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The Judgement of Midas from the Lublin Province Museum – an Early Work by Gerrit van Honthorst?

The collections of the Lublin Museum contain a big painting of outstanding artistic merit – *The Judgement of Midas*. As yet, no attempt has been made to attribute it to a specific artist. At present it is listed among the museum's exhibits as a work by the "circle of Caravaggio," and is dated to the first quarter of the seventeenth century. In the 1960s both Jan Białostocki and Andrzej Chudzikowski emphasized the painting's worth, and this was reiterated in the 1990s by Maciej Monkiewicz from the National Museum in Warsaw.[1] Before World War II, the painting was housed in the Resursa Kupiecka Lubelska [Lublin Trade Association], although it is unclear how it came to be in their its possession. In 1939, together with other paintings (including *Pilate Washing His Hands* by Hendrick ter Brugghen),[2] it was deposited in the Municipal Museum in Lublin, located in the former Municipal Library building, where it remained in storage throughout the war. After the war, the collections of the Resursa were transferred to Lublin Castle, which housed the Lublin Museum from 1958 to 1971. In 1993 the painting was entered into the Castle's catalogue records, and in 1999 it was exhibited in the same room as ter Brugghen's *Pilate*.

The subject of the painting – The Judgement of Midas – was taken from the myth of Apollo and Marsyas, which Ovid relates in his *Metamorphoses* (6.383), and which is also told by Hyginus in his *Fabulae* (165). It depicts the scene of the duel, or contest, in which the satyr Marsyas (or in another version of the myth – the god Pan) dared to challenge Apollo himself. Marsyas, an expert player on the aulos (he learned to play so skilfully on the instrument that was thrown away by Athena), played first, his instrument imitating the warbling of the nightingale, the murmuring of steams, the echo of the woods, the soughing of the wind before a storm; thus creating a hymn in praise of nature. Apollo then took up his instrument, plucking the string of his lyre and singing. His music was a reflection of human feelings – of elation, joy, longing, desire and sadness. Traditionally, the contest is interpreted as being a symbolic opposition between nature and culture, wildness and harmony, simple imitation of nature and the skill required to construct a work of art, as well as the opposition between wind instruments and stringed instruments and between the Attic and Asiatic styles of poetry and music.

[1] Information obtained from Mrs Barbara Czajkowska – curator at the Art Department of The Lublin Province Museum.

[2] *Caravaggio: "Złożenie do Grobu." Arcydzieło Pinakoteki Watykańskiej. Różne oblicza caravaggionizmu: Wybrane obrazy z Pinakoteki Watykańskiej i zbiorów polskich*, Antoni Ziemba, ed., exh. cat., The National Museum in Warsaw, 14 September – 15 October 1996 (Warsaw: Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie, 1996), pp. 106–11, cat. no. 6 (Maciej Monkiewicz).

The concert was listened to by nymphs, as well as the shepherds and shepherdesses tending their flocks on Mount Nysa. King Midas, a venerable old man, and one of the Muses were chosen as the judges (in another version of the myth, Athena herself was chosen). The judges selected Apollo as victor, with only Midas being unhappy with the verdict, preferring Marsyas's wild music, which he believed was the more authentic and natural. Apollo was wrathful at Marsyas's boldness and took his revenge on him by hanging him on a tree and flaying him, and on Midas by transforming ears into those of an ass, as a symbol of his stupidity and musical incompetence.

