Aemulatio

Imitation, emulation and invention in Netherlandish art from 1500 to 1800
Essays in honor of Eric Jan Sluijter

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Contents

8 Preface

10 Fiona Healy
Terminus: Crossing Boundaries in Maarten van Heemskerck's Saint Luke Painting the Madonna in Haarlem

25 Koenraad Jonckheere
Nudity on the Market: Some Thoughts on the Market and Innovations in Sixteenth-Century Antwerp

37 Boudewijn Bakker
Au vif - naar 't leven - ad vivum: The Medieval Origin of a Humanist Concept

53 Ilja M. Veldman
A Display of Ambitions: Isaac Duchemin's Portrait of Jan van der Noot

66 Marion Boers-Goosens
Paintings in Sixteenth-Century Wealthy Interiors: Two Case Studies

76 Mia M. Mochizuki
Seductress of Site: The Nagasaki Madonna of the Snow

89 Huigen Leeflang
'Sine Cerere et Baccho friget Venus' after Bartholomeus Spranger: An Early Parody of Style

103 Barbara Haeger
Rubens’ Singular Tribute to Adam Elsheimer

116 Lyckle de Vries
Painterly Chaos: The Choice of Subject Matter in Dutch Art

126 Ernst van de Wetering
Subordinating Colour to Light and Shadow: Rembrandt’s Fatal Choice?

138 William Worth Bracken
‘So as to give birth to your own inventions, too!’ Rembrandt Transforming Annibale
153  **Eddy de Jongh**  
Van Campen’s ‘White’ versus Lievens’ ‘Black’

166  **Ann Jensen Adams**  
*Aemulatio* of Taste: Thomas de Keyser and the New Classicism of the 1630s

182  **H. Perry Chapman**  
Rembrandt and Caravaggio: A Question of Emulation?

195  **Henk van Os**  
The Painter as a Competitive Reader

208  **Thijs Weststeijn**  
Karel van Mander and Francisco Pacheco

224  **Arjan de Koomen**  
Titus, Titian and Tante Titia: On Rembrandt and Onomastics

233  **Stephanie S. Dickey**  
*Saskia as Glycera*: Rembrandt’s Emulation of an Antique Prototype

248  **Alison M. Kettering**  
Rembrandt and the Male Nude

263  **Susan Donahue Kuretsky**  
Rembrandt’s Cat

277  **Albert Blankert**  
*Rapen* Again: Notes on *Aemulatio* and Plagiarism in Dutch Painting

288  **Margriet van Eikema Hommes**  
‘As though it had been done by just one Master’: Unity and Diversity in the Oranjezaal, Huis ten Bosch

304  **Walter Liedtke**  
Van Dyck’s ‘Influence’ in the Dutch Republic

318  **Amy Golahny**  
Rembrandt’s *Callisto Bathing*: Unusual But Not Unique

326  **Celeste Brusati**  
Painting at the Threshold: Competition and Conversation in Perspective
342 Marten Jan Bok
Van Goyen as Burgher of Delft? Jan Steen and the Moralistic Mode

358 Frauke Laarmann
Abraham and the Angels

371 Ronni Baer
Dou’s Nudes

382 Elmer Kolfin
Omphalos Mundi: The Pictorial Tradition of the Theme of Amsterdam and the Four Continents, circa 1600-1665

393 Frans Grijzenhout
Michiel van Musscher and Bartholomeus van der Helst: Theft of Honour or Creative Imitation?

407 Adriaan E. Waiboer
A Clean Competition: Some Hypotheses on Vermeer’s Lost Gentleman Washing His Hands

419 Emilie E. S. Gordonker
Standing at the Crossroad: Arnold Houbraken on the Career of Jan de Baen

429 Anna Tummers
The Painter Versus His Critics: Willem van Nijmegen’s Defense of his Art

442 Jacquelyn N. Coutré
‘Schoenmaaker blyft by uw leest’: On a Case of Emulation in Gerard de Laresse’s Groot Schilderboek

454 Charles Dumas
Improving Old Master Drawings by Aert Schouman (1710-1792)

471 Bibliography of Eric Jan Sluijter
474 Photo Credits
476 Index
481 Color plates
512 Colophon
Rembrandt’s *Callisto Bathing*: Unusual But Not Unique

Amy Golahny

Rembrandt’s 1654 painting of a woman lifting her chemise as she wades in a calm pool has been recently and most convincingly interpreted as a portrayal of the nymph Callisto alone, on the basis of the rich clothing that suits Diana’s handmaid, the rustic setting, and the figure’s extreme modesty (fig. 1, color plate 22). However, neither the ramifications of this identification nor the imagery related to it have been developed. This brief essay brings associated works into the discussion, in order to examine the visual tradition for this subject and its broader implications within the oeuvre of Rembrandt (1606 -1669). In so doing, this discussion amplifies and deepens Rembrandt’s engagement with Italian art. Despite his famous refusal to travel south of the Alps, he consistently demonstrated in his work a keen awareness of Italian art, not only from the Renaissance but also of his own time.

