

S P H I N X F I N E A R T



Joos de Momper II (Antwerp 1564 - Antwerp 1635) & Hans Jordaens III (Antwerp 1595 - Antwerp 1643)

Christ Healing the Blind Man

oil on canvas
137.5 x 205 cm (54 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 80 $\frac{3}{4}$ in)

In the outskirts of a quaint Netherlandish village surrounded by verdant rolling hills, a cluster of figures stand and watch Christ restore sight to a blind man dressed in beggar's rags. The scene is based on an account from the Gospel of John in which Christ heals a man who was blind from birth by mixing his spittle with mud and applying the ointment to man's eyes.¹ In the New Testament text, the beggar was sent to wash the mud away at the pool of Siloam, a rock-cut pool on what is supposed to be the southern slope of the City of David, now outside the Old City walls of Jerusalem. Joos de Momper II, in setting the events in his native countryside, has transformed the pool of Siloam into a large placid lake on the shores of which lie traditional gabled houses and a church. This incongruous setting and the contrast between Christ and his followers wearing long biblical robes and the villagers in early seventeenth-century dress emphasises the miraculous and extraordinary nature of the event.

Standing behind Christ the three men wearing exotic headdresses represent the Pharisees. They huddle together exchanging sceptical glances, as according to the Gospel of John, the Pharisees doubted Christ's healing powers and subjected the beggar to interrogation about his sickness before accepting the fact that he was truly cured. The man on the left of Christ and the beggar is presumably one of the disciples and looks on in wonder, as does a female villager who sits on the ground. In the background, other inhabitants as well as biblical characters mill around. While the eye is immediately attracted to the activity and brightly coloured garments of the figures in the lower portion of the composition, a perusal of the rest of the painting makes it clear that de Momper II has painted the entirety of *Christ Healing the Blind Man* with the greatest attention to detail. Although the subject is wholly contrived, it is treated with a striking realism that exemplifies the artist's style, which lay between the constructed landscapes of the sixteenth century in the manner of Pieter Brueghel the Elder (c.1525-1569) and the naturalistic ones of the seventeenth century.

De Momper II collaborated on a number of works with Hans Jordaens III, who painted the staffage for the present picture. A much smaller joint work by the two artists in the Hermitage, St. Petersburg,

depicting [*The Conversion of Saul*](#), provides a very different interpretation of a biblical narrative, and gives precedence to the figures who dominate the painting rather than the expansive landscape which features in *Christ Healing a Blind Man*. Although both paintings represent highly spiritual moments, *The Conversion of Saul* is portrayed with great theatrical intensity while *Christ Healing a Blind Man* evokes an atmosphere of profound tranquillity. In *The Conversion of Saul*, a flash of light beams from the heavens and Saul is knocked off his horse. His companions and their steeds are terrified and thrown into a frenzy of movement, each trying to escape in a different direction while Saul lies blinded and immobile.

As Jordaens III's monumental figures command much of the composition in the Hermitage work, de Momper II's expressive landscape with rocky cliffs and imposing trees plays a secondary role. In contrast, *Christ Healing a Blind Man* positions the diminutive biblical figures within a large and distinctive landscape, which is more typical of de Momper II's signature style. The Hermitage, which holds a number of works by the artist, has several related examples in which the staffage, although clearly meant to enliven the painting, is dwarfed by the more impressive surrounding countryside. [*Mountainous Landscape with Figures and a Donkey*](#) is one such painting in which the colourful depiction of the travellers adds a touch of humanity to the scene, especially as the leaders of the group are shown trying to coax a fallen donkey to its feet; their presence, however, is not intended to detract attention from the extensive and magnificent view across the hills and valleys (fig. 2). *Large Mountainous Landscape*, another collaboration between de Momper II and Jordaens III, housed in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, is similar in that the landscape has precedence over the figures, which are modelled in a manner resembling those in the present work. Here the dramatic view with large craggy formations looming to the right and left is a compositional device that de Momper II employed frequently with great effect and earned him the nickname *pictor montium* ('painter of mountains') on his portrait in van Dyck's *Iconography* (c.1632-1644).

