

### ***The Joseph-cycle of 1655***

Nicolette Sluijter (p. 1-5) and Eric Jan Sluijter (p. 6-10). HNA-conference, June 2, 2022

Since a couple of years we know that six rather large seventeenth-century paintings with scenes of the life of Joseph together constitute a cycle (fig. 1). They are all painted on canvas, of the same size and all signed and dated 1655, by six different painters. The paintings themselves were not unknown, but it was Tom van der Molen who realised that they belonged together. He published this in the research volume *Bol and Flinck* of 2017 where he connected this exceptional cycle with Vondel's three Joseph plays (fig. 2). The paintings are, in the order of the Joseph story:

- **Joseph being admonished by his father after telling his dream to his family** by Nicolaes van Helt Stocade (fig. 3).
- **Joseph's blood-stained cloak being shown to his father Jacob** by Govert Flinck (fig. 4).
- **Potifar's wife accusing Joseph**, by Rembrandt (fig. 5).
- **Joseph explaining Pharaoh's dreams**, by Salomon Koninck (fig. 6).
- **Joseph distributing corn in Egypt**, by Bartholomeus Breenbergh (fig. 7).
- **The meeting of Jacob and Joseph in Egypt**, by Salomon de Bray (fig. 8).

It seems almost a matter-of-course to connect this series of 1655 with Vondel's trilogy, because these three dramas were performed together on one day at the Amsterdam Schouwburg in 1653, '54, '55 and following years (fig. 9). However, the link of the subjects rendered to Vondel's plays is not very strong. Some of the depicted scenes only figure in quite oblique references, mostly in *Sophompaneas of Jozef in 't Hof*. Other episodes were only mentioned by one of the protagonists, and no more than two of the depicted scenes had a significant place in Vondel's dramas (fig. 10). Nonetheless, Vondel's plays and the performance of them together precisely in 1653, 4 and 5, could very well have motivated a patron or an institution to commission the paintings. Moreover, the fact that Vondel described in *Sophompaneas* a gallery with a series of paintings with the life of Joseph (fig. 11), could have been a compelling challenge for having a Joseph cycle painted.

The ties to the *pictorial* tradition are much stronger; all subjects had already a tradition in pictures. But in this cycle some essential episodes are missing, for example: *Joseph being thrown into the well by his brothers*, *Joseph being sold*, *Joseph fleeing Potifar's wife* and *Joseph in prison interpreting the dreams of the baker and the butler*. Therefore, it seems unlikely that the cycle consisted of only six paintings. A strong indication that indeed there

would have been *ten* paintings, is the series of 10 drawings attributed to Gerbrand van den Eeckhout, dating from the 1660s (fig. 12). There we do not only find both the existing *and* the missing scenes, but several of the compositions recall the paintings, indicating that the artist **knew** the paintings (fig. 13).

But the strongest proof that the series has contained more than the six paintings we know, is the record of a seventh painting, that I came across in an auction catalogue of 1743 in which both the paintings by Salomon Koninck and Govert Flinck were sold. Lot number 62 reads “Joseph in de gevangenis, door Carel van Savoyen” (fig. 14a). Unfortunately, without dimensions. But from Angela Jager’s master-thesis on this artist I learned that the painting was also recorded in two later auctions. In a sales catalogue of 1781 the measurements are mentioned: 44 by 35 duim (fig. 14b). In centimeters this is: 113 by 90 cm, the same size as the other six *And* also one of the missing subjects. Thus, this work unmistakably belonged to our series, although unfortunately we do not know more about it. The nowadays quite unknown Van Savoyen was a well-respected painter from Antwerp (fig. 15). He had settled in Amsterdam and was mentioned by Jan Vos in his long poem for the Feast of the Brotherhood of Painters on St. Lukes day in 1654 (the year the commissions must have been given), and in which Jan Vos presented a kind of *tableau de la troupe* of renowned Amsterdam painters.

It is clear that some painters one would expect to have contributed to this prestigious series are missing. In my search for more paintings, I went through the works of artists who received commissions for the town hall, and who started working there as of the next year, 1656: Ferdinand Bol, Jan Lievens, Jan Gerritsz. van Bronchorst and Cornelis Holsteyn; but also Jacob van Loo and Gerbrand van den Eeckhout. I searched all the possible files, indexes and databases (fig. 16). Regrettably I found no paintings that could have belonged to the cycle.

