



Short notice

A Trip to Jerusalem: Viewer Participation
in Gerbrand van den Eeckhout's
Last Supper of 1664

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Depictions of the episodes of Christ's Passion often seem to invite the devout beholder to participate in the events portrayed. In art historical literature of the past few decades concerned with approaches related to reception theory, many instances of this visual-devotional procedure have been discussed, particularly with regard to works from the late Middle Ages and the (Italian) Renaissance.¹ To explain how such an approach can be extended to the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Netherlands, I will briefly discuss representations of the Last Supper by artists as dissimilar as Pieter Pourbus and Otto van Veen, as well as my point of departure here, a painting in the Rijksmuseum, signed and dated 1664 by Gerbrand van den Eeckhout.

The original site and purpose of Van den Eeckhout's *Last Supper*, a canvas measuring 100 x 142 cm, are unknown (fig. 1). Scrutiny of its composition and iconography, however, may be helpful. At a table placed parallel to the picture plane, Jesus is surrounded by his twelve apostles, some of whom, such as Peter and John, can easily be identified. The standing figure in the right foreground is James the Greater, his hat and staff making reference to the countless pilgrims travelling to this apostle's shrine in Santiago de Compostela. Back-lit on the left is Judas Iscariot, holding a

< Detail of fig. 1

purse and distinguished by a reddish glow in his hair and beard, the hair colour he is often depicted with.

Jesus holds a piece of bread in his right hand, broken off the roll in his left. The surprised expressions and gestures of some of the apostles confirm that the depiction is rooted in the Biblical passage (John 13: 21-30) in which Jesus predicts that one of the twelve is to betray him. Asked to identify the soon-to-be-traitorous disciple, he replies: 'It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it'. In the painting's narrative, it is obvious that Jesus has just dipped a piece of bread into the silvery chalice on the left. Moreover, the viewer is offered a glimpse of what will happen next: 'when [Jesus] had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas', who, 'after receiving the morsel of bread ... immediately went out'. Indeed, in the painting, Judas has risen from the table and, standing, seems to be ready to leave the room.

An Empty Place Left Behind

Van den Eeckhout has joined a tradition of Last Supper depictions from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Often such images single out Judas and place him in the foreground, sometimes half rising from his seat, a movement that implies his imminent departure.² Strikingly, here it is James who is in



Fig. 1

GERBRAND
VAN DEN EECKHOUT,
The Last Supper, 1664.
Oil on canvas,
100 x 142 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. SK-A-2507.

the act of standing up, with Judas fully risen. Moreover, Judas has apparently stepped over the bench on which he had been sitting and thus has left the place where a red cushion remains.

The motif of the standing Judas is not unique in the visual arts of the seventeenth-century Netherlands, where it can be found, for instance, in an engraving by Nicolaes de Bruyn of 1618 (fig. 2).³ But there are also other, more intriguing examples. Elsewhere, I propose an interpretation of the *Last Supper*, painted in 1548 by Pieter Pourbus (fig. 3).⁴ Here Judas, in the foreground, has not only fully risen but has also turned around and is moving to leave the table and walk towards a devilish creature standing in the doorway at the right. In all the commotion, Judas's chair has fallen over. Interestingly, it is being picked up by a young servant, who at the same time directs a glance at the beholder.

In the Catholic context of sixteenth-century Bruges and the literary culture of *rederijkerskamers* (chambers of rhetoric), the painting may have played a part in the rhetoricians' re-enactment of the Last Supper each year on Maundy Thursday. The image may even have to be understood as an invitation for the beholder to join the company by mentally taking the seat left vacant by Judas, offered so emphatically by the servant.⁵ After all, Judas, the unfortunate sinner too late to repent, is a Biblical figure with whom any devout Christian with a grain of awareness of human frailties can easily identify. In her analysis of Judas depictions in medieval art (2001), Janet Robson points out that the unfaithful apostle, as a counterpart of exemplary saints like Francis of Assisi, was often presented as a *speculum imperfectionis* (mirror of imperfection).⁶ Robson discusses late medieval Italy, but the mode of thought can hardly have been alien



to later periods. The motif of Judas's vacant seat returns in a few other sixteenth- and seventeenth-century paintings, originating from both north and south of the Alps.