A close reading of the Ovidian text supports the identification of Rembrandt’s painting as a depiction of a solitary Callisto bathing in a rustic setting. As first attendant to Diana, Callisto is the most beautiful of all the goddess’ nymphs, who are to remain virgins or be cast out of her entourage. Jupiter, seeing Callisto alone in the woods and smitten by her beauty, knew of her loyalty to Diana, and thus seduced her in the form of the goddess. Callisto resisted Jupiter’s advances and was miserably conflicted and shamed after he raped her. For nine months Callisto refused to bathe with the nymphs, but finally they tore off her clothes to reveal her pregnancy and she was banished from Diana’s entourage. After Callisto gave birth to the boy Arcas, the jealous Juno turned her into a bear. Arcas became a hunter and took aim at the bear who was his mother, whereupon Jupiter intervened and turned both mother and son into constellations, *ursa major* and *ursa minor.*

Rembrandt’s painting is not a depiction of a moment in the Ovidian
text, but an imaginative addition to it. I suggest that it presents the pregnant Callisto bathing privately, so that the other nymphs do not see her condition. This contrasts with the Rembrandt Corpus, where it is proposed that the moment represented follows Callisto’s banishment from Diana’s entourage, and after she has given birth to her son. After having given birth, Callisto had no need for such timidity, or for such richly brocaded clothes.

As Callisto alone, Rembrandt’s painting has been considered a unique rendering of this subject. Evidence suggests at least two earlier representations. A lost painting by Guido Reni (1591-1642) is known from a poem by Giambattista Marino, and a Dutch 1622 inventory lists another ‘Callisto Bathing’ without naming the artist. In his La Galeria of 1620, Marino describes Reni’s painting of a sad Callisto, who has a hidden wound from Jupiter’s molestation:

Do not languish, little Virgin
Discovering at the sacred spring
The deceit of the celestial adulterer,
Who stripped your clothes off by force;
Who shows you the beautiful appearance [of Diana]
in the pool, in the wood, and in the Sky
With human form, and with brutal veil,
And with immortallight [you are] always more beautiful
And Nymph, then Bear, and Star.

Marino’s sympathy for Callisto proceeds from Reni’s image, which apparently showed a thoughtfully expressive woman in a landscape. Callisto is the innocent victim of Jupiter’s subterfuge and violence. As Callisto realizes the depth of Jupiter’s deceit, she also becomes aware of the transformations that await her, into bear and star. Marino’s poem counsels Callisto: ‘Do not be sad, for you will become immortal in the heavens’. Although this is small consolation for Callisto at the time she mourns her lost virginity, it provides the glorious conclusion to her story.

Rembrandt would surely have known Marino’s collection of poems on paintings and sculptures. One of Marino’s poems was on Rubens’ (1577-1640) Hero and Leander, a version of which Rembrandt himself owned between 1637-1644; significantly, of all Marino’s poems, it was the one on Hero and Leander that was translated into Dutch by Joost van den Vondel, perhaps a reflection of the fame of Rubens’ painting in Amsterdam. By 1651, the painting - presumably that from Rembrandt’s own collection - was owned by Pieter Six, and again the subject of a poem, this one by
Jan Vos. The painting thus was owned by two of the most discerning collectors in Amsterdam, and received three poetic accolades.\(^5\)

The second painting, explicitly titled *Callisto Bathing*, belonged to Joan Huydecoper I. As a young man of 23, he had already amassed a significant painting collection, which was inventoried in 1622, after the untimely death of his first wife, and he went on to purchase works by Rembrandt and other foremost artists. The 5 most highly valued paintings of the 14 listed were a large untitled Moeyaert, f 350; Veronese’s *Europa*, f 250; and unattributed paintings of *The Flood*, f 145, *Adam and Eve*, f 134; and *Callisto Bathing*, f 130.\(^6\) Whoever made Huydecoper’s *Callisto Bathing*, that artist fits into a select frame of references: Marino and Reni. It is tempting, but speculative, to posit that the painting owned by Huydecoper might be a version by Reni, whose works were in Dutch collections.

