

Alfred Bader

Alfred Bader Fine Arts

[Rembrandt's Students I: Pieter Fliinck -
Milwaukee Art Museum]

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REMBRANDT'S STUDENTS I:

GOVAERT FLINCK



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1. Manoah's Sacrifice circa 1636

Two separate art historical breakthroughs during the last decade in the field of seventeenth century Dutch painting have encouraged us to embark upon a series of small exhibitions devoted to the wide circle of artists who either learned from or collaborated with Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn (1606-1669). The first was the publication in 1983 of Werner Sumowski's major work, *Gemälde der Rembrandt Schüler* in five volumes. In this important series of books, the work of forty-six known artists whose lives and artistic styles intersect with those of Rembrandt are catalogued. In addition to the better known and studied students such as Ferdinand Bol, Gerard Dou, Barend Fabritius, Aert de Gelder, Nicholas Maes and Jan Lievens the careers of other, lesser figures are studied for virtually the first time. Among the pages of Sumowski's *opus* one learns of the art of Lambert Doomer, Pieter Fris, Jan van Neck and Johannes Spilberg.

The second notable event has been the publication of the findings of the Rembrandt Research Project, a committee whose meticulous gathering of scientific and stylistic data on Rembrandt's oeuvre has generated much discussion in regard to works that have been demoted from the accepted canon of the master's creations. A dividend from the continuing house cleaning of the accepted works of Rembrandt

has been the nudging of some of his more important students into a spotlight that has hitherto been reserved for the master alone. To cite only the most sensational of the reattributions, if, as has been suggested, the famous *Polish Rider* in the Frick Collection, New York is not the work of Rembrandt but, rather, his associate Willem Drost, then it becomes clear that Drost's career as an artist has been severely underestimated. The quality of the painting is, after all, not diminished in the least by the change in attribution.

In this, the first *Rembrandt's Students* exhibition, the focus is placed on one of his more prolific associates, Govaert Flinck. Born in the town of Cleves on 25 January 1615 Flinck's life and career were sketched with the usual anecdotal embellishments by Arnold Houbraken in his *De groote Schouburgh* published in the early eighteenth century. There we are told of how Flinck's father, a merchant, disapproved of his son's artistic interests and placed him in an apprenticeship with a local silk dealer. The young Flinck's opportunity to pursue a career in painting was assured by the intervention of Lambert Jacobsz., a Mennonite preacher and artist from Leeuwarden, who convinced Flinck's father that a career as an artist could be a respectable way to make a living. Jacobsz. was allowed to take on Flinck as an apprentice in 1629. During the apprenticeship Flinck was influenced by another student Jacob Backer, seven years his senior. No known works survive by Flinck from the years he spent in Leeuwarden. By 1633 both Flinck and Backer were in Amsterdam savoring the rich cultural life of the city. It is at this point that Flinck's drawing style in black and white chalk on blue paper most resembled Backer's. This manner of drawing continued to be something of a hallmark for Flinck as demonstrated in his studies of models. The emphasis on working from the model probably arose from Flinck's presence in Rembrandt's studio where he presumably remained between 1633-36. It is from 1636 that his earliest dated paintings (*A Shepherdess*, Braunschweig; *Presumed Portrait of Rembrandt with a Feathered Cap*, formerly Lausanne and a *Portrait of Jonas Jacob Leeuwen Dircksz.* Amsterdam) originate. Sumowski believes that *Manoah's Sacrifice* in the Moore Collection (no. 1) dates from 1636 thus making it an important point of departure for understanding his early style.

