



## On 'AEN'

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**AEN** – a mysterious Dutch inscription on the *Portrait of a Woman, possibly Anna Codde* by Maarten van Heemskerck (fig. 1). In 1979 this painting was not shown in the exhibition *Just Looking at Lettering on Paintings*, one of the most delightful of the mini-exhibitions in the series that Wouter Kloek conceived and staged between 1977 and 1980 under the umbrella title *Just Looking at ....*<sup>1</sup> In each case he tackled a specific problem facing artists – such questions as how to handle light in a domestic interior or how and why to include lettering in a composition. Obviously he could not use a painting with an incomprehensible inscription, no matter how fine and early an example of the use of text this 1529 portrait of a woman might be in itself.

The woman is shown spinning. Her portrait is the pendant to the *Portrait of a Man, possibly Pieter Gerritsz Bicker*, who is seen sitting at a table, occupied with his financial affairs. In one of the earliest issues of this bulletin, published some fifty years ago when the iconological analysis of paintings was not yet common practice, J. Bruyn explained that these portraits were not meant to be snapshots of a moment in the domestic life of the time.<sup>2</sup> To their contemporaries, the occupations of the man and woman and their attributes must,

*Fig. 1*  
MAARTEN VAN  
HEEMSKERCK,  
*Portrait of a  
Woman, possibly  
Anna Codde*, 1529.  
Oil on panel,  
86.5 x 66 cm.  
Rijksmuseum,  
Amsterdam  
(inv. no. SK-A-3519).

above all, have had a symbolic significance. In the woman's case they would have understood that her task denotes her virtue.<sup>3</sup> This symbolism is based on two verses from *Proverbs* that describe some of the characteristics of the virtuous woman whose price, according to chapter 31, verse 10, is 'above rubies'. In verse 31:13 we read, 'She seeketh wool, and flax, and worketh willingly with her hands' and in verse 31:19, 'She layeth her hands to the spindle, and her hands hold the distaff'.<sup>4</sup>

Bruyn did not refer to the inscription 'AEN' on the band that keeps the bundle of flax together. Most of the later authors who discussed the portraits, all of whom accepted Bruyn's theory, likewise ignored the inscription. In 1941, however, C.H. de Jonge did consider it in her publication of Heemskerck's very similar *Portrait of a Lady with Spindle and Distaff* (fig. 2), now in Madrid, in which precisely the same lettering appears.<sup>5</sup> She suggested that it was an abbreviation for 'AEN[DENKEN]' (remembrance).<sup>6</sup> De Jonge's admittedly gratuitous assertion is ignored in the recent online Rijksmuseum catalogue, *Early Netherlandish Paintings in the Rijksmuseum*, in which the function of the inscription is described as unclear.<sup>7</sup>

Since time immemorial, before the invention of the spinning wheel,



Fig. 2  
 MAARTEN VAN  
 HEEMSKERCK,  
*Portrait of a Lady  
 with Spindle and  
 Distaff*. c. 1531.  
 Oil on panel,  
 105 x 86 cm.  
 Museo Thyssen-  
 Bornemisza, Madrid  
 (inv. no. 183 [1969-14]).



Fig. 3  
 Detail (Clotho)  
 of CORNELIS CORT  
 AFTER GIULIO  
 ROMANO, *The  
 Three Fates*, 1561.  
 Engraving.  
 Museum Boijmans  
 Van Beuningen,  
 Rotterdam (inv. no.  
 BdH 19916 (PK)).

people had used a distaff and spindle to spin thread (fig. 3). The distaff is a rod with a large tuft of flax or wool at the top, held on with a short length of twine, a ribbon or a binder designed specifically for the purpose. Two fingers were used to twist a wisp of flax together to form the start of a thread. This piece was secured to a spindle, a sort of top that was spun by twisting the thread with thumb and index finger to create the continuation of the thread. The first stage in mechanizing the process – probably during the thirteenth century – was to mount the spindle horizontally on a wooden base so it could be rotated by a cord encircling a large, hand-driven wheel. The fork of the wheel was fixed on the right side of this base, the distaff on the left.<sup>8</sup> From then on the distaff was part of the device, but – and this is important to my argument – it remained clearly identifiable as an object.

The whole of the distaff is pictured in the portrait in Madrid, which is

Fig. 4

Detail of fig. 2 (*AEN* on the distaff of the Madrid portrait).