A further comparative example in the Hermitage, [*Monks in a Grotto*](#), is painted in a sketchy, expressive style that is typical of de Momper II's later works of the 1620s. The contrast between this and the careful precision of *Christ Healing a Blind Man* is evident. Again, the Hermitage painting is much smaller than the present picture and the subject is taken from contemporary life, rather than biblical narrative. The majority of his paintings, in contrast to *Christ Healing a Blind Man*, show ordinary travellers rather than New Testament figures. The rare exception is found in works such as *A Mountainous River Landscape with the Rest on the Flight to Egypt*, (Private Collection) in which Mary nurses her newborn seated against a backdrop of remnants of classical ruins and a steep rocky outcrop jutting into the sky. This, and all de Momper II's panoramic landscapes, are united as he follows the conventional colour scheme of late Mannerist painting, dividing the composition into three dominant groups of colours, with brown tones in the foreground, greens in the middle ground and blue in the background. A further differentiation occurs between the foreground, which is characterised by rapid, flowing brushstrokes that define the contours of the scene, and the less precise application of dashes and dots of colour to represent the distant views.

As *Christ Healing a Blind Man* attests, de Momper II's picturesque landscapes provide an ideal setting for Jordaens III's charmingly animated figures. Jordaens III's depictions of people and animals can be seen in many works in the Hermitage museum, one of which is [*Finding of Moses*](#) by Jasper van der Lanen (c.1585-after 1624). Jordaens III has painted the Pharaoh's daughter and her handmaidens traipsing towards a river which, as in *Christ Healing a Blind Man*, meanders through a distinctly Netherlandish landscape far removed from the Nile in Egypt where the biblical account is set. In both works, Jordaens III paints the staffage in a manner that closely resembles that of [*Frans Francken II \(1581-1642\)*](#), particularly in the rendering of the variety and texture of the figures' garments and their lively expressions and movement.

De Momper II was born and raised in Antwerp, where he received his initial training from his father, Bartolomeus (1535-after 1597), and by the age of seventeen was registered as a master in the Antwerp Guild of St. Luke. It has been confirmed that he went to Italy in his early twenties since Lodewijk Toeput (c.1550-c.1605), who was then active in Venice, was mentioned as his teacher in an inventory of 1624. The frescoes in the Church of San Vitale in Rome are attributed to de Momper II. In 1590, after returning to Antwerp, he married Elisabeth Gobyn, with whom he had ten children. He became dean of the Guild

in 1611.

De Momper II proved to be the most skilful and eclectic artist in his family and was an engraver and draughtsman as well as a landscape painter. He achieved prominence in his day and over five hundred paintings have been attributed to him. He specialised in panoramic or fantastical landscapes in the manner of Joachim Patinir (c.1550-1524) as well as landscapes in the tradition of Brueghel, in which the forms are depicted with greater realism.

Jordaens III trained with his father, Hans Jordaens II (1581-1635). In 1617 he married Maria van Dijck with whom he had five children. Three years later, he enrolled in the Antwerp Guild of St. Luke. He appears to have become commercially successful quite quickly as by 1624, he is recorded as living in a large house. Jordaens III contributed the staffage to works by a number of artists as well as finishing paintings by Abraham Govaerts after his death in 1626.

Dr. Klaus Ertz has examined *Christ Healing a Blind Man* in the original and confirmed that it is by the hand of Joos de Momper II in collaboration with Hans Jordaens III. An extract from the left half of the painting can be found on a second painting now in a German Private Collection (oil on canvas, 137.5 x 121 cm).²

¹ John, 9:1-7

² see Ertz, K., *Joos de Momper des Jüngerer*, (Freren 1986), p. 558, No. 336, ill. p. 556.

Artist description:

Joos de Momper II received his first training from his father, and as early as 1581 he was registered as a master in the Antwerp Guild of St Luke by his father—who was at the time the dean of the Guild. In Antwerp on 4 September 1590 Joos married Elisabeth Gobyn, by whom he had ten children, including Gaspard and Philips. In 1611 Joos became Dean of the Guild, and the following year he evidently went to Brussels with Sebastiaen Vrancx on guild business. It has long been maintained that de Momper had gone to Italy in the 1580s, since Lodewijk Toeput, who was then active in Venice, was mentioned as his teacher in an inventory of 1624. That this hypothetical trip to Italy actually took place was proved in 1985 when the frescoes in the church of San Vitale in Rome, previously attributed to Paul Bril, were given to Joos de Momper the younger.

