SPHINX FINE ART



Joachim Anthonisz. Wtewael (Utrecht 1566 - Utrecht 1638)

Caritas

oil on panel
37 x 28 in (94 x 71.1 cm)

In this painting Caritas, or Charity, is personified by the young woman in the centre of the painting, who sits breastfeeding the child in her lap. The infant, however, has turned away to look at the boy seated on the step who holds a pear which he has taken from the basket, overflowing with fruit. Both this boy, an older girl, and a grey cat are distracted by the child standing next to Caritas, who is holding a bird in his hand. Behind Caritas, peering over her shoulder, is a further figure who holds a shallow metal bowl and a spoon. Joachim Anthonisz. Wtewael has unified this multi-figured composition through the figures' interest in each other and the bird. Despite the variety of contorted poses, a potentially fragmented scene is harmonised due to the figures' nuanced facial expressions and reactions.

In her 1986 catalogue raisonné of Wtewael's work, Anne W. Lowenthal included the present work under 'Problematical Attributions' on the basis of 'a poor photograph'.[1] However, she has since revised her opinion and, in a 1993 letter, writes 'Having examined it after a recent cleaning, I am now confident of the attribution to Joachim Wtewael'.[2]

Lowenthal has dated the present work to the late 1610s or early 1620s, as the composition of an isolated figure group against a dark background was one that Wtewael used repeatedly during this period. However, Wtewael turned to the theme of Caritas throughout his career, with two further examples dating from 1623, and one from c. 1627. All three works share motifs and features such as the abundance of fruit, the bowl of what is possibly porridge, and Wtewael's use of monumental figures, a typical characteristic of his mature work. All the scenes have a general air of contentment, with the exception in each case of the child is upset by the attentions of the clawing cat. Elements such as this are typical of Wtewael, as he gives a Classical subject matter a contemporary, almost genre-like treatment, in which the personality of his figures stands out.

Despite the similarities between the present work and other treatments of the Caritas theme, the figure types and poses have closer counterparts in other works, such as the Hermitage's *Christ Blessing the Children.* The depiction of fidgeting, distracted children are clearly analogous in both works. Similarly the drapery patterns of *Caritas* recall pictures such as *Mars, Venus and Cupid* [3] or those of the earlier *Lot and his Daughters* in Berlin. Although *Caritas* is a very different work to these other examples, they all share some of Wtewael's unmistakeable and characteristic stylistic traits.

Professor David Ekserdjian has recently suggested that the source for the composition of the central figures of *Caritas* is most likely Federico Barocci's (c. 1535-1612) *La Madonna del Gatto.* Barocci's work was engraved in 1577 by Cornelis Cort (1533-1578)[4], and so the composition would surely have been known to Wtewael. Although he was an artist of striking originality, it was certainly not unusual for Wtewael to take inspiration from engravings: for example the figures in his *The Deluge* (c. 1592-1595)[5] in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg, are based on the convoluted, muscular figures found in Hendrick Goltzius' (1558-1617) engravings the *Disgracers.* It is also clear that the present work must have proven influential in its own right, as Lowenthal believes that is was the source for Wtewael's son Peter's (1596-1660) treatment of the same subject. Peter's *Caritas* is dated 1628, and thus a *terminus ante quem* is established for the present work.

The gracefulness of the figures is one of the outstanding features of *Caritas.* Figures such as these, with slightly broad hands and feet, appear often in Wtewael's work during the 1610s. Lowenthal cites The Louvre's *Andromeda,* as a comparable work to the present painting.[6] Like Caritas herself, Andromeda twists her body from the waist, creating an elegantly balanced form. Again the figures have a monumentality, yet despite the dramatic subject matter in the Louvre work, there is actually a sense of calm, as Andromeda does not seem unduly distressed. The National Gallery's *The Judgement of Paris,* is another work where similarly graceful figures stand in Wtewaeal's contrived poses. In particular the figure of Minerva, on the right-hand side of the main group, is reminiscent of the young girl with her back to the viewer in *Caritas.*

According to Lowenthal, the present work is possibly the *Caritas,* which is listed in the estate of Wtewael's daughter Antonietta, who was married to Johan Pater ('noch een Caritas').[7] The picture then appears to have been passed down to their daughter Hillegonda Nellestyn-Pater ('Een Charitas').[8] The inventories do not give dimensions, so it is impossible to be certain, however, it is certainly plausible that the present work stayed in the Wtewael family until at least 1669.

