

LEONORA IMPERATRIX  
fecit A. 1660



# Short notice

## The Empress and The Black Art: An Early Mezzotint by Eleonora Gonzaga (1630-1686)\*

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The Print Room of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam has in its collection a small mezzotint of a soldier wearing a decorative helmet (fig. 1). The subject of this print is far from unique and the quality of the execution is by no means exceptional. Nonetheless, this particular little print is worthy of mention – solely because of the signature and date in the upper left corner: *Leonora Imperatrix fecit Ao. 1660*. The year tells us that we are dealing with an extremely early mezzotint. The technique was invented in the sixteen-forties and did not become popular on a much wider scale until some decades later. The signature also tells us that the print was made by none other than Empress Eleonora Gonzaga the Younger (1630-1686) (fig. 2), the third wife of Ferdinand III, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. It is the only print she is known to have made, so it raises a variety of questions.<sup>1</sup> Why did the empress make this print? Why did she choose a soldier as her subject? And who taught her to make mezzotints? A number of clues make it possible to reconstruct the imperial context in which this early mezzotint was created.

< Fig. 1  
ELEONORA  
GONZAGA,  
*Bust of a Roman  
Soldier*, 1660.  
Mezzotint,  
144 x 113 mm.  
Amsterdam,  
Rijksmuseum, inv. no.  
RP-P-1892-A-16745.

### Empress Eleonora and the Arts

Eleonora Maddalena Gonzaga, daughter of Carlo II Gonzaga, Duke of Mayenne, and his wife Maria Gonzaga, was born on 18 November 1630, bearing the title Princess of Mantua, Nevers and Rethel.<sup>2</sup> As a young princess, Eleonora received an excellent education. She was fluent in several languages and well-versed in literature, music and art. She was also a good dancer and a poet, and she enjoyed embroidery. On 30 April 1651 she married the Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand III (1608-1657), who was twenty years her senior, and took up residence in the Hofburg in Vienna. Despite the great difference in their ages, Eleonora found a loving companion in Ferdinand. They shared their passion for music and poetry. Her husband gave the young empress a free hand in giving the cultural life in Vienna a more Italian character. The northern Italian, Baroque style soon began to dominate the Viennese court and the city became an important centre of culture and music.<sup>3</sup> Regrettably, the happy marriage came to a premature end when Ferdinand died suddenly in 1657. In 1658, Leopold, his eldest son from a previous marriage, ascended the



Fig. 2  
FRANS LUYCKX,  
*Eleonora Gonzaga  
as Diana*, 1651.  
Oil on canvas,  
153,5 x 121,3 cm.  
Vienna, Kunst-  
historisches Museum,  
inv. no. GG 4508.  
Photo: KHM-  
Museumsverband.

imperial throne at the age of eighteen. From then on Eleonora lived in Schloss Schönbrunn and became one of Leopold's most important political, cultural and religious advisers.

### The Early Mezzotint

Eleonora made her print of the bust of a soldier in 1660, three years after her husband's death. Alongside her advisory tasks, there was time at Schönbrunn for the former empress to work creatively. She made her print in the mezzotint technique, known as 'black art' (*ars nigra*) and *schaafkunst* or – thanks to the huge popularity of the technique in England – as '*la manière anglaise*'. In 1660 the mezzotint process was relatively new and not very widespread. It was invented in 1642 by the German soldier and amateur artist Ludwig von Siegen (c. 1609-c. 1680).<sup>4</sup> In a letter he wrote that year to his superior officer, William VI, Landgrave of Hessen-Kassel, Von Siegen reported

on his new printmaking technique, but did not explain how it worked. He did, though, enclose a portrait of William's mother Amelia Elisabeth, Landgravine of Hessen-Kassel, which he had made using this new method (fig. 3).

An analysis of this portrait print gives us an idea of Von Siegen's methods. Whereas in other techniques (woodcut, etching and engraving) a composition is built up from lines, the portrait of Amelia Elisabeth consists for the most part of rows of small dots. To start with, Von Siegen etched her outlines in the copper plate. He then roughened the passages that had to be darker with the aid of an implement with small teeth – possibly a hatcher, a wedge-shaped tool that has to be moved over the plate in a fanning motion, or a *roulette*, an instrument with a small wheel covered with sharp points, which has to be rolled over the plate.<sup>5</sup> These instruments roughen the copper plate, creating tiny pits and burrs that retain ink. By roughening some areas more than others, Von Siegen made gradations in grey and even deep black tones. He made highlights by polishing the roughened plate smooth again in specific places with a special tool known as a scraper or a burnisher. Von Siegen's method is also called the 'light to dark' method.