Fig. 5

Detail of fig. 1 (*AEN* on the distaff of the Amsterdam portrait).



larger than the one in Amsterdam, so the position of 'AEN' can be seen more clearly (fig. 4). It is picked out in gold capitals on the central black zone of a broad red band wound around the flax to keep it in place. The red band and the black stripe are edged with gold trim. The red area is decorated with small floral motifs applied in gold. The band would appear to be made of fabric, to which the letters, edging and decoration have been applied with gold thread. It is wound anticlockwise around the flax, as we can see from the position of the end (or, if you prefer, beginning) of the band, which protrudes above the top edge. The other end of the band is at the back and so cannot be seen, but after the letters 'AEN' there is plainly enough space for more letters. If I am not mistaken, a tiny part of the next letter, most of which is out of sight, can just be seen.<sup>9</sup> The band itself is fastened with a fine

cord that runs over the centre of the letters. Whenever the ball of wool or flax gets small enough to warrant it, this cord can be tightened by turning the beautifully-shaped gold pin placed through it like a sort of wing nut on the right-hand side and secured by its point in the red part of the band. It is depicted in exactly the same way in the Amsterdam portrait (fig. 5), except that there the decoration on the band is simpler, the letters are silver or white, and the pin is outside the picture plane.

Bands like this instead of a simple ribbon are not uncommon, but they are seldom as colourful or ornate and, at least as far as I have been able to discover, they never bear any lettering. This means that Heemskerck, or perhaps more particularly his client or a scholarly adviser, must have had something quite specific in mind in putting the letters 'AEN' on the distaff. But what might this be? That is the

problem. They cannot be meant as a cryptic reference to the relevant verses from *Proverbs* in the Vulgate, because there is no keyword in them that begins with these three letters.<sup>10</sup> This would have been redundant, anyway, since the act of spinning is in itself an allusion to this biblical moral. So might there be virtues other than domesticity that are symbolized by the distaff and spindle and could be relevant here? There is one: diligence.<sup>11</sup> But again, the letters 'AEN' do not fit. Do we, then, have to cast our net wider and ask whether the spinner's tools are associated with particular biblical, mythological or historical exemplars? Indeed they are – with Eve, who spun virtuously, although Naamah, a distant descendant of her son Cain, had yet to invent spinning. And with Mary, the new Eve. And later as attributes of St Elisabeth of Hungary, St Genevieve of Paris and St Neosnadia of Poitou. And in antiquity first and foremost with Athene (Minerva), who was regarded among other things as the inventor of spinning and weaving. And with her rival, Arachne. And with Clotho who spun the thread of human life, with Helen who, after her wild youth, spun virtuously in her palace in Sparta, with Penelope who spun dutifully while her husband was away, with Lucrece who, conversely, spun in the company of her husband while the wives of other Romans were found feasting, and with Gaia Caecilia, the ideal housewife, who is portrayed in the emblem books with distaff and homely slippers. And finally with two men: Hercules, who as Omphale's slave was forced to wear women's clothes and spin, and Sardanapalus, the Assyrian king who liked nothing better than to spin wool in the midst of his concubines.

Spinners galore, but no one who can be linked to the letters 'AEN', conceived as a word. But do these letters actually form a word? Might they not simply be the sitter's initials? This possibility can be ruled out altogether since they

appear on the portraits of two different women. If we take it to be the Dutch word 'aan' (modern spelling) – which is now, as in the past, pronounced with a long 'a' as in 'ask' – it occurs, like its English equivalent 'on', as a prefix and as a preposition in various meanings, none of which, however, make any sense in the context of Heemskerck's portrait of a woman. Should it then be construed as part of a noun or a compound verb, as De Jonge took it to be when she suggested that it stood for 'AEN[DENKEN]'? This, too, presents numerous possibilities, too many to mention. And surely we may assume that with his 'AEN' Heemskerck gave us a puzzling but not insoluble clue. To make the allusion unfathomable would, after all, have defeated the object. What reasonably remains is that what we have here are one or two syllables of a proper name, that is to say the first syllable or the first and the beginning of the second syllable of the name of a legendary or historical figure who has some sort of connection with a distaff. Read as a first syllable, 'AEN' does not produce any relevant names, but conceived of as two syllables, 'AE' and 'N...', it does. In this case 'AE' is pronounced in Dutch with the 'a' sound in 'table'. Taken in conjunction with the 'N', this immediately gives us Aeneas, the Trojan hero. But what did he have to do with a distaff?

