



Aeneas and Callisto: Two Ceiling Paintings by Jacob de Wit Mixed Up

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If, in the first half of the eighteenth century, you wanted to decorate the interior of your Amsterdam canal-side mansion or your country house with painted wall hangings and ceiling paintings, you would turn to Jacob de Wit (1695-1754). Although many decorations have been lost, the numerous drawings and oil sketches bear witness to De Wit's enormous output. One of these oil sketches, with *The Apotheosis of Aeneas* in the centre, is in the Rijksmuseum's collection (fig. 1). It has long been thought that it was a design commissioned by the Amsterdam merchant Pieter Pels (1668-1739) for his house at number 479 Herengracht. The evidence for this assumption was indirect, however, and the room for which De Wit made this ceiling painting could not be identified. New research in the archives and on location has now filled in the gaps.

In this article we form a picture of the room for which De Wit made the ceiling painting. It will become clear that the ceiling painting was part of a larger ensemble. For the first time, the oil sketch will be linked to ceiling paintings that are in the house now. The reconstruction of the room also brings to light the later fortunes of the room and its various elements, uncovering a bewildering story that leads from Amsterdam to Russia.

< Fig. 1
JACOB DE WIT,
Design for a ceiling
painting of *The
Apotheosis of Aeneas*,
in the corners the four
seasons in *brunaille*,
in or shortly before
1723 (detail and
pp. 198-99).
Oil on canvas,
51.5 x 69.5 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. SK-A-4659;
purchased with
the support of the
J.W. Edwin Vom Rath
Fonds/Rijksmuseum
Fonds and the Stichting
tot Bevordering van de
Belangen van het
Rijksmuseum.

Designs for Pieter Pels

The oil sketch in the Rijksmuseum depicts the apotheosis of Aeneas (fig. 1). It illustrates the moment when Venus, arms outstretched, anoints the head of her son, Aeneas, with the fragrance divine, elevating him to the ranks of the gods as a reward for his deeds on earth.¹ Behind Venus and to her right, Eternity holds the ouroboros – the snake eating its own tail and thus forming an eternal circle – above Aeneas's head. Another figure holds a star above the ouroboros as a sign of Aeneas's admission to heaven. The Trojan hero is supported by Mercury, while the Three Graces and Fame gather behind Venus. Jupiter appears in the centre of the sky, and Apollo, Minerva and an unidentified goddess observe the apotheosis from a cloud upper left. The river god below must be Numicius, who washed away Aeneas's mortality before Venus anointed him. The composition is contained in a frame full of ornaments, with the four seasons in *brunaille* in the corners. Flora, lower left, represents spring, followed clockwise by Ceres (summer), Bacchus (autumn) and Momus (winter).²

De Wit made oil sketches as an interim step between the initial design and the execution of the work to give the client an idea of the eventual result.³ The composition is rendered quite sketchily, particularly in the corners,





where De Wit modelled the four seasons with swiftly painted highlights and dark touches. Pinholes indicate that he used a compass to draw the curves around the central field. Construction lines in pencil, visible to the naked eye and on infrared photographs, mark important points in the architectural frame. It appears that, despite its sketchy nature, De Wit used the *modello* when painting the work. At the top of the sketch, on the paint layer, there is a series of pencil marks that line up with the length of the central field. These may be scale marks that helped the artist transfer the composition to the ceiling. If each square represented one foot, the ceiling painting would be 566 centimetres across.⁴ De Wit kept his oil sketches and often made notes on the back, recording information about the client, the year the work was done and the location. Although *The Apotheosis of Aeneas* does not have an inscription (or at least one that is visible),⁵ the sketch can be linked to Pieter Pels. Adolph Staring, who was not familiar with the oil sketch, was the first to establish a link between De Wit and Pels in his 1958 monograph on De Wit. At the sale of the painter's estate in 1755, there were more than eighty oil sketches for ceiling paintings, among them 'A particularly fine ceiling painting on a frame ... for the Honourable Pieter Pels'.⁶ As well as this, Staring points to two unspecified design drawings for Pels dating from 1723, one sold at auction in 1900 and 1904, the other – for an overdoor – then in Frankfurt. Lastly, he mentions a periodical by the renowned eighteenth-century writer Jacob Campo Weyerman (1677-1747), which refers to a ceiling painting by De Wit for Pieter Pels of 'the apotheosis of the Trojan Aeneas'.⁷

After the Rijksmuseum acquired *The Apotheosis of Aeneas*, the then curator of paintings Guido Jansen linked the design for the ceiling to Weyerman's description and the design drawing auctioned at the beginning of the



twentieth century, although at that time there was no known illustration of it. Because of the stylistic similarities to another oil sketch, made in the same year as the drawing, Jansen cautiously identified the Rijksmuseum's acquisition as the one intended for Pieter Pels that was sold with De Wit's estate.⁸

Thera Folmer-von Oven recently published the drawing in question, annotated by De Wit, which until then had been known only from the description in the sale catalogues (fig. 2).⁹ However, contrary to what Staring and Jansen suspected, it proved to be a design not for a ceiling painting, but probably for a painting to go above a door or fireplace. The subject is an episode from the story of Aeneas – the moment Juno asks Aeolus, the guardian of the winds, to release the winds and raise a storm that will prevent the Trojan hero from reaching Italy and founding a new state there.¹⁰ Folmer-

Fig. 2
JACOB DE WIT,
*Juno Asks Aeolus to
Release the Winds*, in
or shortly before 1723.
Pen and grey ink,
grey wash, over
traces of red chalk,
228 x 186 mm, signed
lower left: *JdWit f.*,
inscription and
date on verso: *voor
dEdl heer pieter pels
1723 geschilderd*
(painted for the noble
Mr Pieter Pels 1723).
Mettingen (Germany),
Draiflessen Collection
(Liberna),
inv. no. D 43.
Photo: Henning
Rogge, Hamburg



Fig. 3
JACOB DE WIT,
*Venus Asks Jupiter
to Protect Her Son
Aeneas*, in or shortly
before 1723.
Pen and grey ink, grey
wash, over traces of
red chalk, 236 x 182
mm, signed lower
left: *JdWit invt f.*
Sale, New York
(Christie's),
31 May 1990, no. 113.
Photo: Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum
Research Library,
TS 0699; *Delineavit
et sculpsit*, 41 (2017)