One striking example is a huge canvas (221 x 413 cm), commissioned from Jacopo Tintoretto by the Venetian Compagnia del Sacramento for their chapel in the church of San Trovaso (fig. 4).⁷ The painting, executed in 1563-64, depicts Jesus and the apostles around a rectangular table. Jesus is seated at the far side of the table, the young apostle John by his side. Jesus and the apostles direct their attention towards a standing man at the right. This figure, dark against the bright background, leans forward a little and gestures with his hands as if somewhat half-heartedly apologizing for an early departure. This must be Judas, who apparently has just moved around the table after hastily relinquishing his usual place in the foreground, leaving his overturned chair.⁸

Fig. 2
NICOLAES DE BRUYN,
The Last Supper, 1618.
Engraving,
201 x 140 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum, inv. no.
RP-P-OB-16.123.



Fig. 3
PIETER POURBUS,
The Last Supper, 1548.
Oil on panel,
46.5 x 63 cm.
Bruges, Groeninge-
museum, inv. no. 1995-
GROO020.1.
Photo: Art in Flanders
(meemoo)

Closer to Van den Eeckhout's depiction, in time, place, and iconography, is Otto van Veen's *Last Supper* from around 1592 (fig. 5).⁹ Although nothing is known of its original location or function, the panel (133 x 108 cm) may have served as an image for private devotion, perhaps a small altarpiece. Christ sits behind a round or oval table, surrounded by the apostles resting on benches. In the middle foreground is a conspicuously isolated, unoccupied wooden stool topped by a green and red cushion. Judas is depicted in the left background: a red-haired, rather mean-looking man holding a money purse, separated only by one figure from Jesus, who is feeding him a piece of bread. As in Tintoretto's depiction, Judas has moved away from his habitual place in the foreground, leaving his seat empty.

The inclusion in a painting's foreground of a seat, apparently left vacant just moments before, must have struck contemporary viewers. After all, there are many instances of the 'ambulant Judas' motif in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century depictions of the Last Supper, by artists ranging from

Jerg Ratgeb (fig. 6) to Nicolas Poussin and afterwards.¹⁰ In most of these cases, however, Judas seems to have left his place in the foreground, but there is no empty seat that reminds the viewer of this former position, as there is in the works by Pourbus, Tintoretto, Van Veen and, indeed, Van den Eeckhout.

Sin, Guilt, Personal Involvement

As stated above, we lack information about Van den Eeckhout's *Last Supper*'s original context and function, let alone its patron's identity and religious convictions. The artist himself came from a Protestant family that, fleeing Catholic repression in the Southern Netherlands, settled in Amsterdam in 1588.¹¹ But in the Rijksmuseum painting Jesus has a halo, a sign of holiness usually omitted in Protestant circles, and also has James attired as a pilgrim, referring to the narrative surrounding the apostle's burial place in Spain, and thereby to the veneration for him as a saint, which seems to be a typically Catholic iconographic choice.

To be sure, in both Protestant and Catholic theology, the concept of the

Fig. 4
JACOPO TINTORETTO,
The Last Supper,
1563-64.
Oil on canvas,
221 x 413 cm.
Venice, San Trovaso
(chapel of the
Holy Sacrament).



burden of original sin is crucial, as is the notion that human beings are constantly tempted to sin.¹² The New Testament is a source of descriptions of sin being inherent to human nature. We need think only of Jesus's words to the Pharisees when confronted with a woman accused of adultery who is in peril of being stoned: 'Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her' (John 8:7). In narratives centred around the Passion as well, the devout reader or listener becomes aware of the uneasy feeling of being co-responsible for the mal-treatments described.