Troy was protected by the Palladium, a wooden image of Pallas Athene (Minerva) that Zeus had given to the city as evidence of his agreement to its founding. It portrayed the goddess with a spear in her right hand as the patroness of war and a distaff and spindle in her left as patroness of women's work. When the Greeks destroyed the city, Aeneas fled with his aged father on his back, his son, his wife and the Palladium. Later, after he had reached Italy and founded Rome, he placed the statue in the Temple of Vesta, the goddess of the hearth, the hearth fire, family life and domestic happiness.



Fig. 6  
Detail of fig. 2  
(spinning-wheel of  
the Madrid portrait).

With the cryptic allusion to Aeneas on the distaffs of the women in the portraits in Amsterdam and Madrid, Maarten van Heemskerck demonstrated his already wholly humanist approach to his art at an early moment in his career, even before his trip to Italy (1532-36). Who else but he, in the Haarlem of the day, could have come up with the idea of exemplifying the virtue of the housewife not by relating it to *Proverbs* but by alluding to it in an *impresa*-like manner – referring to Minerva and Vesta by way of Aeneas and the distaff of his Palladium?<sup>12</sup>

He went even further in his use of classical ideas in the portrait in Madrid. I infer this from the striking difference in execution between the green-painted, elaborately decorated spinning wheel with its gilded swags and balusters in this portrait (fig. 6) and the simple, plain wooden spinning wheel, decorated with a little turning,

in the one in Amsterdam. Admittedly, if we are to go by the (unidentified) family arms, the lady in the portrait in Madrid was a member of the aristocracy, so one could argue that an opulent spinning wheel like this is entirely in keeping with her status, just as the simple version befits the commoner in the other portrait. But did such spinning wheels, lap models decorated with gilded carving, actually exist?<sup>13</sup> Is it not much more likely that this piece, ornamented with acanthus leaves, sprang from the artist's imagination?<sup>14</sup> It seems to me that this astonishing extravaganza represents Helen of Troy's gold spinning wheel, a gift from Alcandra, the wife of Polybos, King of Thebes (Luxor).<sup>15</sup> With it she installed herself in the room in the palace in Sparta where her husband, King Menelaus, received the young Telemachus when he came looking for his father, Odysseus. Settled for good in Sparta, after her wild adventures in Troy and Egypt, Helen became a pattern of domestic virtue. It would seem that the aristocratic beauty in the Madrid portrait deserved to be compared not just with Minerva and Vesta – for even if she was not, like Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world, she must, if her portrait is to be believed, have been one of the most attractive in Haarlem and far beyond.

## NOTES

- 1 *Alleen kijken naar meisjes of jongetjes (Just Looking at Boys or Girls) 1977; ... de omtrekvorm van schilderijen (... the Outlines of Paintings) 1978; ... teksten op schilderijen (... Lettering on Paintings) 1979; ... licht binnenshuis (... Interior Light) 1980.*
- 2 J. Bruyn Hzn, 'Vroege portretten van Maerten van Heemskerck', *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 3 (1955), pp. 27-35.
- 3 Other moral aspects of the spinning motif, such as sexual misbehaviour and diligence, are not relevant in this case. See Alison

Stewart, 'Distaffs and Spindles: Sexual Misbehaviour in Sebald Beham's Spinning Bee', in: Jane L. Carroll and Alison G. Stewart (eds.), *Saints, Sinners, and Sisters: Gender and Northern Art in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, Aldershot 2003, pp. 127-54; Ilja M. Veldman, 'Images of Labour and Diligence in Sixteenth-Century Netherlandish Prints: the work ethic rooted in civic morality or Protestantism?' *Simiolus* 21 (1992), pp. 227-64, and Annette de Vries, 'Toonbeelden van huiselijkheid of arbeid-