Fig. 4
JACOB DE WIT, *Putti
around an Altar*, in
or shortly before 1723.
Pen and brown ink,
colour washes, over
traces of black chalk,
118/125 x 257 mm,
signed lower left:
JdWit invt & F.,
inscription and date

lower left (on an
attached strip): *voor
d'Heer pieterpels in
sijne Edl sijkaemer 1723*
(for Mr Pieter Pels for
his Honourable's side
room).
Frankfurt am Main,
Städelsmuseum,
inv. no. 2025.
Photo: Artothek



von Oven also found a second drawing that is stylistically and thematically akin and is nearly the same size. This drawing shows Venus kneeling before Jupiter to beg him to protect her son, Aeneas (fig. 3).¹¹ In the story of Aeneas, this follows Juno's thwarting of the hero shown in the other drawing. Although it is not known whether the drawing of Venus is annotated, Folmer-von Oven suggests that, in view of the similarities in size, iconography and composition, it is likely that it was made for the same room as the drawing of Juno.¹²

The newly discovered drawings add to the comprehension of Pieter Pels's commission to Jacob de Wit and prove that the ceiling painting, for which the Rijksmuseum holds the oil sketch, was part of a larger ensemble. Folmer-von Oven also mentions another sketch for an overdoor of putti beside an altar with flames, designed, according to the note in De Wit's own hand, for Pieter Pels's side room (fig. 4). The author believes, given the different iconography, that this was probably not part of the Aeneas room, which means that in a single year De Wit decorated at least two of the rooms in Pels's house.¹³ This house, 479 Herengracht, is situated in the Golden Bend. The wealthiest residents of Amsterdam lived on this most prestigious stretch of the Herengracht, between Leidsestraat and Vijzelstraat.

Pieter Pels and His House on the Herengracht

Born in Amsterdam in 1668, Pieter Pels was the son of Jean Lucas Pels (1628-1699) and Suzanne Noiret (1632-1678). He had one sister and four older brothers and was the youngest member of the family, which made its fortune in trade. Pieter's grandfather was a sugar-boiler and trader in East Indian goods and his father was a merchant and shipowner trading with France, Norway and the Baltic, insurance broker and banker. In 1680, with the establishment of the firm of Jean Pels & Sonen, the next generation was groomed to take over. Pieter's brother Andries (1655-1731) went furthest, making history as one of the most successful businessmen of his day. In 1707 he founded the firm of Andries Pels & Zonen. During its almost seventy-year existence the firm was among the world's leading banking houses.¹⁴

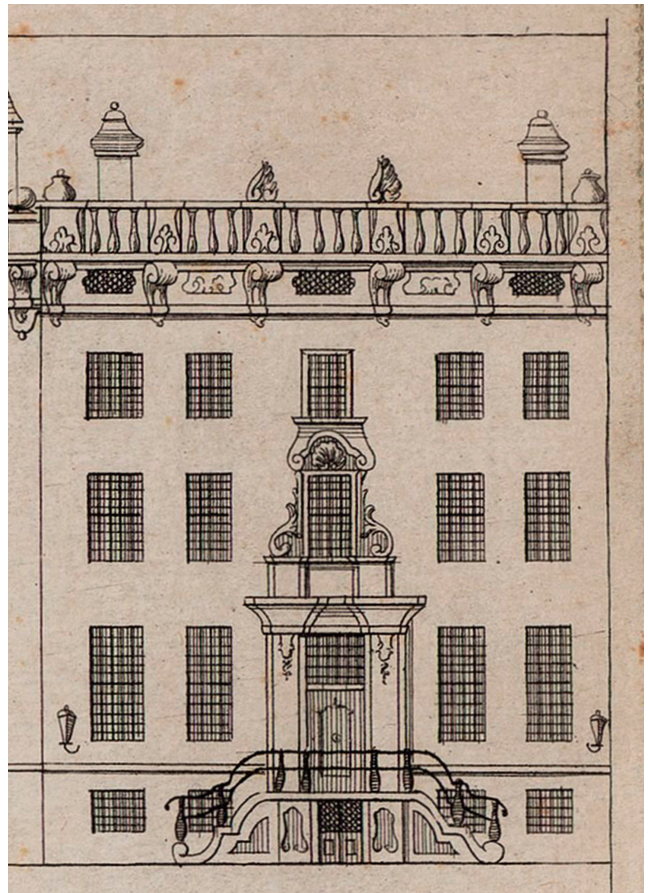
Little is known about Pieter Pels himself. He studied law and then probably worked, like his brothers, in the financial world.¹⁵ He loved the outdoor life and owned the manors of Westerwijk and Overbeek near Velsen and Beverwijk and the house known as the Blauwselhuis in Velsen.¹⁶ Pels never married and according to the city chronicler Jacob Bicker Raye (1703-1777) was known as 'Uncle Pels' because he supposedly had at least eighty nieces and nephews. Pels's will confirms his reputation as the archetypal rich uncle.¹⁷ Although Bicker Raye exaggerates the number of heirs, with the exception of a few bequests, Pels – who survived his siblings and remained childless – left everything he owned to his nephews, great-nephews, nieces and great-nieces on his death in 1739.¹⁸

In 1721 Pieter inherited 479 Herengracht from his second oldest brother, the merchant Adriaen Pels (1657-1721). The building's history goes back to 1665, when Joan Corver (1628-1716) bought two plots of land and built a double-fronted house 14.85 metres

wide. It was completed three years later. Soon afterwards, in 1671, he sold the property to Catharina de Neufville. From 1690 to 1710 this house on the Golden Bend was rented out to no less a personage than the famous Amsterdam burgomaster Nicolaes Witsen (1641-1717). Adriaen Pels acquired the house in 1709 and it passed to Pieter on his death.¹⁹

A print by Jan Caspar Philips (1700-1775) shows the house, five bays wide with a cornice (fig. 5). There are four storeys above the basement and the front door on the ground floor is reached by a double flight of steps. On either side of the corridor there are two rooms connected by double doors (fig. 6). Almost immediately after Pels inherited the house he had