Another way of making mezzotints, the 'dark to light method', was developed by Prince Rupert of the Rhine (1619-1682), the second discoverer of the mezzotint process, who was long regarded as the inventor – until the letter from Von Siegen was published in 1839.<sup>6</sup> Rupert was the third son of the Elector Frederick V of the Palatinate and Elizabeth Stuart, the sister of the English king Charles I. He was Duke of Cumberland, a soldier and an inventor, and most probably learned of Ludwig von Siegen's new printmaking technique during a meeting with him in Brussels in 1654. However, the prince always began his mezzotints by completely roughening the printing plate

with a hatcher. An impression from such a plate would result in a black surface. He then polished all the lighter parts smooth again, in different gradations, and in this way created a light image on a dark background. The nuanced transitions this method made possible could convey different textures, such as gleaming metal, gently waving hair and coarse, matt skin better than any existing printing technique. This is why Rupert's method was widely followed, including by Empress Eleonora.

### Eleonora and Mezzotint

Of course Eleonora had no extensive artistic training, but in all probability she did take drawing lessons – a fairly standard part of the curriculum for noble ladies.<sup>7</sup> This print was probably Eleonora's first and possibly only encounter with the mezzotint technique, which would not have been unduly hard to learn for anyone who could draw.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, someone must have instructed her in 1660. How did this still relatively new technique reach the Viennese court, soon after Rupert made his first mezzotints, and before the technique really caught on in the sixteen-sixties and seventies with artists such as Wallerant Vaillant, Abraham Blooteling and Isaac Beckett? Might Rupert himself have taught the empress? He had visited the court in Vienna and from 1657 on was in the service of Eleonora's husband, as a general in his army in Hungary. The answer is no; there is no evidence to show that Rupert set foot in Vienna in 1660.

The search for an early maker of mezzotints who actually was in Vienna at that time leads us to the Fleming, Jan (Johannes) Thomas (1617-1678), also known as Johannes Thomas van Yperen, a painter and printmaker who was active in Antwerp between 1639 and 1654. He left Flanders to go and work for the Bishop of Mainz. But from the second half of the sixteenth-fifties, Jan Thomas lived and worked in Vienna, primarily as a painter at the

imperial court. He mostly made portraits, like the ceremonial likenesses of Emperor Leopold and his wife Margaretha Theresa dressed in theatrical costumes, now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, which he painted in honour of the imperial couple's marriage in 1666.<sup>9</sup>

Jan Thomas was also a printmaker.<sup>10</sup> At the start of his career he mostly made etchings, published by Frans van den Wijngaerde in Antwerp. But around 1658, Thomas became one of the first to work in the new mezzotint technique, which he had learned from Prince Rupert. One of the finest mezzotints he made in Vienna is a portrait of the Italian artist Titian (fig. 4) after a print

Fig. 3  
LUDWIG VON SIEGEN, *Portrait of Amelia Elisabeth, Landgravine of Hessen-Kassel*, 1642. Mezzotint, 419 x 275 mm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. RP-P-1907-2242.





by Anthony van Dyck of a lost self-portrait of *Titian and his Mistress* that Van Dyck had copied during his journey through Italy when the painting was still in the Galleria Borghese in Rome.<sup>11</sup> In the lower margin of this print, Thomas dedicated his portrait of the great Italian master to Eleonora, which suggests that there was already a link between the artist and the empress.

The subject of Eleonora's little print is more decisive proof that it was Jan Thomas who taught the former empress to make mezzotints.<sup>12</sup> The bust of a soldier in a helmet is a strange

Fig. 6  
 JAN THOMAS,  
*Christ and the Virgin*,  
 1658.  
 Mezzotint,  
 338 x 246 mm.  
 Amsterdam,  
 Rijksmuseum, inv. no.  
 RP-P-1910-1487.

## &lt;&lt; Fig. 4

JAN THOMAS,  
Portrait of Titian,  
1661.  
Mezzotint,  
314 x 245 mm.  
Amsterdam,  
Rijksmuseum, inv. no.  
RP-P-1910-1486.

amalgamation of elements in two prints Jan Thomas made in Vienna in 1658. Eleonora was unmistakably inspired by Thomas's mezzotint of a soldier for her soldier's helmet (fig. 5). Despite minor differences, there are striking similarities. And the empress clearly looked at the print of *Christ and the Virgin* for the face of her soldier (fig. 6). Christ's mouth, beard, long waving hair and eye sockets were meticulously studied and copied for her soldier's face. The fusion of the different elements from these two prints – plus a little input of her own – resulted in the empress's hybrid soldier.

