

47 Gideon's Sacrifice

early 1650s, oil on canvas,
128 × 94 (50 3/4 × 37). Private
collection

Inscription

False signature at the lower
left: *Rembrandt. f. 1 (6?)*

Provenance

Art market, Rome 1995 (as
Savoldo)

AS DESCRIBED IN THE BOOK OF Judges (6:11–21), an angel one day appeared to Gideon, the youngest son of an Israelite farmer, as he sat under an oak tree at Ophrah. Told that the Lord wanted him to rescue his people from their enemies, Gideon demurred and asked for a sign of God's favor. He prepared an offering of a young goat and unleavened cakes, then presented his gifts to the angel, who directed him to place them on a rock: "With the tip of his staff... the angel of the Lord touched the meat and the unleavened bread. Fire flared from the rock, consuming the meat and the bread."

This impressive canvas, unknown to scholars until recently, turned up on the art market in Rome in 1995 as a work by the Italian Renaissance painter Savoldo. A tentative attribution to Jan Lievens by the present owner was confirmed by Werner Sumowski, who dated the painting to the early 1650s.¹ Lievens combined elements in this painting from different periods of his career. The full-bearded Gideon is reminiscent of the kneeling Abraham in

two depictions of the Sacrifice of Isaac from the 1630s (see cat. 41 and Wheelock fig. 17), as are the heavy folds in the drapery of Gideon's robe.² Yet the restrained gestures and muted emotions of the participants as well as the sophistication of the color scheme — with its contrast between the flaming red of the angel's drapery and the silvery shimmer of Gideon's garment — point to the 1650s. This dating is supported by the angel's elegant, almost classical facial type, comparable to figures in Lievens' mythological and allegorical paintings of the 1650s, including the companions in *Diana at the Hunt* of 1654 at Potsdam (Neues Palais). Trees with similar trunks and foliage can be found in other landscapes that Lievens painted in the 1650s, including *A Woodland Walk* in Edinburgh.³

Gideon's sacrifice is rarely seen in seventeenth-century Dutch art, and most known depictions of the subject are by artists associated with Rembrandt in the 1640s. Ferdinand Bol painted his version in 1641, followed by at least three paintings and a number of drawings by Gerbrand van den Eeckhout.⁴ Despite his modest family background, Gideon appears in

Lievens' painting clothed in elegant fabric decorated with a pattern of yellow golden flames that correspond to the flames engulfing the burnt offering before him.

This is the only known painting of Gideon by Lievens, thus it is likely the same one mentioned in a document related to financial transactions between Lievens and Herman Becker, an Amsterdam shipping merchant who was also a moneylender.⁵ Becker counted a number of artists among his debtors, including Lievens and Rembrandt, and he was willing to accept paintings as pledges for the loans. Between May 1667 and October 1668 Lievens borrowed 400 guilders, using four paintings as security, one of them identified as a "Gideon."⁶ When Becker died in 1678, an inventory of his possessions included 231 paintings,⁷ but *Gideon* was not among the six paintings by Lievens in the list. Thus the artist was apparently able to redeem this painting by paying back that debt. VM