Fig. 5
JAN CASPAR PHILIPS,
Detail of No. 7.
De Keizers-Gragt.
De Heeren-Gragt.
From Caspar Jacobsz.
Philips, *Verzaameling van alle de huizen en prachtige gebouwen langs de Keizers en Heere-grachten der stad Amsteldam*, [Amsterdam: Bernardus Mourik, 1768-71].
Etching,
370 x 490 mm.
Amsterdam City Archives, fig. no. 010097012562.



embarked on a massive programme of alterations, remodelling the exterior and interior in Louis XIV style. The façade was given the cornice and corbels with foliar ornaments and the centre bay was accentuated with an elaborate door and window surround (fig. 5).²⁰

Inside, the exceptionally wide corridor was floored – as was to be expected – with expensive white Carrara marble sheets, laid *à livre-ouvert* – the open-book pattern created by cutting the marble sheets from a single block so that the marbling is mirrored. Wainscoting of the same material embellishes the walls. In recessed niches above the doors there are plaster reliefs of vases and exuberant bouquets of flowers, and

the shallow niches in the walls and the ceiling have elaborate stucco decorations (fig. 7). The staircase was moved on Pels's instructions and repositioned in the axis of the corridor, strengthening the perspective. The grand staircase with dark wood banisters and turned balusters combines with the abundant natural light and exuberant plasterwork to create an impression of magnificence. On the first floor of the staircase, four hemi-spherical niches hold larger than life-size statues, personifications of the seasons, and the four elements are pictured in plasterwork in the cupola.²¹

Later alterations have made it difficult to establish exactly which rooms Pieter Pels modernized.²² One room, the left-hand room at the front, is still inextricably associated with

Fig. 7

L. VAN LEER & CO,
479 Herengracht,
ground floor corridor,
c. 1900.
Photomechanical
reproduction from an
original photograph.
From K. Sluyterman,
*Oude Binnenhuizen
in Nederland*,
's-Gravenhage 1908.
Amsterdam City
Archives, fig. no.
ANWQ0029500001.

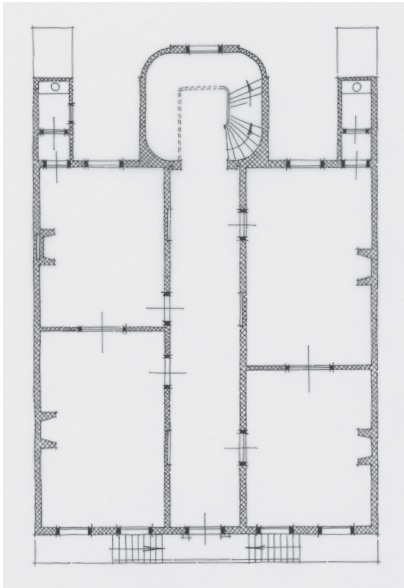


Fig. 6

Plan of the ground floor,
479 Herengracht.
From H.J. Zantkuijl,
Bouwen in Amsterdam:
Het woonhuis in de stad,
Amsterdam 1993,
p. 507. Amsterdam City
Archives, inv. no.
ZANA00029000007.



Fig. 8

JACOB DE WIT,
*The Assumption of Callisto, the
 Four Seasons, the
 Four Seasons, in
 the Corners, 1731,*
 Amsterdam, 479
 Herengracht.
 Oil on canvas,
 central middle sec-
 tion 360 x 535 cm,
 whole ceiling
 850 x 530 cm.
 Private collection.
 Photo: The Hague,
 Netherlands Institute
 for Art History (RKD),
 fig. no. 0000093782.



Fig. 9

The Four Seasons,
 details of the ceiling
 painting and the oil
 sketch.

a-d. Details of the
 ceiling painting
 (fig. 8): Spring (a),
 Summer (b),
 Autumn (c) and
 Winter (d); The
 Hague, Netherlands
 Institute for Art
 History (RKD),
 fig. nos. 0000093780,
 81, 83 and 84.

e-h. Details of the
 oil sketch (fig. 1):
 Spring (e), Summer
 (f), Autumn (g) and
 Winter (h).



a



b



e



f

Pieter Pels. As soon as you enter this room, your gaze is led upwards. The ceiling opens up, and high above you, you see gods and other heavenly beings sitting on clouds and hovering in the air (fig. 8). The ceiling painting that transports you into this world of the gods was made by Jacob de Wit.

A Painted Room by Jacob de Wit and Isaac de Moucheron

The first thing to strike one is that the central field of the ceiling differs from the oil sketch. It is Callisto and her son Arcus, not Aeneas, who are being conveyed up to heaven. Callisto was one of the nymphs attendant on Diana, the goddess of the hunt. After she was seduced and made pregnant by Jupiter,

disguised as Diana, the goddess sent her away. Juno discovered Jupiter's infidelity and in revenge turned Callisto into a she-bear. Years later, when Callisto's son, Arcus, now a grown man, wanted to kill the bear, Jupiter took pity on them and gave Callisto and Arcus a place among the stars as the Great Bear and the Little Bear.²³ This is the moment pictured on the ceiling.²⁴ The four seasons appear around the assumption. These corner decorations do correspond to the corners in the oil sketch. Although De Wit changed details in the compositions, he broadly followed the painted *modello* (fig. 9).

The centre painting is contained in a carved frame with a gilded inner edge, and two carved palmettes on the short



c



d



g



h

sides. The four corner paintings have a simpler frame with a gilded inner edge. The room is panelled with wooden wainscoting, above which framed (empty) fields cover the walls.²⁵ This panelling is nineteenth century, however, like the other fixed elements in the interior.²⁶

It is most likely that two doors were created in the wall adjacent to the corridor wall during the nineteenth-century alterations: the current access door on the left and a false door on the right. In the eighteenth century the entrance to the room must have been the door directly opposite the entrance to the right-hand side room (see fig. 6). Nowadays this is a false door in the corridor. It can be seen from the plasterwork in the corridor, which does not match, that the present access door must be a later addition. Whereas there is a relief of a vase of flowers above all the doors, the plasterwork here corresponds with that in the shallow niches situated between the doors (fig. 7). This tells us that the entrance was originally a niche, not a door. In this arrangement the configuration of the corridor is precisely symmetrical.