The Judgement of Midas housed in Lublin depicts a simple and harmoniously composed scene (**fig. 1**). The five protagonists stand in a tight circle facing the viewer, and are depicted against a tentatively suggested woodland background, showing a twilit landscape. The figures are shown half length and fill the foreground of the painting. This close view of the figures draws the viewer right into the midst of the scene. On the left, depicted against a dark hill, are the judges: King Midas and the figures of an old man and a woman – most probably Athena, whereas on the right, against the background of a darkening, turquoise sky, are the the two rivals, Apollo and Marsyas. The scene shows the closing moments of the concert: the inspired Apollo is engrossed in his playing and is drawing his bow across the strings of his lute, sounding the last notes. Marsyas is bending towards him, gripping his panpipes in his hands and looking with incredulity at Apollo's face. The judges are focussed and considering their verdict. Marsyas and Apollo are displaying raw emotions and the group of judges facing them is deep in thought. The greying and bearded Midas wearing his characteristic crown with widely-spaced "thorns" has folded his arms, as if uncertain, but he finally extends his hand, pointing with his finger at Marsyas. Standing in the centre is a man with a long beard and a crown of oak leaves and acorns on his head – the symbol of Fortitude, although, in this instance, it is symbolic of his decisiveness and the accuracy of his judgment. His pose is that of someone who is listening very closely. His finger is touching his lips, showing that he is deep in thought about the verdict. Behind him stands Athena (a small owl – the attribute of a goddess – is visible in her hair), and she places her hand on his shoulder in a gesture of support.

The artist was fairly free in his interpretation of the mythological details – and also of the musical instruments played by the contestants. Apollo, who was famed for his playing on the Greek lyre, or plucked chordophone, is here shown playing the lira da braccio with a bow – a modern instrument; whereas Marsyas is holding panpipes (also called a syrinx), although, according to mythological tradition, he played the aulos (a double-reeded pipe).

The painting – measuring 163 × 90 cm, painted on hand-woven canvas – is very well preserved, since it underwent conservation work in 1968, when the surface was cleaned and examined using X-rays.[3] Currently conservation work is being planned to remove the discoloured, matt varnish which is the most visible in the landscape in the background, as well as supplementing minor losses in the paint layer and craquelure. In the centre of the composition, just behind the figure of Athena, the paint has been applied very thickly. The X-ray photographs dating from 1968 show that initially a man's head, perhaps that of a satyr, had been painted beneath this layer, but for the sake of clarity of expression it was ultimately omitted. As a result of this change, there is a vertical division between the group of judges and the contestants.

Contrary to first impressions, which could lead us to think that the painting was an Italian work by the Roman Circle dating from the first half of the seventeenth century, its author should be sought among Northern artists – among the Dutch who were in Rome in the early

[3] Information obtained from Mrs Barbara Czajkowska (see note 1).

seventeenth century. The painting clearly bears the stamp of the Northern Caravaggisti. The extreme realism of the faces is characteristic of painters from Utrecht who were active in Rome. Even more presumptive evidence is its analogy to the painting known as *The Music Contest between Apollo and Pan* from the Národní galerie in Prague, which is listed there as a work by Gerrit van Honthorst (although probably painted with the participation of his workshop) and dated to ca. 1624–1625 (**fig. 2**).[4] The painting in Prague was probably executed in Utrecht, during the phase when Van Honthorst went back to painting scenes inspired by ancient mythology. The Lublin painting, with its heavily Italianized style, seems to be the first version of this subject that was painted during his stay in Rome in the years 1610–1620.

Although the two paintings have strong similarities, they do differ. The composition of both scenes, the arrangement of the figures in a semicircle facing the viewer, is very similar, but in the Prague painting the protagonists are shown almost full figure, and the group is supplemented with shepherds and satyrs in the background. The Prague painting has only two judges. An old man with a crown of oak leaves is standing in the centre of the composition, but is clearly linked to Apollo, who fills the foreground on the left-hand side and is pointing at him with an uplifted finger. On the right, Marsyas is sitting in the foreground and Midas is leaning towards him and places his arm around him, and is pointing at him with his finger. In this instance, the meaning behind the division in the group of figures differs; the contestants are being backed by their supporters due to their positioning within the scene, as well as by Apollo's and Midas's unequivocal gestures, i.e., pointing directly towards their choice. In the same way as the Lublin painting, the scene depicts the very moment of announcing the verdict: Marsyas is resting after having played, smiling awkwardly as he awaits the verdict and with his eyes fixed on Apollo, who is drawing the last notes from his violin. Here, however, the dispute over the verdict is shown unequivocally, rather than the hesitance visible in the Lublin painting. Midas is undoubtedly in support of Marsyas. The old judge is holding a long osier – the symbolic palm – and is clearly pointing to Apollo. The faint figures depicted in the background do not participate in the event thus playing the role of neutral witnesses. However, the two satyrs visible behind the Marsyas and Midas group are strongly affected, and are animatedly discussing between themselves.