Takin the auctions in which the existing paintings made their first appearance as a starting point, I tried to trace them back. All of them turned up in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, three paintings together in one auction sale, two in another sale and two alone (fig. 17). I hoped to find how the paintings had been acquired by the owners, and – ideally – the patron or institution who commissioned the whole series.

The earliest sale is that of Jan Agges in 1702, where “The Grainhouse of Egypt” by Breenbergh was sold for an incredibly high sum (fig. 18a). But here we have immediately a complication: we know two almost identical paintings by Breenbergh with this subject – same composition, same dimensions and both signed; but one dated 1655 and the other 1654 (fig. 18b). It is not possible to determine which one figured in this 1702 sale. So one of the

paintings was already finished in 1654 and subsequently copied by the master himself for the series in 1655. The earlier one was undeniably a specific commission as well; not only had Breenbergh virtually stopped painting after 1647, but the upright format and the large scale figures make the painting entirely exceptional in his oeuvre, which raises the question whether the idea for the series originated with this Breenbergh-painting, which shows a pivotal scene in the Joseph story.

I already mentioned the sale in April 1743 that included no less than three paintings: the Flinck, the Koninck and the lost Van Savoyen. These paintings were owned by Isack Hoogenbergh de Jonge, a jeweller. It was possible to trace this family back to the second quarter of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (fig. 19). They were all called Isaac and they were diamant cutters or jewellers. But nothing could be found about paintings owned by these earlier Hoogenberghs.

In a sale of 18 August 1762 were the two paintings by Nicolaas van Helt Stockade and Salomon de Bray. This was the collection of Pieter Johan Wierman (fig. 20). Remarkably, there is a relation by intermarriage between these three families (Agges, Hoogenbergh and Wierman) in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century (fig. 21). Unfortunately, untangling their relations did not help in finding the 17<sup>th</sup>-century provenance of the series.

It was already known that Rembrandt's painting was in a sale of John van Spangen's collection in London in 1743. I found that Van Spangen must have bought it from the painter and art dealer Jacques Ignatius de Roore in The Hague (fig. 22). Alas, here we are again at a dead end. Thus, the search for a provenance before the first known owners yielded no results.

Ten paintings of this size need a lot of wall space and the commission must have been an expensive undertaking (fig. 23). The Rembrandt might have costed between 500 and 1500 guilders to begin with. Naturally, one wonders whether they might have been painted for the Schouwburg as an expensive gift from a rich theatre lover. Above the entrance hall of the Schouwburg was a room where the board members met, which was just large enough to hold a cycle of paintings of this size (fig. 24). If they had been hanging in this room, it would have been understandable that they became to be dispersed when the theatre was rebuilt and enlarged in 1664-65. Had they been there, however, Vondel himself, or Jan Vos, who was one of the directors of the Schouwburgh, would surely have dedicated a poem on what must have been a spectacular set of paintings; they wrote poems about anything or anyone having a connection with the theatre - or with painting. Nothing of the sort is known, however. Thus, the lack of any written record makes this theory unlikely. Even more unlikely is that they would have been part of the stage sets, since the scenes would have been invisible, and,

moreover, far too expensive for such a function. Tracing the board members of the Schouwburgh in those years, yielded no results either (fig. 24a).

Because Joseph is was considered an example of good governance, I also checked in vain prominent Amsterdam regents and Burgomasters who had been involved in the commissions for the decoration of the new Town Hall or had a collection of their own (fig. 25). We can be certain that the Town Hall itself, for which the first commissions for paintings must have been given precisely in this year, never contained such a series (fig. 26a). There is the possibility that the cycle had been planned by, and commissioned through, Jacob van Campen and that the plan was dropped after he left the job because of disagreements in December 1654 (fig. 26b). We just don't know.