The surviving deeds of sale and inventory enable us to build up a picture of the original function, layout and status of the painted room. In 1740, a year after Pieter Pels's death, 479 Herengracht was sold to Johanna Maria Witheyn (1686-1758), the widow of Vincent Maximiliaan van Lockhorst. While Adriaen Pels bought the house for 36,000 guilders in 1709, Witheyn had to dig deeper into her purse and come up with 86,500 guilders.²⁷ This more than doubling of the price shows how much value Pels's major remodeling had added to the property. The importance attached to the interior is clear from the deed of conveyance. Whereas there are no details of the interior in earlier deeds, it is expressly stated in this one that the sale includes 'all the wall coverings and that which is

further specified in the conditions of sale, moreover all the fixtures and fittings'.²⁸ The conditions of sale enlighten us further. With the house the new owner acquired 'all the wall coverings, the paintings in all the ceilings, chimney breasts and above the doors, as well as the six paintings by Moucheron in the large side room, further all the fixed mirrors on the piers, chimney pilasters and buffet, the small table and base under the pier glass in the large side room and the cooler in the dining room [and] the curtains in the small side room'.²⁹

The mention of an artist's name in the conditions of sale is unusual and tells us how much value was attached to this room. In his day, the Isaac de Moucheron (1667-1744) referred to here was – along with Dirck Dalens III (1688-1753) – the leading Netherlandish artist of painted wall hangings depicting landscapes. The decorations by De Wit and De Moucheron must have been in the same room. The first indication of this is the description 'large side room' in the 1740 conditions of sale. This room was described again in the 1759 deed of conveyance: 'as well as the ceilings and the paintings in the large side room'.³⁰ Where this could possibly refer in general to all the ceilings in the house, at the end of the nineteenth century the room with the ceiling painting by De Wit was specifically described as the large side room.³¹ De Wit's annotation 'for Mr Pieter Pels in his large side room 1723' on the design drawing for the double overdoor (fig. 4) ties in with this. A further indication that the six paintings by De Moucheron were in this room is that this number corresponds with the probable number of wall spaces in the eighteenth-century situation described above.³²

A second, even more important reason to assume that this was a collaborative project is that De Moucheron and De Wit worked together on a number of occasions. As a rule, De Wit



Fig. 10
Front room with
painted wall hangings
by Isaac de
Moucheron and
Jacob de Wit, and
ceiling painting and
overdoors by Jacob
de Wit, 1729–34,
168 Herengracht,
Amsterdam.
Photo: Mindspace,
Amsterdam

took on the overdoors and the ceiling painting, and De Moucheron made the paintings for the walls. One ensemble has survived in situ, at 168 Herengracht in Amsterdam (fig. 10). This is one of the best-preserved interiors with painted decorations dating from the first half of the eighteenth century. The original colour scheme, which included the pigment known as dead head purple (*caput mortuum*), was reinstated when the room was restored in the nineteen-sixties.³³ The rooms at 168 Herengracht give an impression of what De Moucheron and De Wit could achieve when they worked together.

We do not know when De Moucheron's paintings were removed from the large side room at 479 Herengracht, nor what their subjects were.³⁴ It seems most likely that they were classical Arcadian landscapes, De Moucheron's speciality. On the other hand, might they have been, as in 168 Herengracht, landscapes with narrative scenes – in this case from the story of Aeneas?

Although the decorations have vanished without trace, the knowledge that De Moucheron also made a contribution to the room gives us an insight into the original context of De Wit's ceiling painting. With six paintings, De Moucheron himself could be regarded as the principal contractor for the room. Viewed from this angle, it is not surprising that it is his name, not De Wit's, that appears in the conditions of sale.

More colour can be added to the picture of Pels's painted room with the inventory drawn up on Pels's death. This source also provides more information about the furnishing and use of the room. It is possible to identify the four ground floor rooms from the inventory; they are described as the red side room, the mirror room, the tapestry room and the downstairs bedroom.³⁵ The red side room is almost certainly the room with the decorations by De Wit and De Moucheron.³⁶ The colour red in the 'red side room'

most probably relates to the wood-work. Red and maroon were in fashion in the first decades of the eighteenth century. The popular pigment dead head that was used for this could be red, maroon or purple depending on how it was burnt.³⁷ The colour reconstruction at 168 Herengracht gives a good idea of a finish in dead head purple (fig. 10).

Is this the atmosphere one encountered in Pels's room? Since the paneling is nineteenth century it is impossible to know, but it is conceivable that the paintings by De Moucheron and De Wit had a red, maroon or dark purple setting. It is noteworthy in this respect that the corner paintings on the ceiling were executed in a darker shade of purple than in the sketch. They would have formed an entity with the finish on the panelling.

Aside from the finish, the estate inventory also provides clues as to how Pels had furnished the red side room. There were four glass wall lights – very modern – with mirrored back plates.³⁸ The chimneybreast lights were glass too, as was the frame of another (separate?) mirror. The console table and pier glass mentioned in the conditions of sale would have been placed between the windows. Most of the furniture was walnut, the most popular wood in the first half of the eighteenth century.³⁹ There was a small walnut table, five walnut guéridons, three cloth-topped games tables, seven walnut armchairs with red seats, two stools with velvet upholstery and a side table with a tray. There were glass curtains at the windows, three mats on the floor, and a carpet (possibly on top of them). The red upholstery of the armchairs, which was probably keyed to the walls, is evidence of a desire for unity in colour. The fairly sparse furnishing is entirely in line with the spirit of the age, geared as it was to social gatherings. In his painted room, Pels and his guests could amuse themselves playing games and

enjoying conversation.⁴⁰ Surrounded by De Moucheron's painted wall hangings and gazing up at De Wit's heavenly universe, they could imagine themselves in another world, away from the hustle and bustle of the city.

Entering the room now, it is almost impossible to imagine the eighteenth-century grandeur. And there is something strange going on. As we have already seen, the composition in the central panel of the ceiling painting does not correspond to De Wit's oil sketch. What has happened here?

