



Wouter Kloek and the Attribution of Louis Vallée's *Silvio with the Wounded Dorinda* in the National Gallery of Art, Washington

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The National Gallery of Art's collection of seventeenth-century Dutch paintings has great strengths but also significant gaps in its holdings – gaps that include paintings belonging to the classicist tradition.¹ So when, in the mid-1990s, Patricia Bauman and the Honourable John Landrum Bryant offered to donate a large and imposing classicist painting depicting *Silvio with the Wounded Dorinda* (fig. 1), their generosity was received with great excitement and anticipation. The painting, dated 165(1?), was in excellent condition and had been published as a work by the important Amsterdam master, Jacob van Loo (c. 1614-70).²

This attribution apparently had a solid basis in that Van Loo painted scenes deriving from the same literary source as the one that inspired *Silvio with the Wounded Dorinda* – Giovanni Batista Guarini's late sixteenth-century tragi-comedy *Il Pastor Fido*.³ Like Van Loo's painting in the Rijksmuseum, *Amaryllis and Mirtillo* (fig. 2), *Silvio with the Wounded Dorinda* has large-scale, idealized figures and sensual subject matter drawn from Guarini's play. Nevertheless, the flowing drapery in the Washington painting is more loosely executed than that in the Amsterdam work, which indicates that despite their superficial similarities the two works are not by the same artist.

Fig. 1

LOUIS VALLÉE,
*Silvio with the
Wounded Dorinda*,
165[1?].
Oil on canvas,
105 x 175 cm.
National Gallery of
Art, Washington (gift
of Patricia Bauman
and the Honourable
John Landrum Bryant,
inv. no. 2000.114.1).

In style the picture in Washington resembles Jacob Backer (1608-51) or Abraham van den Tempel (1622/23-72) more than Jacob van Loo.

Examination in the conservation laboratory gave further reason to doubt the attribution of the painting because the remnants of its abraded signature below the quiver of arrows did not appear to read 'Van Loo'. Despite all our efforts, however, we could not interpret the inscription any more precisely than 'Loiy.. V..../f. [1]65[1?]'.

We became increasingly concerned that we would not be able to attribute this imposing painting, which would greatly complicate our wish to present it to the Board of Trustees for acquisition. Fortunately, just at this time Wouter Kloek came to Washington as a fellow in the Center for the Study of the Visual Arts at the National Gallery. Wouter's project was concerned with Jan Steen (1625/26-79) in continuation of research he had undertaken for the Jan Steen exhibition presented by the Rijksmuseum and National Gallery in 1996-97, but while he was in Washington he also discussed paintings in the Gallery's collection with me. His vast knowledge of Dutch art allowed him to make many insightful comments, but it is in regard to *Silvio with the Wounded Dorinda* that I am most indebted to



Fig. 2
 JACOB VAN LOO,
Amaryllis and Mirtillo,
 c. 1650.
 Oil on canvas,
 161 x 192 cm.
 Rijksmuseum,
 Amsterdam
 (inv. no. SK-C-1630).

him. When we looked at that indecipherable signature together he said it reminded him of one he had once seen somewhere. A week later he had pulled this reference out of his memory, an article published in 1964 in the *Duits Quarterly* that reproduced the signature of Louis Vallée.⁴ As Wouter himself might have said, it was an 'amazing' experience to stand in front of the painting with this catalogue in hand and to be able, at long last, to read the signature.

I had never heard of Louis Vallée and, indeed, the details of his life and artistic career are somewhat of a mystery. Neither his birth date nor his place of birth is known. He was living in Warmoesstraat in Amsterdam at the time of his death in 1653, and it is probably there that he primarily worked, although he also painted for clients in Leiden and Haarlem.⁵ The greatest influence on his style seems to have been the Amsterdam painter Jacob Backer, and it is possible that he studied with this master. Backer's

mature history paintings, such as his *Cimon and Iphigenia*, c.1640 (Braunschweig, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum) (fig. 3), were greatly admired and avidly collected by Amsterdam patricians. The close similarities between the sensual poses of Vallée's Dorinda and Backer's Iphigenia suggest that Vallée knew this work.⁶ Similarities also exist in the rhythms of folds and in the highlights modelling the drapery. However, *Silvio with the Wounded Dorinda* is one of only a handful of paintings attributed to Louis Vallée, most of which are portraits, and this means that it is difficult to make a full assessment of his artistic achievements. It is possible that he died young, which may be why so few works by him are known.