The landscape in the Prague painting is barely visible behind the heads of the listeners, and even less so due to the massive trunk of a tree. The scene takes place in a forest setting, indicated by the massive old oak tree. The composition of the scene is more tightly grouped than in the Lublin version, and there is even less space visible in the background, as well as less skyline. Other than in the Lublin painting, the artist has totally eliminated the figures in the background, the space is more open and the two groups of figures are clearly separated.

The Prague scene is not painted with such a subtle palette suffused in colour. The use of colour is more limited and monotonous, and the strong accents of light are spread more evenly throughout the composition; the figures and robes are not as artistically modelled as in the Lublin painting. Against the background of a forest shown at dusk, the musicians' torso colours are more lit up by the flesh tints than the brightness of the light. The faces of the figures are also treated

[4] Ca. 1625, oil, canvas, 136 × 193 cm, inv. no. O5261. Purchased for the Národní galerie in Prague in 1950, and with such an attribution and dating the painting is exhibited there to this day. On the back there is writing and stamps: *Bundesdenkmalamt* [Vienna] and the number: *25545*. Provenance: put up for auction at Robert Muys in Rotterdam (?), 6 June 1810, no. 6 (purchased by Rembertus Pott); in 1932 exhibited at the Otto Vaenius Auction House in Antwerp (?); before 1950 in the Julius Schmitt (1894–1949) collection in Prague. See Richard J. Judson, *Gerrit van Honthorst: A Discusssion of His Position in Dutch Art*, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague 1959, p. 183, cat. no. 74; Maciej Monkiewicz, "Ter Brugghen and Honthorst in Poland," *Bulletin du Musée National de Varsovie*, n° 3–4, XXXVII (1996), p. 238 (as *The Singing Competition between Apollo and Marsyas*).

in a similar, realistic fashion, although they seem more hale and hearty, even boorish. Apollo is somewhat different from his Lublin counterpart: he lacks the elegance, charm and spirituality. The Marsyas in the Prague scene is totally different from the Lublin version; his traits are wilder – those of an uncouth god. He is depicted as a burly, hairy, ginger-bearded creature of the forest, with a clumsy red nose and boorish features, whereas in the Lublin version he is reminiscent of a good-looking, gentle youth with Northern features, and he only bears a slight resemblance to a silenus (small horns, pointed ears hidden by his hair, and of insignificant height).

The two most similar figures in the paintings are the old judge and King Midas – the types of figures are identical as are the attributes (a leafy crown and a crown with a crenelated decoration); they differ only in the colouring of their robes and hair, and the less distinct modelling of the features in the Prague version. Also Apollo's instrument – the lira da braccio – is analogous to both paintings; although the artist changed the instrument played by Marsyas, in the Prague version he is playing a pipe and not a syrinx as in the Lublin painting.

The composition and atmosphere in the Prague scene is very dynamic and ludic – and can be associated more with the Netherlandish tradition than with Italian influences. The Prague *Judgement of Midas* is less Italianesque, less colourful with less chiaroscuro, and it also not as Caravaggesque and is less skillfully executed. This may be due to the collaboration of students working in the artist's large atelier. In Rome where – it can be assumed – he made the Lublin version, he did not have an atelier, and the painting is calm and concentrated, as if the emotions were frozen on the faces of the figures, and it is distinctly Italian in style. In the Prague work, which was made in Utrecht, where his stay in Italy was but a reminiscence and a remote souvenir of Italian art, the artist reached for local, mannerist forms of narration, as developed in the Utrecht ateliers of Abraham Bloemaert and Paulus Moreels.

