

# A Surprising and Diverse Life: Joachim Wtewael (1566–1638)

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AT THE TURN OF THE seventeenth century, Joachim Wtewael was at the height of his powers. He was blessed. His business endeavors brought him prosperity; he was married, had two sons, and his paintings were acquired by the leading collectors of his time. Melchior Wyntgis, for one, was the proud owner of a small, gleaming jewel on copper depicting Vulcan surprising Mars and Venus in flagrante delicto. This information comes from Karel van Mander's *Schilder-boeck* of 1604, which is the most important source on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century painters of the Netherlands.<sup>1</sup> Van Mander not only knew Wyntgis — an exceptionally influential figure in the art market who lived up to Van Mander's ideal of a legendary Maecenas — but also dedicated *Het Schilder-boeck* to him.<sup>2</sup> The picture by Wtewael in Wyntgis' possession may well have been the version now in the Mauritshuis and dated 1601 (cat. 16). In that same year Wtewael painted his self-portrait and the likeness of his wife Christina (cats. 1, 2). On the plaques behind them he inscribed ages — his, thirty-four, his wife's, thirty-three — and the motto “Not Glory but Remembrance” (*Non gloria sed memoria*), thus immortalizing himself and his wife. The Wtewael coat of arms above the plaque is flanked by two satyrs, each with goat's hooves and a cornucopia between its legs. The cornucopia refers to Wtewael's prosperity, while the cheerfully mischievous woodland creatures allude to his whimsical artistic approach (fig. 1). Wyntgis' picture of the Olympians cavorting is just one example of his playful mind.

Joachim Wtewael, together with Abraham Bloemaert, dominated the Utrecht art scene in the first decades of the seventeenth century. Unlike Wtewael, who was a Calvinist, Bloemaert, a Catholic, was an influential teacher who instilled the rudiments of painting in the hundred pupils who passed through his workshop. Aside from producing a large painted oeuvre, Bloemaert was an excellent draftsman who enjoyed venturing into nature to draw: some 1,700 sheets by him have been preserved. Some of his drawings were engraved for a model book, *De Teeken-konst*, which was first published in about 1650 and was consulted by artists until the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Bloemaert painted on panel and canvas,

but never on copper, a support that Wtewael often used, largely because its smooth surface, which enabled him to render the tiniest details with the finest of brushes, showed his extraordinary craftsmanship to best advantage. Paintings on copper constitute close to a third of Wtewael's entire oeuvre, and virtually all date from the first decade of the seventeenth century.

Joachim Wtewael is considered the last of the great mannerists in the Northern Netherlands. Characterized by the portrayal of an idealized nature, mannerism developed in Italy in about 1525. Realistic proportions in the rendering of human bodies were abandoned in favor of exaggerations in body height, the length of limbs, fingers, and the neck, while heads were rendered in a relatively small scale. These figures, which assume twisted and forced poses, populate mythological, often salaciously erotic scenes. The painter's palette became pastel, setting shades side by side as complementary areas of color: lemon yellow next to lilac next to pink and pale blue. In the second half of the sixteenth century, mannerism grew into an international movement. The most important centers of this style in the Northern Netherlands were Haarlem (with Hendrick Goltzius and Cornelis van Haarlem) and Utrecht (with Wtewael and Bloemaert). The two leading European centers were the school of Fontainebleau, to which Wtewael must have been exposed during his sojourn in France, and the court of Rudolf II in Prague. Wtewael's mannerist style was primarily indebted to Bartholomaeus Spranger, an artist in Rudolf's court whose designs were engraved by Goltzius.

## BIOGRAPHY

Joachim Wtewael was born in Utrecht in 1566.<sup>4</sup> According to Karel van Mander, Joachim's first teacher was his father, the glass painter Anthonis Jansz. When Wtewael was eighteen years old, he was apprenticed for two years to the Utrecht artist Joos de Beer. About 1586 Wtewael set off for Italy and came to Padua, where he found employment with Charles de Bourgneuf de Cucé, the bishop of Saint-Malo (Brittany), with whom he traveled to France



FIG. 1 Wtewael coat of arms (detail of cat. 1)

two years later. Wtewael probably returned home shortly before 1592. He joined the Saddlers' Guild, an umbrella organization to which painters belonged; set up a workshop; and took on his first pupils.<sup>5</sup> Walter Proeys is recorded in his workshop in 1591 or 1592; Henrik de Keyser, a relative of the eminent sculptor and architect of the same name, in 1613; Peter van Winsen in 1614; and Andries van Bochoven — by whom a modest oeuvre has been preserved — much later, in 1624 (cat. 43).<sup>6</sup> Wtewael married Christina van Halen in 1595; their union produced two daughters, Antonetta and Eva, and two sons, Peter and Johan. Wtewael may well have taught the art of painting to Peter and possibly to Johan.<sup>7</sup> The couple also had three other children whose names are not known. The tomb in the Buurkerk was opened for them in December 1600, February 1602, and August 1605.<sup>8</sup> Over the years Wtewael portrayed all four of his surviving children (cats. 4–7); he also made paintings of two of the children who died in birth. These works are listed in the inventories of his heirs.<sup>9</sup> In 1596 Wtewael bought a large house on the east side of the Oudegracht (the present number is 58), where he raised his children and most likely lived until his death.