- zaamheid? De iconografie van de spinsters in relatie tot de verbeelding van arbeid en beroep in de vroegmoderne Nederlanden', *Tijdschrift voor sociale en economische geschiedenis* 2 (2005) no. 3, pp. 103-25.
- 4 The whole passage, Proverbs 31: 10-31, is the subject of the six-part set *Praise of the Virtuous Wife* of 1555, engraved by Coornhert to a design by Heemskerck. The first print depicts *The Virtuous Wife Spinning*. Bruyn referred to this set in his first footnote. The set is illustrated in Ilja M. Veldman, *Images for the Eye and Soul: Function and Meaning in Netherlandish Prints (1450-1650)*, Leiden 2006, pp. 153-55, figs. 135-40.
- 5 C.H. de Jonge, 'Maerten van Heemskerck: portret eener jonge vrouw, *Oud Holland* 58 (1941), pp. 1-5. Even though J.C. van Ebbingh Wubben had reported the inscription as 'AEN' in the *Sammlung Thyssen-Bornemisza* catalogue, no. 129, in 1971, in 1980 R. Grosshans stated with great certainty, but entirely mistakenly, that the inscription on this portrait, which he, too, could not decipher, read 'BAEN' (R. Grosshans, *Maerten van Heemskerck: die Gemälde*, Berlin 1980, p. 94 and note 3). J.C. Harrison, *The Paintings of Maerten van Heemskerck: a Catalogue Raisonné*, 4 vols., Ann Arbor 1989, vol. 1, cat. nos. 2 and 4, is among those who ignored the inscriptions.
- 6 The author did not explain why she thought this. It is possible that the inscription 'Léal Souvenir' (Loyal Remembrance) on Jan van Eyck's *Portrait of a Man* of 1432 (The National Gallery, London) gave her the idea.
- 7 *Early Netherlandish Paintings in the Rijksmuseum*, Amsterdam. Volume 1 – *Artists born before 1500* (see the Rijksmuseum website, under Collection). Entry by I. van Tuinen, who refers to De Jonge's article only as a literature reference in a footnote.
- 8 The base of the apparatus was usually mounted on legs to create a standing model. Around 1530, just about the time Heemskerck was painting his portraits, a German realized that it would be easier and faster to turn the wheel with a treadle rather than the right hand.
- 9 This is a capital letter with a vertical stroke on the left, in other words B, D, E, F, H, I, K, L, M, N, P OR R.
- 10 In 1529 there were very few translations of the Bible in Dutch. The first was published by Jacob van Liestvelt in Antwerp in 1526. This was followed in 1528 by the Vorsterman Bible, likewise published in Antwerp.
- 11 Philips Galle after Maerten van Heemskerck, *Two Ways of Getting Rich*. Engraving dating from 1563. Ilja M. Veldman, *Leerrijke reeksen van Maerten van Heemskerck*, The Hague 1986, p. 28, fig. 8.
- 12 I will leave it to the philologists to debate which classical source Heemskerck or his adviser consulted. There were various Palladium legends in circulation. Virgil wrote that Aeneas got his father to carry the *penates* when they fled Troy ('Father take in your arms the sacred emblems of our country's household gods') but he did not mention the Palladium in so many words (Aeneid, II, 707-25). According to other authors, Ulysses and Diomedes had already stolen the statue earlier, so that unprotected Troy was doomed to fall. Ovid had to confess that all he knew for certain was that the Palladium was in the Temple of Vesta in Rome, but he did not know who took it there – Ulysses, Diomedes or Aeneas (Fasti IV, 433-36). Pausanias, in contrast, had no doubt: 'For the Palladium, as it is called, was manifestly brought to Italy by Aeneas.' (*Description of Greece* II, 23, § 5).
- 13 Spinning wheels usually stand on three legs, two on the same side as the wheel, and one opposite it. The spinning wheel in the Amsterdam portrait seems to me to be an ordinary standing model.
- 14 The acanthus ornament, classical in origin, was in vogue in the early decades of the sixteenth century. In J. Bruyn and M. Thierry de Bye Dölleman, 'Maerten van Heemskerck's Familiegroep te Kassel: Pieter Jan Foppesz. en zijn gezin', *Oud Holland* 97 [1983], p. 22, note 29, Bruyn suggested certain ornamental prints by Lucas van Leyden (B. 160-62, 164, 167) as possible examples. Prints by Heinrich Aldegrever and Barthel and Sebald Beham are also potential sources.
- 15 Homer, *Odyssey* IV, 130-131. Maerten van Heemskerck could hardly have portrayed his sitter with a distaff, so he made it into a complete spinning wheel. In Greek antiquity, golden spindles were sent as presents to ladies of high rank, and a golden distaff is attributed by Homer and Pindar to goddesses, and other females of remarkable dignity, who are called *chruselakatoi* (online W. Smith, *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, p. 565).