Aeneas's Trip to Russia

We now jump forward in time to the end of the nineteenth century. In 1896, 479 Herengracht came into the possession of the politician Willem Frederik van Leeuwen (1860-1930). Van Leeuwen was friends with Johan Ferdinand Backer (1856-1928), who played an important part in Amsterdam's cultural life. In 1897 Backer wrote a 'memorandum' for Van Leeuwen, explaining the history of the occupants of the house and a description of a number of recent renovations. Backer, who had a great interest in his family history, may have been prompted to do this because a relative had briefly owned the property more than ten years before.⁴¹ Backer's unique report, the rough version of which is in the Amsterdam City Archives, sketches a disconcerting picture of the changes the painted room had undergone in the previous ten years.⁴²

The memorandum reveals two distinct phases in the treatment of the room: one of destruction under Cornelis van Mourik (1843-1903), owner in the 1885-96 period, and one of construction under Van Leeuwen. Backer writes that Van Mourik sold De Wit's ceiling painting and overdoors in the large side room to a Russian grand duke! Fortunately, he says, the sale did not include the four unsigned corner paintings of the four seasons because 'they had been whitewashed over and

were concealed from the eyes of the beholders'. In short, only the central middle section of the ceiling painting was sold. Curiously, Van Mourik then had it replaced with another ceiling painting by De Wit, which came from Mr Blaauw's house on the corner of Keizersgracht and Vijzelstraat, where the Hollenkamp clothes shop was established at the time. After this revelation, he recounts how Van Leeuwen restored the ceiling to its 'primitive condition'. 'He had the four corner works, covered with white plaster, cleaned and restored (the name of the painter was not found there), and he had the carved oak frame around the middle field, also plastered over, brought back to its original state.'⁴³

The exceptional record of events Backer provides here presents a picture of the extraordinary way historic interiors were treated in the nineteenth century. Because Backer noted down all these interventions, the current state of the room suddenly becomes easier to understand. The ceiling painting in the room, so the memorandum tells us, is a hybrid composite, not an original whole. This explains the puzzling difference between the iconography of the oil sketch and the ceiling painting.

Closer examination of the paintings confirms Backer's account, initially by looking at the incidence of the light. As was usual at that time, De Wit coordinated the painted incidence of the light in his interior paintings with the direction of the natural light in a room. This is not the case in the ceiling painting of *The Assumption of Callisto*. The light in the room, seen from the corridor wall, comes from the left. On the painting, however, it appears to come from the upper right (fig. 8). It is virtually inconceivable that De Wit could have lit the principal composition incorrectly. The lighting in the compositions of the four seasons, however, does correspond to the light

in the room (figs. 9 a-d). This supports the thesis that the corner paintings were originally made for the room and the middle section was not. Backer states that the middle section comes from the building where Hollenkamp's shop is. It is easy to guess why they wanted to get rid of a ceiling painting by De Wit. In 1886-87 this building, 601 Keizersgracht, was comprehensively remodelled and fitted out as a shop. The interior walls were demolished and replaced with cast iron piles. There would have been no place for the ceiling painting that De Wit must have originally made for Jacob Reijnt, who moved into the property in 1713.⁴⁴

Aside from the paintings themselves, it is clear from the construction of the frame that the ceiling is no longer in its original condition. Various wooden insets are visible by the chimney-breast and the fact that the field opposite, where one would expect an ornament, is empty is unsightly. Other possible slapdash work can be found, for instance in small differences in the measurements in the corners of the surrounds of the seasons.

This raises the question as to which ceiling painting the present frame with palmettes was made for. The frame is closer to the one in the oil sketch for the Aeneas ceiling painting than for the Callisto ceiling painting.⁴⁵ However, *The Assumption of Callisto* fits perfectly in the frame: nothing appears to have been cut off or added to the composition. If the frame for the Aeneas ceiling painting was retained, this would mean either that the two paintings had exactly the same dimensions – which is highly unlikely – or that the frame was modified. If the Aeneas ceiling painting was 566 centimetres long (see note 4), the Callisto ceiling painting is thirty centimetres shorter. Between the ceiling and the corner paintings there is a flat frame that looks quite modern. Could it be that the carved frame of the Aeneas painting had to be reduced for



the Callisto painting and this flat zone had to be added? Another possibility is that the ceiling painting was moved complete with its frame. Supporting this theory is the fact that at first sight there are no visible alterations to the carved frame around the decoration.⁴⁶

The idea that Van Mourik was unaware of the existence of the corner paintings when the ceiling paintings were switched, as Backer states, is questionable. According to Backer, both the corner paintings and the frame of the middle section were covered in white plaster. It is possible that Van Mourik preferred light, plasterwork ceilings to dark mouldings and had the room decorated accordingly. It is also possible, though, that the corner paintings were covered up before his time. Scientific analysis might be able to provide more information about all this, but it is clear that at the end of the nineteenth century two ceiling paintings were switched and this changed the room for ever.

Three Overdoors Discovered

While *The Assumption of Callisto* moved less than a mile, *The Apotheosis of Aeneas* and the three smaller paintings travelled halfway round the world. Amazingly, it has been possible on the basis of the three sketches (figs. 2-4) to trace the latter to Russia and Ukraine (figs. 11-13).⁴⁷ They hang there as anonymous eighteenth-century works and no one knew that they belonged together. The paintings are unmistakably by De Wit. In *Venus Asks Jupiter to Protect Her Son Aeneas* (fig. 12) De Wit's signature and the date 1723 can just be made out in the lower left corner.⁴⁸

The three drawings, it now appears, are designs for overdoors and a chimney-piece. As Folmer-von Oven has already pointed out, the dimensions and the perspective, which is based on a viewpoint from below, confirm this. The horizontal overdoor (fig. 13) would originally have been placed above the double doors between the front and back rooms. This is con-

Fig. 11

JACOB DE WIT,
*Juno Asks Aeolus to
Release the Winds*,
1723.
Oil on canvas,
116.5 x 80 cm.
Alupka (Crimea),
Alupka Palace
and Park
Museum-Reserve,
inv. no. Ж-453.

Fig. 12

JACOB DE WIT,
*Venus Asks Jupiter
to Protect Her
Son Aeneas*, 1723.
Oil on canvas,
116 x 96 cm,
signed and dated
lower left: Wit 1723.
Alupka (Crimea),
Alupka Palace
and Park
Museum-Reserve,
inv. no. Ж-520.

firmed by the painted incidence of the light, which appears to come directly from the front in the painting. The direction of the light is also the key to establishing the original location of the other two paintings. In *Juno Asks Aeolus to Release the Winds* (fig. 11) the light comes from upper right, which indicates that this piece must have been installed above the then door in the corridor wall. In *Venus Asks Jupiter to Protect Her Son Aeneas* (fig. 12) the painted light comes from the opposite direction, from upper left. This painting was therefore intended for the opposite wall and must have acted as a chimney-piece, possibly above the mirror referred to in the inventory. The impressions of the strainer on *Venus* and the cuts in the upper corners of *Juno* indicate that the paintings had an arch-shaped frame in the panelling.

