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Dutch Master Joachim Wtewael Subject of First Monographic Exhibition, on View at National Gallery of Art, Washington, June 28–October 4, 2015



Joachim Anthonisz Wtewael
Perseus and Andromeda, 1611
oil on canvas
180 × 150 cm (70 7/8 × 59 1/16 in.)
framed: 209 × 178 cm (82 5/16 × 70 1/16 in.)
Musée du Louvre, Paris, Département des Peintures, Gift of the Société des Amis du Louvre, 1982
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Washington, DC—The brilliantly colored and highly sensual works by Utrecht master Joachim Wtewael will be showcased in the artist's first monographic exhibition, from June 28 through October 4, 2015, at the National Gallery of Art, Washington. ***Pleasure and Piety: The Art of Joachim Wtewael (1566–1638)*** includes nearly 50 of his finest paintings on canvas, copper, and panel, as well as selected drawings. Ranging from portraits and moralizing biblical scenes to witty mythological compositions, these works underscore the artist's reputation as a remarkable storyteller.

"Wtewael was one of the most important Dutch artists at the turn of the 17th century, but unlike some of his contemporaries—Hendrick Goltzius, Abraham Bloemaert, and Cornelis van Haarlem—Wtewael has not been the subject of a solo exhibition," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art. "This exhibition sheds light on Wtewael's artistic excellence, allowing him to reclaim his rightful place among the great masters of the Dutch Golden Age."

Organization and Support

The exhibition is organized by the Centraal Museum Utrecht; the National Gallery of Art, Washington; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; and the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation. The exhibition was on view at the Centraal Museum from February 21 through May 25, and will be on view in Houston from November 1, 2015, through January 31, 2016.

The exhibition in Washington is made possible by The Exhibition Circle of the National Gallery of Art.

It is supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.

Exhibition Highlights

The exhibition presents the artist's finest works, selected by the curatorial team from the 100 or so known paintings and drawings in private and public collections in Europe and the United States. "Pleasure" and "piety" are constant motifs in these works, which were rendered from the imagination and from life—two approaches to Dutch painting at the time. The exhibition covers three galleries and is organized thematically.

Wtewael painted compelling portraits of family members and close associates, and his ability to capture the likeness and character of a sitter is exceptional. The exhibition opens with pendant portraits (both 1601) of Wtewael and his wife, Christina, on loan from the Centraal Museum Utrecht. In his *Self-Portrait*, Wtewael holds his paintbrushes, while a Latin motto on a wall plaque declares that he seeks "Not Glory, but Remembrance." In her portrait, Christina points to her husband with one hand and holds a prayer book or Bible with the other; a coin scale on the nearby table alludes to her thrifty management of the household. Several other portraits are also on view in the first gallery, along with large-scale biblical and mythological scenes, including *The Death of Procris* (c. 1595–1600) from the Saint Louis Art Museum and *Lot and His Daughters* (c. 1597–1600) from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Nearly one-third of Wtewael's extant paintings are on copper, a smooth shiny support that yields intense luminosity. Popular in the late 16th and early 17th century, paintings on copper appealed to an elite clientele that valued their exquisite delicacy. Wtewael's talent for executing these meticulous, miniature scenes was celebrated by both critics and patrons, including Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II, who owned one work by Wtewael, most likely *The Golden Age* (1605) from the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Among Wtewael's wittiest mythologies are his depictions of Vulcan, god of fire, catching his wife Venus, goddess of love, and Mars, god of war, in bed and exposing their adulterous affair. Though a pious Calvinist, Wtewael depicted the lovers' predicament on several copper sheets. In each of the three versions on view, Vulcan stands next to a lavish bed having just ensnared the couple in a bronze net, while several other gods look on. Small enough to be tucked away, these jewel-like works were kept private and brought out only for those who would appreciate the erotic subject.

Wtewael also made large narrative paintings that focus on a single figure, including the sensuous and evocative *Perseus and Andromeda* (1611) from the Louvre in Paris, and the remarkable *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* (1600) from the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City.

