

JOOS DE MOMPER II & HANS JORDAENS III

(Antwerp 1564 - Antwerp 1635)

(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)

ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF A QUIANT NETHER-landish 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



Joos de Momper II and Hans Jordaens III, *The Conversion of Saul*,
The Hermitage, St. Petersburg (Figure 1)



Joos de Momper II, *Mountainous Landscape with Figures and a Donkey*,
The Hermitage, St. Petersburg (Figure 2)

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

¹ *John*, 9:1-7





Joos de Momper II and Han Jordaens III, *Large Mountainous Landscape*, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (Figure 3)

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* (fig. 1). 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.



Joos de Momper II, *Monks in a Grotto*, 1620s, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg (Figure 4)



Joos de Momper II and Han Jordaens III, *Christ Healing a Blind Man* (Detail)

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). 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 (fig. 3). 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 (fig. 4). The contrast between this and the careful precision of *Christ Healing a Blind Man* is evident. Again, the Hermitage



Joos de Momper II and Han Jordaens III, *Christ Healing a Blind Man* (Detail)



Joos de Momper II and Han Jordaens III, *Christ Healing a Blind Man* (Detail)

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*, in which Mary nurses her newborn seated against a backdrop of remnants of classical ruins and a steep rocky outcrop jutting into the sky (fig. 5). 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) (fig. 6). Jordaens III has painted



Joos de Momper II, *A Mountainous River Landscape with the Rest on the Flight to Egypt*, Private Collection (Figure 5)



Jasper van der Lanen and Hans Jordaens III, *Finding of Moses*, c.1620, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg (Detail, Figure 6)

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) (see inventory), 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 (see inventory) 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

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