In executing the work De Wit followed his designs fairly closely. The horizontal overdoor underwent the most significant changes (fig. 13). The shield now has a lion's head, and a bird, most likely a swan, has appeared above right. Here De Wit has ingeniously brought together symbols relating to Aeneas. The altar with a holy flame can be interpreted as the altar of the fatherland, the symbol of patriotism and piety. This is a reference to Aeneas's destiny,

the foundation – by force of arms (the shield) – of the Roman Empire.⁴⁹ The laurel wreath symbolizes the eternal fame this brings him.

The significance of the swan is more complicated. The bird is most probably a reference to the auspices, derived from the Latin for 'observer of birds'. No decision was ever taken in Antiquity without first determining the will of the gods. Special priests, augurs, advised the state by reading the signs the gods sent through the flight of birds. The importance of the auspices comes to the fore in Virgil's *Aeneas*. To reassure her son, Venus shows him twelve swans, which proclaim Aeneas's safe passage with twelve ships.⁵⁰ In Vondel's translation of the epic it appears that this prediction had meanwhile been transferred to the hero himself. In the print on the title page Aeneas himself is portrayed as a swan swimming from the burning River Xanthus in Troy to the Tiber, where Romulus and Remus stand for the foundation of Rome.⁵¹ The swan on the overdoor thus symbolizes Aeneas's journey to Latium. The work can be seen as an allegory of Aeneas's destiny that brings together various symbols: Aeneas's piety and bravery, the prediction of the safe voyage and the foundation of the new state and, then, eternal

Fig. 13

JACOB DE WIT,
Putti around an Altar, 1723.
Oil on canvas,
84 x 181 cm.
St Petersburg, The
Scientific-Research
Museum of the
Russian Academy of
Arts, inv. no. Ж-174.



fame.⁵² As an extension of this, two other overdoors illustrate the hindrance (Juno) and help (Venus) that Aeneas encountered on his journey. Aeneas's emergence as the victor of the battle and his elevation to the realm of the gods is the subject of the ceiling painting.

There are several painted ensembles of the story of Dido and Aeneas, but the apotheosis of Aeneas has seldom been the subject of painting.⁵³ So why did Pels choose this particular iconographic programme? Apotheoses were regarded as a reward for earthly endeavours and that certainly applies in the case of the indomitable Aeneas. As Folmer-von Oven rightly says, Aeneas could also have been an example for Pels.⁵⁴ If Pels worked hard and refused to be beaten, he would be rewarded. De Wit's ceiling gave him a glimpse of the heaven that awaited him.

It is well known that many historic interiors have not withstood the ravages of time. Pieter Pels's Aeneas Room in the Herengracht house can now be added to the list. In this study we have used De Wit's sketches and archive and research on site to create a picture of the rich furnishings and the use of the room in the eighteenth century. Three of the lost paintings have been traced. This find improves our understanding both of the room and of

De Wit's oeuvre. There is no trace of De Moucheron's painted wall hangings, and De Wit's ceiling painting is probably rolled up somewhere in the depot of a Russian museum. It is to be hoped that this article acts as a catalyst and the works come to light. Until then, we at least have the oil sketch in the Rijksmuseum to give us an impression of the ceiling that once adorned Uncle Pels's splendid room.

ABSTRACT

The Rijksmuseum has in its collection an oil sketch by Jacob de Wit (1695-1754) of a design for a ceiling painting. This ceiling painting – *The Apotheosis of Aeneas* – was commissioned by Pieter Pels (1668-1739) for his house at number 479 Herengracht, Amsterdam. The present article identifies the room for which the work was made. The ceiling painting proves to have been part of a larger painted ensemble by Jacob de Wit and the landscape painter Isaac de Moucheron (1667-1744). On the basis of De Wit's sketches, records in the archives and research on site, a picture of the way this painted room looked in Pels's day is built up. The later fortunes of the room are also explored. At the end of the nineteenth century the ceiling painting was replaced by another one, also by De Wit. As a result of this very curious switch, the present ceiling painting is no longer an original whole, but a composite hybrid. All the other interior paintings vanished from the room long ago. Three of them, a chimney-piece and two overdoors by De Wit, have been traced to Russia. Three previously unknown paintings have now been added to the artist's oeuvre.