Images depicting these narratives can arouse feelings of self-examination, responsibility and guilt even more insistently. Compelling examples stem from the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, for instance in depictions of the theme of *Ecce Homo* (John 19:5), with Roman governor Pontius Pilate presenting the condemned Jesus to a crowd. When, as in paintings of the theme by sixteenth-century artists such as Correggio or Quentin Matsys, Jesus is depicted in frontal close-up, beholders can easily imagine themselves to be part of the mob they know are roaring 'Crucify, crucify him!', in answer to Pilate's faint-hearted question about what to do with the arrested man.¹³ In these and other instances, actual space seems to melt into the painted realm in order to suggest that the beholders have a share in the episode depicted, or indeed to invite them to depart their place in the real world and enter the imaginary space and time represented in the painting.

A Trip to Jerusalem

The paintings depicting the Last Supper by Pourbus, Tintoretto, Van Veen and Van den Eeckhout discussed earlier all show Judas's empty seat in the foreground. The wicked apostle himself has left his place at the table and has either stood



upright (Pourbus, Van den Eeckhout) or has moved somewhere else in the composition (Tintoretto, Van Veen). In the narrative Judas, as *speculum imperfectionis*, is the figure who, given the unfavourable but at the same time also quintessentially human part he plays in the narrative, appeals to the contemporary devout viewer, who is aware of the virtual impossibility of living a perfectly virtuous life. The seat awaiting a new occupant incites the beholder to contemplate their personal part in the narrative and perhaps to imagine taking Judas's place. By mentally aspiring to substitute for or to succeed Judas, the devout beholder may even become aware of the necessity to strive to practise Christian virtue

Indeed, the open space and empty seat are waiting invitingly, now being offered by an upended chair close to the lower edge of the composition

Fig. 5
OTTO VAN VEEN,
The Last Supper,
c. 1592.
Oil on canvas,
133 x 108 cm.
Madrid, Real
Academia de
Bellas Artes de
San Fernando,
inv. no. 0752.
Photo: Index
Fototeca / Scala,
Florence 2024



Fig. 6
 JERG RATGEB,
The Last Supper,
 1505-10, cm.
 Oil on panel,
 98.5 x 91.5 cm.
 Rotterdam,
 Museum Boijmans
 Van Beuningen,
 inv. no. 2294 (OK),
 on loan from the
 Cultural Heritage
 Agency of the
 Netherlands.
 Photo: Studio Tromp

and thus to the viewer (Tintoretto) or by a servant who stands it upright (Pourbus), now standing ready with a nice cushion on which the newcomer may sit comfortably (Van Veen and Van den Eeckhout). In the latter two paintings, there is not only a seat for the spectator but on the table there is also a simple cover: a wooden plate with a bread roll in Van Veen's composition, and a metal dish with some edibles and a piece of bread in Van den Eeckhout's.

Furthermore, Gerbrand van den Eeckhout's Rijksmuseum painting contains a few striking motifs to impart an immediate feeling of an imaginary bridge between painted and real worlds. In all other depictions mentioned so far, Christ is engaged

with others within the composition. For instance, in Otto van Veen's composition, two of the apostles direct their gazes towards the viewer, thus involving them in the gathering. Van den Eeckhout, however, carries the procedure a step further, by having Jesus himself direct his attention towards a spot outside of the painted space. Indeed, while Judas has moved to the side, Jesus, with watery eyes and a sad expression, his lips somewhat parted, looks not at him but rather in the beholder's direction while opening his arms in appeal. Invitingly, he holds up the piece of bread, at the same time a reference to Judas's treason, and to either Jesus's sacrifice (in the Protestant interpretation) or to the transubstantiation in

the Eucharist (in the Catholic one that, as we have seen, seems the most fitting context for Van den Eeckhout's painting).

The play with a chair, only shortly before left vacant and in some cases fallen over, waiting to be occupied again, can hardly help but call to mind, be it anachronistically, the well-known game of musical chairs (*stoelendans*

in Dutch). The serious, religiously inspired side of mental participation in depictions such as Gerbrand van den Eeckhout's, however, is more in accordance with another traditional name of the game, 'Trip to Jerusalem'. After all, the viewer is made to feel welcome to step in and join a party situated in that Biblical place and time.

