Gerbrand van den Eeckhout (Amsterdam 1621 – Amsterdam 1674)

Tobit, Anna and the Kid
1652
Oil on canvas, 47.6 × 39.4 cm
Signed and dated lower left: G.V. Eeckhout. F. 1652
Milwaukee, collection of Alfred and Isabel Bader

Provenance

Literature
Manuth 2002, p. 235; Manuth 2004, pp. 89-105 (colour ill.)

Exhibition Catalogues
Tokyo 2003, p. 164, no. 70 (colour ill.)

Among the Books of the Apocrypha is the story of the pious but blind and impoverished Tobit, whose wife Anna maintains their household with the income from her spinning. Van den Eeckhout has chosen here to portray the moment when Tobit unjustly accuses Anna of stealing a kid that she actually earned through honest labour (Tobit 2:13). The picture resurfaced in 2000 on the French art market and received its first mention in the art historical literature in 2002.1

The scene is set in a modestly appointed interior featuring wooden beams and a curving staircase that leads to an upper storey obscured in deep shadow. The stone floor visible at the lower left, where steps descend into the cellar, is covered by wooden planks. Anna, holding the kid in her arms, stands in front of a fireplace where the embers burn low. Her gaze is directed at Tobit, who sits in an armchair beside a table decked in red, a walking stick resting against his right knee. Turning toward his wife, he raises a scolding finger. A spinning wheel stands in the right foreground, beside a small fringed stool. The fire in the hearth has virtually no impact on the lighting of the scene, and the figure of Anna is accentuated by a source of illumination at the left.

Representations of the book of Tobit are few in Van den Eeckhout’s oeuvre, although it is otherwise rich in themes from the Old Testament.2 There is no other known example by the artist of the scene presented here, but he evidently took up the theme more than once. This can be deduced from references to thematically related paintings in 18th-century documents. The earliest such reference is to a picture that appeared at an auction in November 1761, in Amsterdam. The description supplied is strongly reminiscent of the present work, but is ultimately too summary to allow for a secure identification. Furthermore, the dimensions given suggest a horizontal format.3 Some years later, in 1770, a painting with a very similar description was included in another Amsterdam sale.4 In addition, a painting of the story of Tobit by Van den Eeckhout – depicting the very same episode as the Bader picture – was listed in the 1764 inventory of the collection of the Berlin factory owner, banker and art dealer Ernst Gotzkowsky. However, a comparison of that work’s and the present picture’s dimensions excludes the possibility that they are one and the same.5 In light of this evidence, it seems very likely that Gerbrand van den Eeckhout represented the Tobit theme several times, just as he did many other biblical scenes that exist in several versions or appear in diverse references in inventories and auction catalogues.

In terms of specific motifs, but also with respect to the figural arrangement – Tobias seated at the left and Anna standing to the right, holding the kid in both arms – the present picture can be related to Rembrandt’s 1626 work Tobit Repenting from Accusing Anna, now in the Rijksmuseum (fig. 67a).6 For his own composition Rembrandt made use of earlier prints, and Jan van de Velde’s etching of around 1619-1620 after Willem Buytewech’s picture on the same theme is repeatedly and justifiably referred to as a source.7 The interior portrayed in the print, with the wooden construction of a peaked roof and a window to the left, along with several other details show a clear correspondence with Rembrandt’s painting. Van den Eeckhout’s setting, on the other hand, is a windowless space whose ceiling and rear wall are cast in deep shadow. There are no stairs in either of the other images, nor any sign of the curved basement entrance seen in the lower left section of the present picture. Tools for producing textiles, such as a spindle, do appear in the Buytewech and the Rembrandt, but neither of these artists includes a spinning wheel like the one that appears here prominently in the foreground.8 When one considers the furniture and other accessories in the three representations, not many parallels emerge. They are limited
to books (in the Buytewech and Rembrandt on the shelf on the back wall, in the Van den Eeckhout on the table), and a string of onions, which hangs in Van den Eeckhout’s painting to the left of the fireplace. Common to all three depictions, however, is the opposition of the two old people, with Tobit seated to the left of the standing Anna.

The narrative moment selected by Van den Eeckhout differs from both the Buytewech and the Rembrandt. With Buytewech, the direct and heated confrontation between the married couple dominates the scene. Rembrandt, by contrast, has represented the prayer of the desperate old man related in Tobit 3:1: “Then I being grieved did weep, and in my sorrow prayed.” Van den Eeckhout has chosen the earliest moment in the chain of events. Anna gazes in astonishment at the aged Tobit, who raises his left hand in reproach and thus underscores his words: “From whence is this kid? Is it not stolen? Render it to the owners; for it is not lawful to eat any thing that is stolen” (Tobit 2:13). It is notable that Van den Eeckhout, unlike Rembrandt, avoided dressing Tobit in worn-out clothes as a sign of his impoverished state. There is no doubt that in his orchestration of light and his contrasting of illuminated figures against a background cast in shadow, Van den Eeckhout was employing Rembrandtesque stylistic devices, but this does not necessarily mean that he was familiar with Rembrandt’s painting of 1626. The light, colourful scheme of Rembrandt’s work, which clearly reveals the influence of his teacher Pieter Lastman, is quite different from Van den Eeckhout’s reduced palette, in which brown, grey and greenish tones dominate.

Nevertheless, despite the differences between the two ver-