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Charles de Bourgneuf de Cucé, Bishop of St. Malo travelling in Italy and France, and his pictures c.1590 demonstrate a familiarity with Parmigianino (1503-1540) and the Fontainebleau school. By 1592, he is recorded back in Utrecht and the works that followed show an awareness and enthusiasm for the work of the Haarlem Mannerists. The influence of Goltzius, Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem (1562-1638), and Karel van Mander (1548-1606) was considerable throughout the northern Netherlands at this time. Wtewael spent most of his career in Utrecht, cultivating his unique style. He was a founder member of that city's St. Luke's Guild in 1611, but was also a flax merchant and a politician, and elected to the town council several times.

Although he is considered one of the last exponents of Mannerism, in his mature phase Wtewael started to curb the exuberance of his compositions and figures. Thus in a work such as *Caritas,* he constructed a composition that is on the one hand highly sophisticated, with a variety of figures each of whom is carefully individualised. However, what could be a complicated scene feels restrained, subtle and harmonised. The typical Mannerist elements, such as the contorted poses and the brilliant colour of the red ribbon in Caritas' hair , are combined with a naturalism which in many ways reflects the broader changes in the approach of Dutch art at this time: from *uyt den geest* ('from the imagination') to *near 't leven* ('after life'). In fact, it is the ability to shift between styles that perhaps is Wtewael's most defining characteristic. As Lowenthal has written, 'he was a chameleon, endlessly inventive, restless in his experimentation with pictorial vocabularies'.[9] Certainly *Caritas* demonstrates a knowledge of a variety of stylistic sources, as Wtewael finds the balance between Mannerism and Naturalism in his composition, or the painterly and the precise in his brushwork.

We are grateful to Professor David Ekserdjian for suggesting that the source for the composition of the central figures of *Caritas* is most likely Federico Barocci's *La Madonna del Gatto.*

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[1] Lowenthal, A. W., *Joachim Wtewael and Dutch Mannerism* (Doornspijk, 1986), p.164.

[2] Written correspondence, 8 January 1993.

[3] Lowenthal, A-52.

[4] For example, see British Museum, London, inv. no V,8.159.

[5] Lowenthal, A-2.

[6] Written correspondence.

[7] Lowenthal, p. 192.

[8] Ibid., p. 198.

[9] Lowenthal, A. W., 'Joachim/Peter Wtewael, Father/Son, Master/Pupil' in *In his Milieu: Essays on Netherlandish Art in Memory of John Michael Montias,* (Amsterdam University Press, 2006), p.248.

Provenance:

Possibly Johan Pater and Antonietta Pater-Wtewael, Utrecht, to 1655;
Possibly Johan van Nellesteyn and Hillegonda van Nellesteyn-Pater, Utrecht, 1655;
with Arcade Gallery, London, 1953;
sale, Finarte, Milan, 29 November 1990 (lot 22);
with Chaucer Fine Arts, London, 1990;
sale, .Sotheby's, New York, January 14 1994 (lot 20).

Exhibitions

Arcade, London, *Mannerist and Baroque Pictures from Italy and Holland,* 1953, no. 9.

Literature:

Anne W. Lowenthal, *Joachim Wtewael and Dutch Mannerism* (Doornspijk, 1986), p.164, no. B-9, pl. 140, (under problematic attributions. Dr. Lowenthal has since revised her opinion and accepts it as fully autographed – see note for details).

Artist description:

Wtewael trained in Utrecht, in his father's glassworks. From c. 1588 he spent four years with his patron Charles de Bourgneuf de Cucé, Bishop of St. Malo travelling in Italy and France, and his pictures c.1590 demonstrate a familiarity with Parmigianino (1503-1540) and the Fontainebleau school. By 1592, he is recorded back in Utrecht and the works that followed show an awareness and enthusiasm for the work of the Haarlem Mannerists. The influence of Goltzius, Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem (1562-1638), and Karel van Mander (1548-1606) was considerable throughout the northern Netherlands at this time. Wtewael spent most of his career in Utrecht, cultivating his unique style. He was a founder member of that city's St. Luke's Guild in 1611, but was also a flax merchant and a politician, and elected to the town council several times.