NOTES

- 1 See, e.g. Hans Belting, *Das Bild und sein Publikum in Mittelalter: Form und Funktion früher Bildtafeln der Passion*, Berlin 1981; F.O. Büttner, *Imitatio pietatis: Motive der christlichen Ikonographie als Modelle zur Verähnlichung*, Berlin 1983; John Shearman, "Only Connect...": *Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance*, Princeton 1992; Sarah Blick and Laura D. Gelfand (eds.), *Push Me, Pull You: Imaginative and Emotional | Physical and Spatial Interaction in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art*, 2 vols., Leiden/Boston 2011. For a few Renaissance case studies, see also Bram de Klerck, 'Inside and Out: Curtains and the Privileged Beholder in Italian Renaissance Painting', *Horti Hesperidum* 6 (2015), 2.1, pp. 5-28 (<https://issuu.com/horti-hesperidum/docs/21.b.deklerck>); idem, 'Fra Bartolommeo: The Depiction of Landscape and the Use of Devotional Images', in Carlo Corsato and Juliette Ferdinand (eds.), *Art and Culture North and South of the Alps from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century. Essays in Honour of Bernard Aikema*, Cracow/Wienna 2018 (*Artibus et Historiae*, vol. 39/no. 78), pp. 59-73.
- 2 Leonardo da Vinci's influential innovation in the *Last Supper* in Milan (1495-98), not singling out any of the apostles, is of course the exception. For some Italian examples dating from before and after Leonardo's composition, see Brigitte Monstadt, *Judas beim Abendmahl: Figurenkonstellation und Bedeutung in Darstellungen von Giotto bis Andrea del Sarto*, Munich 1995.
- 3 Lorena A. Baines (ed.), *The New Hollstein: Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engraving and Woodcuts 1450-1700*, vol. 78: *Nicolaes de Bruyn*, 2 parts, Ouderkerk aan den IJssel 2014, part 1, p. 187, no. 75.
- 4 Bram de Klerck, 'Trading Places with the Traitor: Pieter Pourbus and Sixteenth-Century Last Supper Iconography' (forthcoming in *Oud Holland*, 2024).
- 5 De Klerck (forthcoming) (note 4).
- 6 Janet Eileen Robson, *Speculum imperfectonis: The Image of Judas in Late Medieval Italy*, London (unpublished PhD thesis, Courtauld Institute of Art) 2001 (made available through www.academia.edu, consulted 11 July 2023).
- 7 Robert Echols and Frederick Ilchman, in Miguel Falomir (ed.), *Tintoretto*, exh. cat. Madrid (Museo Nacional del Prado) 2007, pp. 304-09, no. 32.
- 8 David Rosand (in *Painting in Cinquecento Venice: Titian, Veronese, Tintoretto*, New Haven/London 1982, pp. 207-10), I believe mistakenly, identifies Judas as the apostle seated on the far right.
- 9 Isadora Rose-de Viejo, *Catálogo actualizado de la antigua colección de pinturas de Manuel Godoy*, 2021 (1981), p. 30, cat. no. 662 (updated online version, see <https://isadora-rosedeviejo.eu/#catalogo>, consulted 11 July 2023).
- 10 The motif appears in the depiction of *The Eucharist* in both of Poussin's well-known series of *The Seven Sacraments* (the first of 1636-40, now in the Duke of Rutland Collection, Belvoir Castle, Grantham; the second of 1647 in the National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh).
- 11 Volker Manuth, 'Eeckhout, Gerbrand van den', in Andreas Beyer, Bénédicte Savoy and Wolf Tegethoff (eds.), *Allgemeines Künstlerlexikon. Internationale Künstlerdatenbank Online*, Berlin/New York 2009 (https://www-degruyter-com.ru.idm.oclc.org/database/AKI/entry/_10201205/html, consulted 11 July 2023).
- 12 See e.g. S. Lyonnet, 'Pêché – pêcheur, 1: Écriture', P. Gervais 'Pêché – pêcheur, 11: Réflexion théologique et spirituelle', in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité, ascétique et mystique, doctrine et histoire*, vol. 12.1, cols. 790-815, 815-53 respectively.
- 13 Shearman 1992 (note 1), pp. 38-40.