NOTES

- * This study is part of the collection catalogue of eighteenth-century interior paintings in the Rijksmuseum in progress. Colleagues in the Rijksmuseum and beyond have contributed to the creation of this article. Our thanks go to Lisette Vos (paintings conservator, Rijksmuseum), Gregor J.M. Weber (head, department of fine and decorative arts), Reinier Baarsen (senior curator furniture, Rijksmuseum), Alexander Dencher (junior curator decorative art, Rijksmuseum), Robert-Jan te Rijdt (curator eighteenth- and nineteenth-century drawings), Richard Harmanni (independent art and interiors historian), Henk Atze Dijkstra (Stichting Jacob de Wit 2020), Sergey Alekseev (senior researcher, department of paintings from the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century, State Russian Museum), Irina Sokolova (curator of Dutch paintings, State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg) and Lia Gorter (Stichting Cultuur Inventarisatie).
- 1 Ovid, *Metamorphoses* (David Raeburn, transl.), London 2004, book XIV, 575-79.
 - 2 Ovid (note 1), book XIV, 575-79. For the iconography, see also Thera Folmer-von Oven, 'Een Aeneaszaal voor Pieter Pels: drie ontwerpen van Jacob de Wit voor Herengracht 479', *Delineavit et Sculptit* 41 (May 2017), pp. 84-89, esp. p. 89, note 6.
 - 3 Janrense Boonstra and Guus van den Hout (eds.), *In de wolken: Jacob de Wit als plafondschilder*, Amsterdam 2000, pp. 17-18.
 - 4 There are precisely twenty squares of 1.9 cm wide. One Amsterdam foot is 28.3 cm. 20 x 28.3 is 566 cm. In proportion the central field must therefore have been approximately 362 cm wide.
 - 5 The sketch has been lined, so any annotation there may be on the back cannot be seen.
 - 6 'Een extra fraay Blaffonstukje op een raampje ... voor den Welëdelen Heer Pieter Pels.' Sale, Jacob de Wit (1695-1754), Amsterdam (Hendrik de Leth and Dirk van Schorrenbergh), 10 March 1755 sqq., no. 136 (sale cat. p. 17).
 - 7 'de vergoeding van den Trojaanschen Aeneas'; Adolph Staring, *Jacob de Wit 1695-1754*, Amsterdam 1958, pp. 77, 91, 145, 160.
 - 8 Wiepke Loos et al. (eds.), *Het Galante Tijdperk: Schilderijen uit de collectie van het Rijksmuseum 1700-1800*, coll. cat. Amsterdam (Rijksmuseum) 1995, p. 38.
 - 9 Folmer-von Oven 2017 (note 2), pp. 85-86.
 - 10 Publius Vergilius Maro, *Aeneis: heldendicht over Aeneas* (Henk Schoonhoven, transl.), Bussum 2003, book 1, 64-75.
 - 11 *Ibid.*, 227-52.
 - 12 Folmer-von Oven 2017 (note 2), pp. 87-88.
 - 13 *Ibid.*, p. 88.
 - 14 Johan E. Elias, *De Vroedschap van Amsterdam 1578-1795*, 2 vols., Amsterdam 1963 (original ed. 1903 and 1905), vol. 2, pp. 812-17 and 1062-63; Kees Zandvliet, *De 500 rijksten van de Republiek: Rijkdom, geloof, macht & cultuur*, Zutphen 2018, pp. 271-72; Taco Tichelaar, *Andries Pels, bankier en assuradeur*, see <http://taco-tichelaar.nl/wordpress/andries-pels-bankier-en-assuradeur/> (consulted December 2018).
 - 15 In an ode to Pels's manor, Westerwijk, there is a reference to his work at the Amsterdam Stock Exchange (A. Rademaker and Gijsbert Tijssens, *Hollands Arcadia, of De vermaarde rivier den Amstel ...*, Amsterdam 1730). In the inventory of his property drawn up after his death, Pels is referred to by the title of Mr. (Master of Law) (Amsterdam City Archives (henceforth ACA), Amsterdam Notarial Archives (archive no. 5075), inv. no. 9148, 13-01-1740, p. 1).
 - 16 Authorization for the sale of the manors of Westerwijk and Overbeek, the house called Blaauwselhuijs and a piece of grazing land (ACA, archive no. 5075, inv. no. 9149, 14-04-1740). For Westerwijk, see Hendrik de Leth and Matthaëus Brouerius van Nidek, *Het zegepralend Kennemerland ...*, Amsterdam 1732, pp. 22-23 and plates 28-30.
 - 17 Jacob Bicker-Raye, *Het dagboek van Jacob Bicker Raye 1732-1772* (F. Beijerinck and M.G. de Boer, eds.), Amsterdam 1935, pp. 70-71.
 - 18 Pieter Pels's will (ACA, archive no. 5075, inv. no. 7404, 13-03-1736).
 - 19 For the complete history of the residents see Isabella Henrietta van Eeghen et al., *Vier eeuwen Herengracht*, Amsterdam 1976, pp. 326-27. For the surviving late seventeenth-century paintings of birds on the beams see Hans Tulleners, 'Interieurs van Amsterdamse grachtenhuizen. Pracht en praal in Herengracht 479', *Heemschut* (June 1998), pp. 26-27; Walther Schoonenberg, 'Plafondschilderingen III. De laat-17de-eeuwse plafondschilderingen van Herengracht 479', *Binnenstad* 32 (November 1998), no. 173, pp. 90-91 and Milko den Leeuw (ed.), *De Gouden Bocht van Amsterdam*, The Hague 2006, pp. 46-49.
 - 20 For the alteration of the façade see Walther Schoonenberg et al., 'Beschrijving Herengracht 479', see https://www.onderdekeizerskroon.nl/database/grachtenboek_objecten.php?tab=4&id=1664 (consulted February 2019).
 - 21 Tulleners 1998 (note 19), p. 27.
 - 22 For the mahogany rooms in Louis xv style to the right of the corridor see note 19.
 - 23 Ovid (note 1), book 11, 409-507.