Over 500 paintings have been attributed to de Momper, but only a few are signed and only one is dated, the *Mountain Landscape* (1623; Private Collection). De Momper painted two kinds of landscape: panoramic or 'fantastic world landscapes' in the tradition of Joachim Patinir and those in the manner of Jan Breughel the elder, in which the forms are already much more realistic. The panoramic landscapes follow the conventional colour scheme of late Mannerist landscape painting, with tones of brown used for foreground, green for the middle ground and blue for the background. Yet the separate narrative scenes within the compositions are already very individual and strikingly decorative. The artist's painting technique is characterized by rapid, flowing brushstrokes that sharply define the contours of the foreground; also typical are tiny dots of impasto colour used to create the aerial perspective in the background and the modeling of the middle ground. This is particularly noticeable in his panoramic landscapes with a high viewpoint, such as the *Wide River Landscape with a Boar Hunt* (Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum), the *Mountain Landscape with a Company of Riders* (Madrid, Prado), the *Mountain Landscape with a Water-mill* (Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister) and the *Mountain Landscape with Dancing Figures* (University of Rochester, New York).

The *Mountain Landscape with Bridges* (Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum) represents the other type of mountain landscape: the viewpoint is lower, and the foreground is flat and bordered by steep rocks, like stage scenery for the figures. However, the figures are always—unlike those in Breughel's images—without narrative meaning. Joos de Momper's landscapes are usually conventionally framed on the sides with groups of trees or rocks; the real development takes place in the importance given to the centre of the composition. Here he explored the potential of the flat Dutch landscape by varying the viewpoint, which gradually sinks, culminating in the so-called grotto landscapes (e.g. *Landscape with a Grotto and Painter*, Bonn, Rhein. Landesmuseum; *Waterfall in a Cave*, University of Manchester,

Whitworth), in which the picture seems to flow out from a figure placed almost at eye-level with the viewer.

Alongside the numerous mountain landscapes, which earned the painter the nickname '*pictor montium*' on his portrait in van Dyck's *Iconology* (c. 1632–44), Joos also painted other types of paintings. In his town and village landscapes, the houses and people, previously mere accessories in the mountain landscapes, became the main focus of the pictures, as in the *Washing Place in Flanders* (Madrid, Prado), with its wandering perspective disappearing into a broad bluish distance, and in *Autumn* (Brunswick, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum). The houses in the middle ground of the latter almost close off the composition. This convention is most common in the so-called winter landscapes (e.g. *Winter Landscape with a Village and Antwerp Cathedral*, Germany, Private collection), in which the village scene spreads over the middle of the whole picture. There are countless variations of these landscapes by de Momper, who is generally seen as the inventor of the genre landscape. He is also well known for his cycles of *Seasons*, the best of which is in Brunswick (Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum). These landscapes alternate between high and low viewpoints, referring back to the compositions of the panoramic landscapes.

However, in terms of technique, execution and the amount of detail, they are already close to 17th-century realistic landscape painting. There is also a small group of drawings attributed to him, for example *Rider Crossing the Mountains* 1578, Courtauld Institute, London); these follow the development of his landscape paintings.

Joos de Momper's pictures were already greatly valued during his lifetime; they were first mentioned in inventories c. 1608. He was also praised by van Mander as early as 1604. His mountain landscapes were included in contemporary cabinet pictures by Frans Francken the younger, Jan Breughel the elder, Willem van Haecht etc. Some of these artists—for instance Francken and Breughel—as well as Sebastiaen Vrancx, Jan Breughel the younger and Hendrik van Balen painted figures in Momper's mountain landscapes. However, the extent of their collaborative work has not been examined in detail.

Collections

Momper II is represented in the following collections: Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum; Madrid, Prado; Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister; Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Brunswick; Courtauld Institute, London, amongst others.