Other hypotheses were tried, such as Amsterdam religious or charity institutions, but none had any connection with the Old-Testament Joseph. I also looked into Jewish patrons or institutions. Such a commission might explain the total silence around the series, but without result. Or did the commission come from an art dealer? Especially Marten Kretzer seemed qualified (fig. 27). Kretzer initiated and supervised the formation of the Brotherhood of Painters in 1654 and organized the feast on St. Luke's day, together with Helt Stockade. But also in that case, and in fact almost in any other case, one would have expected a poem by Vondel, Jan Vos, or some other Amsterdam poet. This total silence makes this cycle all the more mysterious.

Most likely it was a private person who commissioned this cycle for his own house. Such a series was seen by Zacharias Uffenbach in 1711 in the house of the collector Jacob de Wilde in Amsterdam, consisting of 10 or 11 paintings; but that one cycle was by one artist and of a much later date (fig. 28). Therefore, the conclusion must be: As far as I know, I have tried every possible connection, but without result.

=====

Well, this was a thrilling search, but the outcome leaves us with many questions. Of one thing we can be sure: this commission was expensive and highly unusual, and must have been a great challenge for the artists, because they knew that their works were going to be compared (fig. 29). It recalls Joachim von Sandrart's story in his *Lebenslauf*, recounting that the King of Spain commissioned twelve paintings of similar size from the most renowned artists in Rome, which were exhibited together to be judged by cardinals, princes and connoisseurs (fig. 30).

For our Joseph series all painters demonstrated emphatically their own manner, each distinguished their styles as much as possible (fig. 31). It must have been a perfect sample of the different styles of Amsterdam history painters. Connoisseurs would have loved to discuss

this (comparing and valuing their manners), and that's what I will try to do, albeit very concisely.

### *Helt Stockade*

It must have been Helt Stockade's goal to demonstrate ostentatiously his acquaintance with contemporary Italian and French art (fig. 32). Of this same subject, Rembrandt had made a grisaille and etching in the 1630s, emulating with great wit both Raphael's and Lucas van Leyden's invention (fig. 33). Helt Stockade, also taking Raphael as point of departure, obviously wished to present something entirely different in every respect (fig. 34). He used a type of ordonnance developed for large altarpieces in Rome, further elaborated upon by Simon Vouet and others, with huge columns to the left and figures close to the picture plane on and before a marble platform (fig. 35).

One wonders what Rembrandt would have thought of this total lack of *houding* - of space created through overlap of sharp contours only (fig. 36)? He might have considered this, and the idealized poses, a matter of contrasting ideals. But he would not have shown consideration for the fact that the figures are quite clumsily drawn, that the space occupied by the group of brothers to the left and their position in relation to Joseph is totally unclear, while Jacob is dangerously balancing at the edge of the platform in a kind of graceful, but unsuitable pose (which, moreover, appears to be grafted on his own Jacob figure [fig. 36a]). He would have recognized, as we do, that it was mainly due to Stockade's cosmopolitan CV (fig. 37a) and his connections with Quellinus and Van Campen, that such a mediocre painter, who finished in the next year this rambling painting for the Town Hall (fig. 37b), received such important commissions.

### *Flinck*

It must have been Flinck's goal to emulate both the renowned painting by Jan Pynas as well as Vondel's emulation of Pynas's work on the theatre stage (fig. 38). In the dedication of his 1640 *Joseph in Dothan*, Vondel had written that a painting by Jan Pynas inspired him "to follow as closely as possible with words the painter's colors, drawing, and rendering of the passions." In the final scene a brother tells the episode as if he sees in his mind's eye what Pynas had visualized in the painting. In 1633 Rembrandt had already taken Pynas's painting as a starting point for an etching, turning it into a scene of fierce emotion (fig. 39).

Flinck transformed Pynas's intricate composition and Rembrandt's violent ordonnance into a stylized, easily readable narrative. With supple ease and a refined use of '*houding*' through many gradations of grayish browns and reds, he strings the figures together in tight

groups cutting through space, effectively focusing the attention on the main protagonist – a lesson he learned well from poring over prints after Rubens (fig. 40). Thus, Flinck developed an alternative style that deviated radically from Rembrandt's endeavors, but still had many ties with his master's lessons. The graceful, conventional gestures and poses with which the passions were rendered and the story clearly told, were essential means for Flinck to give the painting its proper function, that is, a pleasing scene of which the viewer immediately recognizes what is happening (fig. 41).

