SPHINX FINE ART



Attributed to Adriaen Thomasz. Key (Antwerp C.1544 - Antwerp After 1589)

St. Peter Penitent

oil on panel
108.5 x 75.5 cm (42¾ x 29¾ in)

The present painting is thought to be a very early example of the work of Adriaen Thomasz. Key, which demonstrates the wide variety of influences that the young artist incorporated into his narrative art. The composition is dominated by the figure of St. Peter, who crosses his arms and gazes to heaven. In the background are two vignettes from the Passion: Christ before Pilate, and the denial of St. Peter. However, this does not feel an overtly religious piece, rather a captivating and subtle portrayal of regret.

The present work dates to c. 1564-1568, when Key was still a member of Willem Key's (c.1515/16–1568) workshop. It certainly relates to Willem, and their work is often hard to distinguish. However, details such as the dirt under the fingernail of St. Peter's left thumb, suggests that the painting is from the hand of Adriaen. This small detail is absolutely typical of Adriaen who, as Koenraad Jonckheere explains, 'explicitly presented saints - like Caravaggio would later also do - as very human, indeed, with dirt under their nails, and filthy, bare feet'.[1]

There are two other versions of St. Peter Penitent, by Michel Coxcie I (1499-1592), which although inferior to the present in terms of quality, do demonstrate the significant impact Coxcie's work had on Key's development. Key probably came into contact with Coxcie whilst studying as a pupil of the glass

painter Jan Hack.[2] The present work is not an isolated instance of Key copying Coxcie's paintings. For example Key's *Cain and Abel* (Zanchi Collection, Switzerland),[3] is a copy of Coxcie's treatment of the same subject in the Prado[4]. Much of Key's understanding of Italian Renaissance principles seem to have derived from Coxcie's art, and as Jonckheere remarks 'Coxcie's influence is clearest in Key's juvenilia'.[5] Therefore the present work seems to serve as a fascinating link between Adriaen Thomasz. Key, Willem Key, and Coxcie.

Adriaen Thomasz. was trained by Willem Key, and was a part of his workshop for many years. Traditionally it was thought that Adriaen was a relation of his master but it is now known that his family name was Thomasz. Adriaen only adopted the name Key after he took over his master's workshop in 1568, because of the advantages of aligning his work with a long-established and successful painter. In effect 'He thus used the name 'Key' to brand his art'.[6]

Although his art was firmly rooted in the tradition of Willem, Adriaen developed his own style, arguably surpassing the work of his master. Although he is justifiably considered one of the great Antwerp portraitists, a genre which makes up ninety percent of his preserved oeuvre, he also painted numerous religious scenes, such as the present example, in which he developed the pre-existing ideas of Willem, and Coxcie. However, after Calvinists took over the administration of Antwerp in 1579, production of altarpieces ceased, and the demand for mythological or devotional work must have been minimal.

[1] Jonckheere, K., *Adriaen Thomasz. Key (c. 1545-c. 1589): Portrait of a Calvinist Painter* (Brepols, Turnhout, 2007), p.41.
[2] Ibid., p.44.
[3] Ibid., cat. no. A.103.
[4] Inv. No. P01518
[5] Jonckheere, p.44.
[6] Jonckheere, K., 'Supply and Demand: Some Notes on the Economy of Seventeeth-Century Connoisseurship', in *Art Market and Connoisseurship: A Closer Look at Paintings by Rembrandt, Rubens and their Contemporaries,* ed. Tummers, A. & Jonckheere, K. (Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2008), p. 72.

Artist description:

Adriaen Thomasz. Key was a Flemish painter. His oeuvre consists of portraits and altarpieces, devotional paintings and chiaroscuro prints.

After a short and successful artistic career in a turbulent period, Adriaen Thomasz. Key vanished from the stage for centuries. Barring his art, he left few other traces behind and over time even this came to be riddled with the most far-fetched attributions. In the past, connoisseurs were often at a complete loss. Key's pictures were ascribed to a host of painters from numerous countries and periods. The names of Frans Pourbus the Elder (c.1545-1581) and Willem Key (c.1515-1568), for instance, were linked to several of Key's panels. Other works had to endure attributions which had nothing in common with the quality, let alone the art, of the master. Dozens of inferior portraits were given to Key and many of his altarpieces and devotional scenes were not recognised as such because he was considered solely as a portraitist. Consequently, up until now the image of Key's art has been clouded and inconsistent.

Key richly deserved his reputation as a portraitist. Some ninety percent of his preserved oeuvre consists of likenesses of the Antwerp and the Dutch elite. Key's skills as a portraitist were and are generally acknowledged. With a finesse and sobriety recalling that of Flemish Primitives such as Jan van Eyck (c.1395-1441) and Hans Memling (c.1430-1494), he recorded his sitters with ruthless objectivity. The same sobriety and objectivity are to be found in his altarpieces and devotional paintings, a less known facet of his art. Often incorrectly ascribed as a lack of ingenuity or understanding of the Italian Renaissance and typified as archaising, Key's history and devotional paintings prove to be of a huge intellectual resourcefulness and artistic talent. His art was a conscious, reformatory and humanistic intellectual discourse with his famous predecessors and contemporaries.