Flinck quickly emerged as a successful independent artist executing a number of portraits on commission for the Mennonite laity. This group also provided him with a market for his biblical and history paintings. Probably under such circumstances were the *Vertumnus and Pomona* (no. 5), and *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (no. 4) executed. All of the paintings date to the early 1640s. Here the somewhat stumpy

and pudgy proportions typical of Rembrandt's work of the period carry over into Flinck's creations. The style used in his history paintings did not necessarily surface in the portrait commissions of the 1640s however. Flinck's success as a portraitist was built on satisfying his sitters' desires for an accurate, yet flattering likeness. His presentations could be grand and elegant as demonstrated by the Milwaukee Art Museum's own works by the artist (nos. 6 and 7) signed and dated 1648. It was such paintings that elevated Flinck's reputation and self-esteem. In the following year he built an extravagant new studio which more befitted his self-determined role of "the Rubens of Amsterdam." Previously, in 1645, he married Ingeltje Thovelingh, a step not normally taken by an artist until his status in the community was somewhat insured.

With his success in the 1640s came commissions from the princely houses of Orange, Nassau and Brandenburg usually in the form of elaborate allegories on family historical moments. He further consorted with the better known literary and political figures in Amsterdam. His second marriage to Sofia van der Houven, daughter of a director of the Dutch East India Company, in 1656 was celebrated in verse by the noted poet Joost van den Vondel. The crowning jewel of his career was the commission in November 1659 to decorate the Amsterdam town hall with

twelve scenes from the story of the revolt of Julius Civilis, a Batavian who led an insurrection against the Romans in A.D. 69. Unfortunately, Flinck was only able to complete sketches for his ideas, dying as he did in the following February.

Taken as a whole, Govaert Flinck's career was a paradox. His success increased as his actual powers as an artist declined. Critics are apt to cite his quickness to satisfy his clients as the source of his ultimate mediocrity. During his maturity, he was a master technician with paint as demonstrated by his beguiling *Portrait of a Young Boy* (no. 8) and the ennobling image of *King David* (no. 9). But, as with other artists of the age, technical accomplishment could easily supplant or erase conceptual prowess. We should take care not to assess an artist's importance to history based on a perceived character flaw. It might also be an error to assess his contribution based on criteria established by a study of Rembrandt's career. Flinck, who died nine years before his teacher, might well have attempted to learn from Rembrandt's own professional setbacks. As a result, his works seem varnished with a pragmatism that protected them from contemporary failure and, in our day, historical praise.

James Mundy,
chief curator

5. *Vertumnus and Pomona* circa 1640-42



CHECKLIST

1. *Manoah's Sacrifice* circa 1636
Oil on panel
43 3/4 x 33 3/4 inches
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Harry Judson Moore
2. *Abraham's Sacrifice*
Oil on panel
19 x 15 inches
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Harry Judson Moore
3. *Manoah's Sacrifice* 1640
Oil on canvas
29 1/4 x 48 3/4 inches
Agnes Etherington Art Centre,
Queens University, Kingston, Ontario
4. *The Return of the Prodigal Son* circa 1640
Oil on canvas
52 1/2 x 67 inches
North Carolina Museum of Art
5. *Vertumnus and Pomona* circa 1640-42
Oil on canvas
38 1/4 x 45 1/4 inches
Memorial Art Gallery of the University of
Rochester, Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Frank W.
Lovejoy, Jr.
6. *Portrait of a Man* 1648
Oil on canvas
50 1/2 x 39 1/2 inches
Milwaukee Art Museum,
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Alfred Bader
7. *Portrait of a Woman* 1648
Oil on canvas
50 1/2 x 39 1/2 inches
Milwaukee Art Museum,
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Alfred Bader
8. *Portrait of a Boy*
Oil on canvas
30 x 24 inches
Lent anonymously
9. *King David* circa 1650-55
Oil on canvas
52 1/2 x 39 1/2 inches
Lent by Isabel and Alfred Bader
10. Attributed to Govaert Flinck
Christ and the Woman of Samaria at the Well
Oil on canvas
43 x 33 inches
Lent by Isabel and Alfred Bader

Cover: 6. *Portrait of a Man* 1648;
7. *Portrait of a Woman* 1648

4. *The Return of the Prodigal Son* circa 1640