Wtewael was a successful man of some standing: He amassed great wealth from his flax business. He also bought shares of the United Dutch East India Company, founded in 1602, and owned

a series of bonds, debentures, multiple mortgages, and real estate. He was an orthodox Calvinist (a Counter-Remonstrant) and played an active role in local politics. In 1610 he was a member of the town council, which was in power for three brief months before the council was ousted by other factions in a swift coup. In 1611 he was a founding member of the Utrecht Saint Luke's Guild. In 1618, along with the painter Paulus Moreelse and his elder brother Johan, Wtewael took part in a coup that reinstated the orthodox Calvinists to power in the town council. For their efforts, Stadholder Prince Maurits, who supported the Counter-Remonstrants, rewarded Moreelse and Johan Wtewael with life memberships on the town council. However, because brothers could not serve at the same time, Joachim was appointed only after his brother's death in 1632. Essential to winning this appointment was his membership in the Dutch Reformed Church. He held various ecclesiastical and charitable positions between 1620 and 1630. He was dispenser of the poor box, deacon, and churchwarden of the Jacobikerk, and regent and first warden of the Sint Maartensgasthuis. He died on August 1, and was interred in the family crypt in the Buurkerk.

FIG. 2 Joachim Wtewael, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, c. 1598–1599, oil on canvas, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco (Legion of Honor), 1999.130



#### THE WORKSHOP

The biographical information on Joachim Wtewael comes from Karel van Mander's *Het Schilder-boeck* of 1604 and archival sources. Van Mander was the first to note that Wtewael was a flax dealer as well as a painter. The biographer also expressed surprise that *Pictura* was so well disposed to Wtewael since the artist put painting in second place.<sup>10</sup> The painter and art theorist Joachim von Sandrart, who visited Wtewael several times in Utrecht in 1626, also wrote that he was largely occupied by the flax business,<sup>11</sup> as was his talented eldest son, Peter (cat. 5). About twenty-five paintings constitute Peter's preserved oeuvre, the last one dated 1628, the year his father portrayed him.<sup>12</sup> Johan was depicted in the

pendant; and Eva, their youngest sister, was immortalized in 1628 as well (cats. 6, 7). Joachim's wife Christina died on April 13, 1629, and from that moment he seems to have lost interest in painting; indeed no known paintings by him or by Peter are dated after 1628. Joachim was a member of the town council from 1632, but attended only his first meeting. He stepped down in 1636, "impo- tent ofte onbequaem" (infirm or unfit), in favor of his eldest son.<sup>13</sup> Throughout these years, Joachim must have retained his membership in the Saint Luke's Guild because in 1639, one year after his death, Johan paid the guild dues.<sup>14</sup> Johan continued the workshop and maintained the right to produce and sell paintings through the guild membership. It is not certain, however, that he, like his

FIG. 3 Joachim Wtewael, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, 1598 (cat. 11)



brother, was also a painter.<sup>15</sup> According to guild regulations, a widow was entitled to membership in the guild.<sup>16</sup> In this instance, the privilege seems to have passed to the son, probably Johan, as the eldest was focusing his attention on the flax trade.<sup>17</sup>

Joachim Wtewael's workshop practice is not known, but he must have had assistants help produce reproductions of some of his compositions. Certain pictures seem to have been extremely popular. For instance, ten versions of the *Adoration of the Shepherds* are known; of them, the San Francisco painting (fig. 2) is closest to the prototype dated 1598 (fig. 3). The differences are primarily related to tonal nuances, though occasionally the change

is more dramatic, as in the colors of some of the draperies. Such differences are particularly apparent in the versions of the *Annunciation to the Shepherds* (cats. 24, 25). Recent technical analysis has demonstrated that the colors were originally identical. The old colors can be seen under the new ones, separated by a layer of varnish. The coloration of the two pictures, thus, was the same, but was changed at some point, probably by Joachim himself, to brighter, more pronounced tones: from pink to bright red, from peach to dark blue, from pale blue to pink.<sup>18</sup> That Wtewael kept several of his paintings and was consequently able to work on them anew, emerges from the inventories of his heirs. They mention



FIG. 4 Utrecht?, draw-leaf table, c. 1620–1628, oak, bog oak, and ebony, and a lighter colored wood, Centraal Museum Utrecht, 8465

FIG. 5 Overmantel (with a reproduction of cat. 34) in Aletta's house on Janskerkhof

not only family portraits, but also, for instance, “Een geboorte vanden ouden Wttewael” (A Nativity by the elder Wtewael) and “Corsnacht in groote personagie door Joachim Wtewael” (Nativity with large figures by Joachim Wtewael).<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, whether or not one of these two works is identical to the version dated 1598 (see fig. 3) can no longer be determined. The inventories also cite copies, autograph or not, of works by Joachim Wtewael.<sup>20</sup>

#### LEGACY

The family portraits are Wtewael's most personal artistic statement (cats. 1–7) and remained in his possession until he died. His *Self-Portrait* and the pendant with Christina passed to Peter, the eldest son. His sister Antonetta, who was married to Johan Pater, received the likenesses of remaining family members. Peter, who never married, left the portraits of his parents to Antonetta's daughter Aletta. Via her, the entire group of family portraits passed to the Martens family and ultimately to the Centraal Museum Utrecht, which also preserves two pieces of furniture from Joachim Wtewael's estate: a large cabinet and a draw-leaf table (fig. 4) depicted in Eva's portrait. They graced the house that Aletta built at 16 Janskerkhof, as did the *Woman Selling Vegetables* (cat. 34), which hung there as an overmantel (fig. 5) and later rounded out the inheritance to the museum.

Joachim Wtewael was a brilliant colorist and raconteur, both poignant and witty, and equally masterful in large and small

format.<sup>21</sup> In about 1600 he was touted by Karel van Mander as one of the greatest painters of his time. His pictures were eagerly sought after, and steep prices were paid for them. His brilliant reputation, however, would soon be overshadowed and the period in which he and his contemporaries forged their oeuvres would be perceived as but a prelude to the Golden Age of Dutch painting.<sup>22</sup> This exhibition reasserts Wtewael's importance during an exceptionally intriguing period and reaffirms his place among the finest masters of Northern Netherlandish art.