Apart from the works under discussion, there are no other known paintings by Van Honthorst that depict the Judgement of Midas, although the artist often undertook both the subject of music, concerts, musicianship, folk musicians and singers, and the theme of satyrs and pastoral subjects (motifs of satyrs, Sileni, nymphs and shepherds). In the first instance, probably the earliest example, dating from the Roman period is *Orpheus Playing among Animals* (Palazzo Reale, Naples), dated to 1614–1616 – a painting that is heavily influenced by the Carravaggisti.[5] The gentle realism, which only Dutch masters in Rome could portray, is reminiscent of the Lublin painting and the atmosphere, and the figure of the musician is similar to Apollo's pose.

The next mythological representations date from the 1620s, and are connected with the artist's Utrecht phase. They are an attempt to transpose Roman inspiration onto Dutch soil. Around 1623 he executed the *Triumph of Silenus* (Mauritshuis, The Hague), a drawing entitled *Satyrs and Nymphs* and the painting *Satyrs and Nymphs* (Schloss Weissenstein, Sammlung des Grafen von Schönborn, Pommersfelden) – the composition of the latter is somewhat striking, with its diagonally arranged half-figures placed close to the viewer, against a background of regularly placed tree trunks, presented in an idyllic and cheerful, satyrish fashion.[6] In 1996 the painting *Two Satyrs with a Brass Pitcher* (on loan to the National Museum in Warsaw) was found in a private collection in Poland.[7] It was made in the atelier of Van Honthorst, dated

[5] Reproduction of this painting (as *Apollo and Marsyas*, undated) see *Caravaggioniści holenderscy* (Wrocław: Eaglemoss, Polska,2001), p. 16. Wielcy Malarze, no. 157.

[6] See Monkiewicz, "Ter Brugghen...," op. cit., pp. 238–9, fig. 13.

[7] *Caravaggio: "Złożenie do grobu."...*, op. cit., pp. 160–5, cat. no. 19, p. 161, fig. 67 (Maciej Monkiewicz); see Monkiewicz, op. cit., pp. 236–8, fig. 12.

(again!) *1623* and signed *GVh* (Gerrit van Honthorst) or *GVk* (Gerard van Kuijl – the master's pupil). It shows the light figures of two very amused satyrs sitting at the foot of an enormous tree trunk, busy pressing grapes into a brass pitcher, and in the background, a very faint figure is gorging itself on the fruit. The scene is startlingly close to the right hand part of the Prague composition depicting *The Judgement of Midas*, and the atmosphere is also very similar (**fig.3**).

Compositional similarities to the Lublin painting can also be seen in Van Honthorst non-mythological paintings, both from his Roman and his later periods. The same figures appear in a whole series of paintings, particularly images of old men, or the heads of young men of an identical or similar physiological type as the Lublin Apollo, Marsyas and Athena. The half-figural forms and arrangement are repeated, as are the gestures, poses and even the details, such as the characteristic striped material on Athena's sleeves. These similarities are visible in, among others, *The Denial of St Peter* (ca. 1618–1619, Minneapolis Institute of Art), *Doubting Thomas* (ca. 1618–1620, Prado, Madrid, formerly attributed to Matthias Stomer), *Solon and Croesus* (1624, Kunsthalle, Hamburg) and *Death of Seneca* (Centraal Museum, Utrecht).

Similar types of figures also appear in the works of other Utrecht Caravaggisti, and not only in those executed by Van Honthorst. *Pan with a Syrinx* by Dirk van Baburen[8] (private collection), dated ca. 1616–1618, when the artist was in Rome, shows a striking similarity with the figure of Marsyas in Lublin's *The Judgement of Midas*.

Could both artists really have employed the same model or the same drawing from a pattern book, or could they perhaps have used motifs and figures taken from each other's paintings? It could have been the young Van Baburen, who was already known and who was having great success in Rome and Italy, who first created the figure that was later repeated by his compatriot. The Lublin painting with its cold Classicism, static elegance, lack of spontaneity and different use of light – colder, daylight – speaks against Van Baburen's authorship. Van Honthorst was also the only artist among the Dutch Caravaggisti to use landscape in the background, although in a very limited scope. Despite this, Van Baburen's *Pan* could prove helpful in the attempt to give the Lublin painting a more precise dating.

