70. Gerbrand van den Eeckhout (Amsterdam 1621 – Amsterdam 1674)

Jacob’s Dream
1672
Oil on canvas, 121.3 X 102.8 cm
Signed and dated lower right: G.V. Eeckhout / A° 1672

Kingston, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, gift of Alfred and Isabel Bader, 2001, acc. no. 44-008

Provenance
John Turner et al. sale (anonymous section), London (Sotheby’s), 6 May 1953, lot 150 (as dated 1652); sale, London (Christie’s), 11 March 1955, lot 170 (as dated 1652); London, collection of Efim Schapiro; An American Corporation et al. sale (Dr. Efim I. Schapiro section), London (Christie’s), 13 July 1979, lot 10 (pl. 5, as dated 1652); purchased by Alfred Bader; Milwaukee, collection of Alfred and Isabel Bader

Literature

Exhibition Catalogues

CHAPTER 28 OF the Book of Genesis tells how Jacob, after having cheated his brother Esau out of his birthright, obeyed his father Isaac’s order to visit his uncle Laban in Padan-aram (in present-day Syria) and there to find himself a wife. During his journey, Jacob “lighted upon a certain place, and tarried there all night, because the sun was set; and he took of the stones of that place, and put them for his pillows, and lay down in that place to sleep.” As he slept, he dreamt that he saw “a ladder set up on the
earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it" (28:11-15). From above the ladder God speaks to Jacob, promising that the land where he is will belong to him and his descendants, the Israelites. When Jacob wakes he builds a pillar from the stones and pours oil on it, calling the place Beth-El (the House of God).

Gerbrand van den Eeckhout depicted this subject on several occasions, in paintings and drawings. The present picture – whose date was wrongly read as 1652 until a cleaning undertaken in 1981, soon after its acquisition for the Bader Collection, revealed it to be 1672 – is thus Van den Eeckhout’s latest surviving painted version of the subject. The earliest painting, today at the Muzeum Narodowe in Warsaw, is dated 1642. Another painted version, dated 1669, can be found at the Dresden Gemäldegalerie.

In all three paintings Van den Eeckhout dispenses with the motif of the ladder, which is mentioned in the Bible and had hitherto been an important iconographic motif in the pictorial tradition for the theme. The artist replaces it with clouds that reach to the ground. The semi-dark setting is in keeping with the textual source, which indicates that the sun had already gone down. Jacob is shown lying stretched out in the foreground, nearly parallel to the picture plane. His head is tilted back, and his slouch hat has almost fallen off. His legs are crossed at the ankles, and a walking stick, his calabash and a bag lie close to his feet. The pose and motif of the hat that has slipped off his head as he sleeps probably derive from a 1602 etching by Jan Pynas, where they appear in reverse.

The angel standing beside Jacob has raised his right hand, as if to protect the sleeping man, and points with his left up toward heaven. This figure displays similarities with Ferdinand Bol’s angel in his painting of Jacob’s Dream, now at the Dresden Gemäldegalerie (fig. 70a). In comparing the figure of the angel in Bol’s painting with Rembrandt’s figure of Christ in his 1642 etching The Raising of Lazarus, Albert Blankert dates Bol’s version of Jacob’s Dream to around the same year. As noted above, 1642 is also the date of Van den Eeckhout’s earliest version of Jacob’s Dream. For the period from around 1640 to 1644 it is possible to detect a close connection between Bol and Van den Eeckhout with regard to their choice of subject matter and their Rembrandtesque painting style. Although both painters were working as independent masters from around 1641, Rembrandt’s influence remained noticeable in their work. Blankert speculates that Rembrandt may have given his two pupils the task of depicting an encounter between a biblical figure and an angel.

For the present painting, Van den Eeckhout made a preparatory red chalk drawing, now in the Staatliches Museum in Schwerin (fig. 70b). Despite slight variations (see, for example, Jacob’s hat) there can be no doubt about the close connection between the drawing and the painting, although the latter seems to have been slightly cut down on the left. In 1984 David McTavish observed that beneath the wings of the second angel, in the background of the painting, there is an earlier figure, with longer and more horizontally positioned wings. These are still visible through the top paint layer. This original set of wings corresponds to that of the same angel in the Schwerin drawing. For stylistic reasons the drawing must be dated to the 1650s. Van den Eeckhout evidently referred back to it for his painting of 1672, altering the wings of the angel in the background in order to give them the same shape as those of the angel dressed in white.

Volker Manuth

2. Gerbrand van den Eeckhout, Jacob’s Dream, 1669, oil on canvas, 118 x 104 cm, signed, Dresden, Gemäldegalerie alte Meister, inv. 1618A; see Volker Manuth in exhib. cat. Melbourne and Canberra 1997-1998, p. 274 (fig. 55a).
5. Ibid., p. 30.