Everything leads to the conclusion that Eleonora had Jan Thomas's prints in front of her during her mezzotint lesson. The fact that we know of no other maker of mezzotints who was working for the Viennese court in the exact same period makes it likely that she learned the technique from Jan Thomas himself. And so a tiny print, which at first glance appeared of no particular interest in terms of subject and execution, nevertheless unexpectedly tells an entire fairy tale about an empress in a grand palace, surrounded by art and culture, who one day decided to learn the art of making mezzotints from a Flemish artist.

## &lt; Fig. 5

JAN THOMAS,  
Pro Deo & Patria,  
1658.  
Mezzotint,  
222 x 168 mm.  
Amsterdam,  
Rijksmuseum, inv. no.  
RP-P1910-1491.

## NOTES

\* This short notice is based on a lecture given at the 26th annual NIKI symposium *Italië en de Nederlanden. Artistieke wisselwerkingen: op papier*, Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht, 11 December 2017.

- 1 To date we only know of one other impression of this print: Vienna, Graphische Sammlung Albertina, inv. no. DG2017/1/3383. One was offered for sale in Vienna in 1907: sale Clemens Lothar Metternich Collection, Vienna (Gilhofer & Ranschburg/ C.J. Wawra), 13 November 1907, no. 271. Unfortunately, it is not clear whether this is the impression in the Albertina.
- 2 See also Rotraut Schnitzer-Becker, 'Eleonora Gonzaga Nevers, Imperatrice', *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* (1993), vol. 42, and others.
- 3 See also Katharina Fidler, 'Mäzenatentum und Politik am Wiener Hof: Das Beispiel Eleonora Gonzaga-Nevers', *Innsbrucker Historische Studien* 12/13 (1990), pp. 41-68; Marko Deisinger, 'Eleonora II. und die Gründung ihrer Hofkapelle. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des kulturellen Lebens am Wiener Kaiserhof', *Frühneuzeit-Info* 18 (2007), no. 1, pp. 45-54.
- 4 See among others, Eva-Maria Hanebutt-Benz et al., 'Die also genannte Schwarze Kunst in Kupfer zu arbeiten': *Technik und Entwicklung des Mezzotintos*, exh. cat. Mainz (Gutenberg-Museum/Landesmuseum) 2009; Arwed Arnulf and Anne-Katrin Sors (eds.), *Die Englische Manier: Mezzotinto als Medium druckgrafischer Reproduktion und Innovation*, Göttingen 2014.

- 5 John Evelyn drew a hatcher around 1662 in one of his manuscripts (London, British Library, Evelyn Papers Ms. 52, p. 307). The roulette is pictured and called 'the Engine' in the anonymously published *The Excellency of the Pen and Pencil* (London 1688).
- 6 Ad Stijnman, *Engraving and Etching 1400-2000: A History of the Development of Manual Intaglio Printmaking Processes*, Houten 2012, pp. 184-85.
- 7 See among others, K. Sloan, 'A Noble Art': *Amateur Artists and Drawing Masters, c. 1600-1800*, London 2000.
- 8 G. Wuestman, 'The Mezzotint in Holland: "Easily Learned, Neat and Convenient"', *Simiolus* 23 (1995), pp. 63-89.
- 9 Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv. nos. 9135, 9136.
- 10 Twenty-six prints by Jan Thomas are mentioned in F.W.H. Hollstein, Ger Luijten (comp.) and Dieuwke de Hoop Scheffer (ed.), *Hollstein's Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts: ca. 1450-1700*, Amsterdam 1986.
- 11 Carl Depauw and Ger Luijten, *Antoon van Dyck en de prentkunst*, exh. cat. Antwerp (Museum Plantin-Moretus)/Amsterdam (Rijksmuseum) 1999, pp. 240-48, no. 32.
- 12 The idea that Jan Thomas taught the empress to make mezzotints was briefly mooted in the 1907 sale catalogue (note 1), but it was not correctly followed up. It stated that Thomas did not go to Vienna until 1660 and that Eleonora's print should probably be regarded as the earliest Viennese mezzotint.