Guarini's extremely intricate plot in *Il Pastor Fido*, a pastoral play glorifying Arcadian life that had a far-ranging impact on art and literature in France, Flanders, and the Netherlands, focuses on the love between the shepherd Mirtillo and the nymph Amaryllis,

who by paternal arrangement was betrothed to Silvio. Van Loo's painting in the Rijksmuseum depicts the culmination of a 'kissing warre' among the nymphs, with Amaryllis assuming the role of judge. Mirtillo brazenly disguises himself as a woman to take part in the context. Mirtillo is an easy winner and receives from Amaryllis a floral crown signifying his victory. Van Loo has depicted the moment when Mirtillo gallantly removes the crown to place it on Amaryllis's head.

The scene Vallée has depicted is the culmination of the subplot of *Il Pastor Fido*, the love story of the nymph Dorinda and Silvio, Amaryllis's intended. In the play, Silvio ignores Dorinda and cares only for the hunt. Dorinda decides to disguise herself in a wolf's skin and follow her beloved on the hunt. As the plot evolves, Silvio, mistaking Dorinda for an animal, inadvertently shoots and wounds her with an arrow. Vallée depicted the moment when Dorinda,

having emerged from the bushes where she had been hiding, has fallen into the arms of the aged Linco, who has always cared for her as a second father. The distraught Silvio, suddenly realizing he is in love with Dorinda, asks her to end his life to exact revenge for his intemperate action. Happily, as befitting a tragi-comedy, Dorinda's wound is only superficial and she spares her beloved Silvio. To the great joy of the assembled company, they marry that very day.

To emphasize the emotional drama unfolding between Silvio and the wounded Dorinda rather than the play's broader narrative sweep, Vallée has filled the picture plane of this large canvas with the three protagonists. Dorinda, dressed in a classicizing manner in a red satin skirt and white blouse, with a strand of pearls in her hair, reclines sensuously in Linco's arms, her pale skin amply exposed to reveal the bloody wound in her left breast. The wolf's skin that served as

Fig. 3

JACOB BACKER,
Cimon and Iphigenia,
c. 1640.

Oil on canvas,
150 x 230 cm.
Herzog Anton
Ulrich-Museum,
Braunschweig
(inv. no. GG 670).
Photograph:
Bernd Peter Keiser.



her ill-fated disguise is beneath and behind her, while Silvio's gold and black quiver of arrows and polished hunting horn lie abandoned beside her recumbent body. With a soulful look Silvio leans forward offering Dorinda the fateful arrow, its tip still wet with her blood, so that she could exact her revenge:

Behold with bended knees I show thee rev'rence.
 O grant me pardon, and deny me life!
 Behold my arrows, and my bow I give;
 Ah do not wound, but spare these eyes, these hands,
 Which were the guilty ministers because
 By an unguilty will they were directed.
 Here strike my breast, that enemy to love,
 Foe to all tenderness, this cruel heart
 Which was so harsh to thee. My breast is open.⁷

Dorinda's sidelong glance and restraining gesture indicate that she rejects the offer to end his life, however tempting it may have been. In its emotional and pictorial impact, however, Vallée's interpretation of the scene is in keeping with the character of the literary genre of the tragi-comedy. As Guarini defined it, tragi-comedy is '...the mingling of tragic and comic pleasure, which does not allow hearers to fall into excessive tragic melancholy or comic relaxation'.⁸

The most important visual prototype for Louis Vallée was a painting of the same subject that Herman Saftleven (1609-85) executed in 1635 for the influential *Il Pastor Fido* cycle at the palace at Honselaarsdijk, the hunting lodge of Stadholder Frederick Henry and his wife Amalia van Solms (fig. 4). Despite the differences in the scale of the protagonists and in their

