainting.

Footnotes


6. Oil on canvas, 101 x 117 cm, London, The National Gallery, inv. 4503. In addition, Slatkes notes a Saint Sebastian painted by Dirck van Baburen in Italy in about 1615; the painting, now lost, is known through contemporary copies (e.g., at the Bob Jones University collection); see Nieuwe Licht op de Gouden Eeuw: Hendrick ter Brugghen en tijdgenoten (exh. cat., Centraal Museum, Utrecht, 1986-87), p. 132, fig. 86.


9. Oil on canvas, 113 x 100 cm, signed and dated 1624, Rohrau (Austria), Graf Harrach'sche Familiensammlung, Schloß Rohrau; see *Nieuwe Licht op de Gouden Eeuw: Hendrick ter Brugghen en tijdgenoten* (exh. cat., Centraal Museum, Utrecht, 1986-87), cat. no. 39.


15. Notes on Suhr's treatment are in the museum files; additional information for this section is taken from Richard D. Buck's preliminary examination of the painting in June 1953, and Brealey's treatment report of May 1983 (both in the museum files).