In the years 1610–1615, Van Honthorst painted genre and religious scenes, most often depicted at night, or at dusk, and lighted up with artificial light. We do not know of any mythological subjects that date from this period. It can be presumed, therefore, that the Lublin painting was executed later, ca. 1615–1620. Yet another approximation could be dating Van Baburen's *Pan with a Syrinx* to 1616–1618. If we assume that Van Honthorst modeled his image of Marsyas on Pan, and that the Lublin painting was made in Italy, then *The Judgement of Midas* should be dated between 1616 and March 1620 (i.e., when the artist returned to Utrecht).

The fact that *The Judgement of Midas* was painted in Rome can be clearly felt in its "Italianness," the Caravaggisti-type composition and the lighting, the manner in which the figures are depicted, as well as the decidedly non-Dutch landscape in the background. The steep mountain, the cypresses, pine trees and Italian poplars clearly locate the scene in Italy. This is all the more visible because the landscape in the Prague painting is decidedly "Northern," and painted under a "Northern" sky.

As in other Roman paintings by Van Honthorst, the Lublin painting combines various influences, which is the result of the impact of the many artists he encountered in Rome. Apart from Caravaggio himself, whose influence is not visible in the analyzed painting, the

[8] Reproduction of this painting see Alberto Ausoni, *Muzyka* (Warsaw: Arkady, 2007), p. 78. Leksykon – historia, sztuka, ikonografia.

young Roman Caravaggisti, including Bartolomeo Manfredi and Orazio Gentileschi and Carlo Saraceni,[9] did have a strong influence on him. It is possible that the heads of the figures of Apollo and Marsyas were influenced by Manfredi. The use of a light colour range in tones of gleaming blues, golds and reds is characteristic of Gentileschi, and it is his work that the painting's overall artistic expression brings to mind.

The influence of the Bolognese and Roman artists of the first half of the seventeenth century also seems to be strong in the Lublin painting, which is characterized by its classicistic tone, visible particularly in the buildings and the pose of the figures, the elegance and the hieraticity of the figures. This view could have been influenced by the works of Guido Reni, Domenichino and Francesco Albani, known in Rome at that time; Reni and Domenichino were also active in Rome in the years when Van Honthorst was there. The fact that he met them left its mark in his constant tendency to classicize, and in the monumentalism of his figures. This is most clearly seen in the figures of Athena, Apollo and the bearded judge.

The musical competition between Apollo and Marsyas,[10] a theme that was mainly undertaken in Italian art, beginning with the masters of the Quattrocento (e.g., Perugino, Louvre), also gained interest among the Northern Artists – as a theme that was strictly Italianate, making reference to humanist erudition as far as classical literary materials were concerned, as well as to the archetypical, allegorical juxtaposition of poetical and musical style: the elevated, dramatic "Apollonian" style and the low, idyllic "Dionesian-Satyrish" style. It is present in Raphael's painting (Raphael's Rooms, Vatican) – in the *Punishment of Marsyas* (The Flaying of Marsyas), and later in the Venetian artists: Andrea Schiavone painted several versions of the musical competition, with a landscape at dusk in the background, whereas Titian, in his famous painting in the Kroměříž (Czech Republic) made a compilation of various themes, combining the musical competition and the scene showing Marsyas's punishment, which was later interpreted as an allegory of the triumph of culture over nature. In Italy there are more depictions of Apollo's punishment and revenge (e.g., Guercino, Manfredi, Giovanni Liss), whereas the Judgement of Midas appeared, among others, in works by Domenichino, Pietro Novello, Guido Reni, right up until Johann Carlo Loth, known as Carlotto (*Apollo, Pan and Marsyas*, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin), who was active in Venice at the end of the seventeenth century. The Dutch painters, Gillis van Coninxloo II, Karel van Mander, Hendrick Goltzius, Abraham Govaerts, Pieter Lastman, Abraham Janssens, Peter Paul Rubens, Abraham van Cuylenborgh and others developed crowded scenes, in which the Judgement of Midas was accompanied by a large circle of listeners and observers, including gods, nymphs and shepherds. Thus the bucolic variant, with its idyllic atmosphere, triumphed over the dramatic nature of