- 24 Staring mentions both this ceiling painting and the oil sketch for it. Like Folmer-von Oven, he assumes that the ceiling painting was made for 479 Herengracht. Staring 1958 (note 7), p. 191, no. 74 and pl. 74; A. Staring, 'George van der Mijl', *Nederlands Kunst-historisch Jaarboek* 20 (1969), pp. 199-234, esp. p. 210, note 17; Folmer-von Oven 2017 (note 2), p. 88.
- 25 There is a framed empty field between the doors on the corridor side, two on either side of the fireplace and two beside the sliding doors that connect the room to the back room. There are also empty fields above the two doors and the double door. In the eighteenth century the field between the windows would have been intended for the console table and the pier glass.
- 26 With thanks to Reinier Baarsen. Scientific analysis supports the dating of the panelling. Although extensive architectural paint research has not been done, a paint cross-section from the door frame identified the presence of the pigment zinc white in the first finish. This pigment was used in commercial paints from the mid-nineteenth century onwards.
- 27 Van Eeghen et al. 1976 (note 19), p. 326.
- 28 'alle de behangsels ent geene verder bijde vijlconditien gespecificeert staat, mitsg al hetgeen aard en nagelvast is'; deed of conveyance for 479 Herengracht, 1740 (ACA, Magistrates' Archives: acquittance registers, (archive no. 5062 (former no. I5)), document 226, 13-04-1740).
- 29 'alle de behangsels, de schilderijen in alle de zolders, schoorsteenen en boven de deuren, als mede de ses stucken schilderij van Moucheron in de groote zijkamer, verders allé de vaste spiegels in de dammen, schoorsteenen pilasters en Búvet, het tafeltje en voet onder de damspiegel in de groote zijkamer en't koelvat in de Eetkamer de gordijnen in de kleijne zijkamér'. Willing sale of 479 Herengracht, 1740 (ACA, Burgomasters Archives, agreed sales (sales of houses, premises and bonds) (archive no. 5068), inv. no. 88, 29-02-1740, p. 5).
- 30 'als meede de Blafons ende schilderijen inde groote zijkamer'. Deed of conveyance for 479 Herengracht, 1759 (ACA, archive no. 5062, inv. no. 133 (former no. D6), document 124, 27-04-1759).
- 31 Johan Ferdinand Backer, *Memorie betreffende het huis op de Heerengracht <over de Spiegelstraat> no. 479 te Amsterdam toebehoorende aan M: W.F. van Leeuwen*, January 1897 (ACA, Archief van de Familie Backer en Aanverwante Families (archive no. 172), inv. no. 341, pp. 3, 7).
- 32 'voor d'Heer pieterpels in sijne Edl sijkamer 1723'. In the present layout, the room has five framed wall spaces, one of them on the wall abutting the corridor (see note 25). Since the door was situated more in the middle of the wall in the eighteenth century, there would have been room for a decoration on either side of the door. This brings the number of spaces for decorations to six. The consequence of creating a symmetrical layout in the corridor was that the eighteenth-century door to the room was not precisely in the middle of the wall, so the wall space to the left of the door must have been wider than the space on the right. The symmetry of the corridor must have been regarded as more important than that in the room. With thanks to Richard Harmanni.
- 33 Richard Harmanni, *Jurriaan Andriessen, 'behangselschilder'*, Leiden 2006 (unpub. diss. University of Leiden), vol. 1, pp. 134-35.
- 34 Oeuvre catalogue consulted: Nina Wedde, *Isaac de Moucheron (1667-1744): His Life and Works with a Catalogue Raisonné of his Drawings, Watercolours, Paintings and Etchings*, Frankfurt 1996.
- 35 Inventory of Pieter Pels's estate, 1740 (ACA, archive no. 5075, inv. no. 9148, 13-01-1740, pp. 41-47).
- 36 The bedroom can be ruled out, because it is unlikely that in this period a painted room at the front of the house whose purpose was to express prestige, would have been used as a bedroom. The fact that the bedroom was a back room is also evident from the fact that a privy is mentioned immediately after this room in the inventory, and that must have been in one of the outbuildings at the back. The mirror room can be identified as the 'other side room' in the 1759 deed of conveyance, 'with the further fixed mirrors and ornaments and the pier glass' ('met de verdere vaste Spiegels en ornamenten ende damspiegel', 1759 deed of conveyance (note 30)). Since this room is mentioned separately from the large side room with painted wall hangings, the mirror room cannot be the painted room. The name of the tapestry room, lastly, implies that this room was hung with tapestries, so that there was no space for painted wall hangings. This room, like the bedroom, was probably on the garden side and the cloakroom, which follows it immediately in the inventory, was situated in one of the outbuildings.
- 37 C. Willemin Fock (ed.), *Het Nederlandse interieur in beeld 1600-1900*, Zwolle 2001, pp. 194-95. On the use of this pigment in the 1700-40 period see Lambertus Simis,

- Grondig onderwijs in de schilder- en verwkunst* ..., 2 vols., Amsterdam 1807, vol. 2, p. 21.
- 38 Fock 2001 (note 37), pp. 200-01.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 199.
- 40 For the furnishing of reception rooms see C. Willemijn Fock, 'Het decor van huiselijk vermaak ten tijde van de Republiek', in Jan de Jongste et al. (eds.), *Vermaak van de elite in de vroegmoderne tijd*, Hilversum 1999, pp. 40-72, esp. pp. 49-61.
- 41 In 1910 Backer, in accordance with his father's will, set up the Backer Stichting with the aim of keeping the family collection together. The relative in question was Dirk Bas Backer. In 1885 he and Sophia Carolina Agatha Wilhelmina Crommelin-Van Dielen inherited 479 Herengracht from Constantia Isabella Ferdinande Alewijn. On 28 October the same year they sold the property at a public sale organized by the notary Pollones to Cornelis van Mourik. Backer 1897 (note 31), p. 12.
- 42 Backer 1897 (note 31).
- 43 'door overwitten aan het oog des toeschouwers waren onttrokken'; 'primitieven toestand': 'De vier hoekstukken, wit gestucaard, laat hij schoonmaken en herstellen (naam van schilder wordt er niet gevonden), de gestoken eikenhouten rand om het middenvlies, ook gestucaard, laat hij weer tot zijn recht komen.' *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 8, 13.
- 44 Redactie Amsterdamse GrachtenHuizen, *Keizersgracht 601-605*, <<http://www.amsterdamsegrachtenhuizen.info/grachten/kg0/kg0601/kg21601/>> (consulted January 2019). In particular tabs *Oud 601*, *Details 601 tot 1886*, *Bouwtekening 1886 en 1896* and *Hollenkamp & Co.*
- 45 For the oil sketch for *The Assumption of Callisto*, see Staring 1958 (note 7), pl. 74.
- 46 This analysis of the room comes out of exchanges of views with Reinier Baarsen, Alexander Dencher, Lisette Vos and Henk Atze Dijkstra. The viewing was facilitated by manager Martin Soesbergen, with our gratitude for the hospitality of the tenant, the Fabienne Chapot fashion house.
- 47 We are indebted to Lia Gorter and Irina Sokolova for circulating our appeal. Our thanks go in particular to Sergey Alekseev. He recognized the overdoors from the drawings and informed us, generously sharing all the information known by the museums.
- 48 With thanks to Sergey Alekseev for pointing this out to us.
- 49 There is another example of the depiction of patriotism by way of an altar in Rubens's *Triumph of Victory* (Kassel, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, inv. no. GK 91). With thanks to Gregor J.M. Weber for the information. See also Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia of Uytbeeldingen des Verstants* (Dirck Pietersz. Pers, transl.), Amsterdam 1644, pp. 177, 299-304.
- 50 Virgil (note 10), book 1, 570-585. For the interpretation see J. van Lennep, *De werken van J. van den Vondel* (J.H.W. Unger, ed.), Leiden 1891, vol. 21-22, p. 183.
- 51 J.F.M. Sterck et al. (eds.), *De werken van Vondel. Zesde deel: Vondels Vergiliusvertalingen*, Amsterdam 1932, pp. 38-42, esp. lines 35-50.
- 52 With thanks to Gregor J.M. Weber.
- 53 There is one other known painting of the subject by De Wit, a ceiling painting now in Huize Hoevelaken. Boonstra and Van den Hout 2000 (note 3), p. 71.
- 54 Folmer-von Oven 2017 (note 2), p. 88.