Wtewael made many sophisticated variations of his own compositions, raising questions about his workshop practice. He may have made these versions for his own satisfaction rather than for the market, since a number of his paintings remained in his possession until his death.

Two versions of *The Annunciation to the Shepherds* (made in or about 1606), from the Rijksmuseum and Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, illustrate the passage from the gospel of Luke (2:8–14) in which shepherds, watching their flock by night, are visited by an angel who bears tidings of the birth of Christ. Subtle differences between the two compositions exist, but infrared reflectography made during the recent restoration of the Rijksmuseum picture reveal that the two paintings were initially nearly identical.

The exhibition concludes with a selection of Wtewael's exquisite drawings. Among them is a series of four drawings related to a commission he received to paint 12 glass panels for the town hall of Woerden, west of Utrecht. The series depicts the early stages of the Dutch Revolt, a struggle for independence from Spain dating from 1568 to 1648. The designs on view chronicle the events through the tribulations and triumphs of the Dutch Maiden, the allegorical personification of the Netherlands.

About the Artist

Wtewael's career began in his native Utrecht, where he studied with his father, a glass painter. During an extended period of travel to Italy and France he became inspired by the school of Fontainebleau; Wtewael returned to Utrecht in about 1592 and quickly embraced the international mannerist style—one characterized by extreme refinement, artifice, and elegant distortion. Aside from his artistic career, Wtewael was a successful businessman who amassed great wealth from his flax business, as well as real estate and stock equities. An orthodox Calvinist, Wtewael was a loyal supporter of the House of Orange. He was active in local politics, serving on Utrecht's city council, and was a founding member of the Utrecht artists' guild in 1611.

Throughout his career, Wtewael remained one of the leading proponents of the international mannerist style. His inventive compositions, teeming with choreographed figures and saturated with pastels and acidic colors, retained their appeal even when most other early 17th-century Dutch artists shifted to a more naturalistic manner of painting. Nevertheless, Wtewael's paintings were highly regarded during the Dutch Golden Age, but were largely neglected during later centuries. This exhibition reveals the full scope of Joachim Wtewael's remarkable and fascinating artistic output.

Curators, Catalog, and Related Activities

Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., is the curator of the exhibition at the National Gallery of Art. His fellow curators are Liesbeth M. Helmus, Centraal Museum Utrecht, and James Clifton, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, who is also director of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation. Anne W. Lowenthal, the foremost expert on Wtewael's paintings, is the exhibition's consulting scholar.

Published by the National Gallery of Art and Princeton University Press, the fully illustrated exhibition catalog includes essays by Helmus, Wheelock, Clifton, Lowenthal, and Stijn Alsteens, curator of drawings and prints, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Essays and catalog entries on individual works explore Wtewael's amazingly refined and detailed paintings and drawings, shedding light on his reputation, his life, and the conflicted times—marked by iconoclasm and strife—in which he thrived. The 236-page catalog features 175 illustrations, and is available for purchase in the Gallery Shops in hardcover and softcover. To order, please visit <http://shop.nga.gov/>; call (800) 697-9350 or (202) 842-6002; fax (202) 789-3047; or e-mail mailorder@nga.gov.

General Information

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For additional press information please call or send inquiries to:

Department of Communications
National Gallery of Art
2000B South Club Drive
Landover, MD 20785
phone: (202) 842-6353
e-mail: pressinfo@nga.gov

Anabeth Guthrie
Chief of Communications
(202) 842-6804
a-guthrie@nga.gov

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Curator Biography:

[Author K. Wheelock, Jr.](#)

[Wall Text](#) (PDF 806 KB)

AUDIO/VIDEO

[Press Event: Gustave Caillebotte: The Painter's Eye and Pleasure and Piety: The Art of Joachim Wtewael \(1566–1638\)](#) (Audio)

ONLINE RESOURCES

Exhibition Page:

[Pleasure and Piety: The Art of Joachim Wtewael \(1566–1638\)](#)

PRESS CONTACTS

Anabeth Guthrie
(202) 842-6804
a-guthrie@nga.gov