[9] See, i.a., Judson, *Gerrit van Honthorst...*, op. cit.; Hermann Braun, *Gerard und Willem van Honthorst*, Ph.D. diss. (Göttingen: Universität Göttingen, 1966); Benedict Nicolson, *The international Caravaggesque movement: lists of pictures by Caravaggio and his followers throughout Europe from 1590 to 1650* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1979); *Holländische Malerei in neuem Licht: Hendrick ter Brugghen und seine Zeitgenossen*, Albert Blankert and Leonard J. Slatkes, eds, exh. cat., Centraal Museum Utrecht, 13 November 1986 – 12 January 1987, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig, 12 February – 12 April 1987 (Braunschweig: Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, 1986), pp. 30–2, 276–302, cat. nos 60–7 (entries on Van Honthorst by Marten Jan Bok and Martin Vermeer); *The Dictionary of Art*, vol. 14, Jane Turner, ed. (New York: Grove's Dictionaries Inc., 1996), pp. 727–32 (entry on Van Honthorst by Leonard S. Slatkes).

[10] Edith Wyss, *The Myth of Apollo and Marsyas in the Art of the Italian Renaissance: an Inquiry into the Meaning of Images* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1996); Katia Marano, *Apoll und Marsyas. Ikonologische Studien zu einem Mythos in der italienischen Renaissance* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1998); *Häutung. Lesarten des Marsyas-Mythos*, Ursula Renner, Manfred Schneider, eds (Munich: Wilhelem Fink Verlag, 2006); *Die Launen des Olymp. Der Mythos von Athena, Marsyas und Apoll*, Vinzenz Brinkmann, ed., exh. cat., Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung, Frankfurt am Main, 22 May – 21 September 2008 (Petersberg: Michael Imhofl Verlag, 2008).

history which, after all, ended cruelly with the flaying of Marsyas. The pastoral aspect of the incident was often emphasized by developing the landscape, as in the versions by Coninxloo and Van Mandera.

The depiction of the myth of Apollo and Marsyas gave the artist from the North cause to emulate Italian models, to show off his "Italian education," to present himself as an Italianist. It allowed him to express – somewhat ostentatiously – his aspirations to the status of artist-poet (in accordance with Horace's topos *ut pictura poësis*), to weave into the then-fashionable theory of art, reflections on poetic, musical and artistic models of excellence, and to present himself as an artist as well as a learned humanist (*artifex doctus*), deeply rooted in the achievements of antiquity and the culture of Italy – "the homeland of art."

Compared to these various depictions of the myth, Van Honthorst's Prague painting and the painting in Lublin – which here is also attributed to him – are very different. They were executed in an innovative, Caravaggesque manner, emphasizing the realism of the scene and the internal, dramatic tension, thus diverging from the cliché of the fabled idyll (in Italy called *favola*; by Vasari *poesia*), that was adopted by many Dutch artists to depict this story. They depict a real musical competition; one that is full of tension, and that is strongly experienced by flesh-and-blood people. Thanks to its depiction the emotions of the protagonists in a somewhat static composition, there is a break with the traditional Venetian conventions of the rural concert or musicianship in a natural setting and concerts depicted in the Caravaggesque and Caravaggisti genre. The figures make contact with the viewer, thus making him a witness and participant – even a judge – of the mythical competition. Van Honthorst's twofold attempt at depicting the Judgement of Midas, with a significant gap between the two versions, can be explained by his return to painting classical subjects, which took place around the mid-1620s, and it can be understood as an endeavour to depict with the use of a new formula a theme that he had already painted when in Italy.