Fig. 4
 HERMAN SAFTLEVEN,
Silvio and Dorinda,
 1635.
 Oil on canvas,
 118 x 141.7 cm.
 Gemäldegalerie
 Staatliche Museen
 zu Berlin. © bpk/
 Gemäldegalerie
 SMB/Jörg Anders.



relationship to the surrounding landscape, the disposition of Vallée's figures is remarkably similar to those in Saftleven's painting, although in reverse. The compositional connections between these works are so strong that one wonders if Vallée had an opportunity to see Saftleven's painting in Amalia's private apartments at Honselaarsdijk.⁹

Louis Vallée is not well known as a painter, but this bold image captures both the sensuality and human intrigue that lay at the core of Guarini's literary masterpiece. It has a narrative integrity that is compelling even when the specifics of the saga are not known. The painting's interest, however, lies as much in its visual appeal as in the story it tells. Vallée emphasizes the human interactions by filling his composition with the three main

protagonists, each of whom responds to the situation with convincing gestures and expressions. He was, moreover, a master at creating the rhythmic flow of drapery and at capturing the varied textures of materials. One must assume that more masterpieces like this exist, hidden under wrong attributions as this one was for so many years, just waiting for Wouter Kloek to come along and set the record straight. Fortunately, thanks in large part to his discovery of the painting's proper attribution, the Board of Trustees approved the acquisition of Louis Vallée's *Silvio with the Wounded Dorinda* in the year 2000 and it now hangs proudly in the National Gallery of Art.

NOTES

- 1 I would like to thank Henriette de Bruyn Kops for her thoughtful comments on this text. For Dutch Classicism of this period, see *Dutch Classicism in Seventeenth Century Painting*, cat. Albert Blankert et al., Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam and Städtisches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt, 1999-2000.
- 2 Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6, 1983, 3731, no. 2373. At this time the painting was with the London dealer Alex Wengraf.
- 3 See W.W. Greg, *Pastoral Poetry and Pastoral Drama* (London 1905), pp. 196-200; Alison Kettering, *The Dutch Arcadia: Pastoral Art and Its Audience in the Golden Age*, Totowa, 1983, 107-13; and Peter van der Ploeg and Carola Vermeeren, *Princely Patrons: The Collection of Frederick Henry of Orange and Amalia van Solms in The Hague*, cat. Mauritshuis, The Hague, 1997, 217-25.
- 4 *Duits Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1964, 16.
- 5 This information is taken from Maarten Wurfbain *Fine Art* vi, 1992, 186-87.
- 6 See Peter van den Brink, 'De schilder en tekenaar Jacob Adriaensz. Backer', in: *Jacob Backer (1608/9-1651)*, cat. Museum het Rembrandthuis, Amsterdam, and Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum, Aachen, 2008-09, 54-55, ill. In this same exhibition there is

- a drawing of a young man holding an arrow (cat. 43) from the Städel Museum, Frankfurt (inv. 15227) that depicts, in reverse, the young man who posed for Silvio in Vallée's painting. The similarities in pose and facial features raise the question as to whether this drawing is by Vallée rather than Backer, to whom it has traditionally been attributed.
- 7 Giovanni Battista Guarini, *The Faithful Shepherd*, trans. by Dr Thomas Sheridan, ed. by Robert Hogan and Edward A. Nickerson, Newark, Del, c.1989, 143.
- 8 As quoted in Giovanni Battista Guarini, *The Faithful Shepherd*, trans. by Dr Thomas Sheridan, ed. by Robert Hogan and Edward A. Nickerson, Newark, Del, c.1989, introduction.
- 9 One wonders if Louis Vallée was related to Simon de la Vallée, a French architect who worked for Prince Frederick Henry between 1633 and 1637, a connection that could have provided Vallée with access to the palace of Honselaarsdijk. Maarten Wurfbain, correspondence dated 8 May 2003, suggested that like the *Il Pastor Fido* cycle of paintings, Vallée's painting may have been intended for an architectural setting. Its dimensions are roughly those of the Golden Section/Ratio (1:1.618) a format often used for paintings in architectural settings.