### *Rembrandt*

As with the *Nightwatch* in the Kloveniersdoelen, Rembrandt aimed at outshining the others, pointedly demonstrating the exceptionality of his manner and introducing staggering novelties in the process (fig. 42). As always, a convincing rendering of the passions of the soul was the focus of his painting, but he achieved this in a novel way. Rembrandt knew both Pynas's painting and Vondel's text that had been inspired by that work (fig. 43), but deleted the maid showing the mantle and the servants holding Joseph, as well as other narrative elements. Potifar's wife does not point to the cloak (which is inconspicuously under her feet), nor does she point to Joseph. She presents her case with an arguing gesture. Her gaze - not looking at Potifar - is unfocused, as if her guilt prohibits her to confront him (fig. 44). He, in his turn, does not touch her and does not look at Joseph, nor at her. Thus, it is entirely up to the viewer to interpret and contemplate the 'woelingen', the inner turbulence, raging in their minds. This approach of the passions, skipping narrative motifs and suppressing movement, the viewer thus being forced to think about what is going on in their minds, is entirely new.

To hook and hold the gaze of the viewer, the paint surface is, more than in any of Rembrandt's earlier history paintings, extremely variable, showing simultaneously an astounding emphasis on impasto *and* a high degree of detail (fig. 45). Though in bad condition, the *kenlijkheid* of this new technique, and the display of *houding* are still sensational, suggesting space entirely through endless variation of light reflecting on surfaces. This highly specific kind of surface treatment, unbelievable technical virtuosity and emotional intensity was radically different from the styles that the other five painters employed (fig. 46).

### *Breenbergh*

The contrast with Breenbergh's manner could not be greater (fig. 47). Like Helt Stockade Breenbergh was a true cosmopolitan, but Rembrandt would have found his work much more interesting. In an earlier painting of this subject Breenbergh had transformed Pieter Lastman's influential composition of 1612 into his own type of small figured history (fig. 48). But when

tackling the problem of this specific high format with large figures, entirely unusual for him, he came up with an unexpected solution: he adapted basic elements of a highly idiosyncratic ordonnance by Jacopo Pontormo (fig. 49). He must have made a sketch of Pontormo's panel in Italy thirty years earlier. He kept the narrow framing with monumental architecture, part of the vertiginous open staircase with sculpture on top, and main figures high up to the right, but made Pontormo's claustrophobic space less artificial, using a much lower vanishing point, diminishing the irrational spatial leaps, opening it up with a *doorzicht* in the middle, while reusing elements of his earlier composition (fig. 50). Breenbergh had always emphatically demonstrated his intimate knowledge of Roman monuments, as he did here (fig. 51a). In two foreground figures, the Reni-like woman and a Carracci-type male nude, he displays also his knowledge of contemporary Italian ideals in figures (fig. 51b). No *houding* here, but clearly drawn overlapping contours and steeply receding perspective lines. But also a refined colorism and brilliant use of atmospheric perspective (fig. 52). Rembrandt probably would have appreciated this very competent endeavor to make something exceptional and unconventional.

I have no time left for Koninck and De Bray, but will only say that Salomon Koninck, even this late, employed many motifs of Rembrandt's early manner (fig. 53), but transformed these into something utterly different, creating a straightforwardly narrated story, through pleasingly undulating forms and surfaces (the auricular ornament seems to pervade even the folds of the shining textiles) (fig. 54), in a clearly structured, almost classicist ordonnance (fig. 55).

Salomon de Bray was the eldest of all (fig. 56). As an architect he was a learned classicist, but as a painter he basically held on to a manner of history painting of earlier decades, competently updating Lastman, Pynas and Moyaert (fig. 57). Remarkably, he skillfully fitted elements from inventions by Rembrandt's of the 1630s into this work (fig. 58).

It will have been clear how they all emphasized the divergency of their styles (fig. 59). Rembrandt deliberately demonstrated his exceptionality in every respect and connoisseurs would have acknowledged that his art, meant to involve them with great intensity, was of a different level. At the same time his painting showed them clearly that his views on art and his manner, which aimed at true connoisseurs, would not work for public commissions as in the Town Hall. There one needed painters like Flinck who would render with clarity stories that were easy to read and pleasing to the eye.