Grand paintings by Reni were in the Dutch Republic by at least circa 1615. Michiel Wyntgis, an immigrant from Deventer who lived in Middelburgh, owned a large *Judith* that appears in his inventory of 1618, and of which many copies are known.\(^7\) Samuel Godijn, a merchant who had a significant art collection in Amsterdam, owned two grand pendants by Reni, now untraced, *Sophonisba and Massinisa* and *Sophonisba Drinking Poison*, according to his inventory of 1633. Jacomo Noirot’s 1638 inventory included a Reni painting of two wrestling cupids. A Reni *Susanna and the Elders* belonged to Gerard Reynst. The 1673 inventory of Maria Anna Lenarts included two Reni paintings, one of wrestling cupids and another of *Susanna and the Elders*, both possibly versions of those in the Noirot and Reynst collections.\(^8\)

These two references to lost paintings of Callisto, one by Reni described by Marino and the other unnamed, indicate works well within Rembrandt’s circle. Rembrandt certainly would have been aware that Marino’s poem would enhance the value of his own Rubens painting of *Hero and Leander*. Huydecoper can be considered a patron of Rembrandt as he bought a painting by the artist in 1628.\(^9\) It stands to reason that Rembrandt would have been familiar with his art collection. The Veronese *Europa* in Huydecoper’s collection was presumably a version of that in the Palazzo Ducale, Venice, and seems to have furnished Rembrandt with an appealing model for the woman bending over, spilling wine from a goblet, in his *Belshazzar’s Feast* of 1636.\(^10\) If Rembrandt viewed Huydecoper’s collection by the mid-1630s, he may have revisited it later, or simply recalled its *Callisto Bathing*, as a visual prompt for his own 1654 portrayal of the nymph.

As bathing nudes of 1654, with robes placed aside, the *Callisto Bathing* and *Bathsheba Contemplating David’s Letter* are crafted with the loaded
impasto of a limited palette, and present the range of Rembrandt’s brushwork, from freshly applied pigment in long strokes to layered and textured paint (fig. 2). These paintings complement one another in pictorial organization: Bathsheba, seated in profile, is planar and motionless, Callisto, wading in water, walks forward on a diagonal. Long recognized as a guide both formal and thematic for Rembrandt’s Bathsheba is François Perrier’s (1584/1590-1650/57) print after a small marble relief in Rome (then in the Della Valle collection, and now in Palazzo Altemps) (fig. 3). Perrier’s nude was published in his Icones et Segmenta in 1645, with the inscription from Apuleius that identifies the veiled woman as Psyche: ‘The girl who is to be a bride wipes away her tears with her wedding veil’ (Apuleius 4).11 The story of Psyche, a woman exploited by men, resonates thematically with the circumstances of Bathsheba and Callisto.

Psyche’s narrative parallels the circumstances of both Bathsheba and Callisto in that she is forced to associate with a male against her better judgment or will. Psyche’s complicated life appears in Apuleius’ Golden Ass, a compilation of metamorphoses of various characters. Leading to
the happy ending of Cupid’s union with Psyche among the gods is a series of near-death experiences for poor Psyche, each of which is emotionally fraught with tests of her own character and her love for Cupid. Instigating her trials is Venus, who is jealous of Psyche’s beauty and of Cupid’s love for her. The line identifying the Perrier relief as Psyche refers to her impending marriage to an evil serpent on a remote mountain, a consequence of her father’s consultation with an oracle. Psyche unhappily prepares for her marriage as for a funeral. Apuleius’ book appeared in Latin editions throughout Europe, and was translated into English, Spanish, Italian, German, and French in the sixteenth century. Two slightly different Dutch translations appeared in 1608 and 1636.\(^{12}\)

Perrier’s two collections of prints after the antique (Statuen of 1637 and Icones of 1645) were owned by the foremost Amsterdam art collectors, and likely owned by Rembrandt.\(^ {13}\) Rembrandt’s adaptation of Perrier’s miserable bride for the pose of Bathsheba with servant was not an arbitrary use of a pose for its own sake. Psyche provided the background for a woman facing an imminent, forced, and unhappy union. Bathsheba
considered the consequences of David’s summons and her subsequent adultery, whether or not she could foresee her husband’s death in battle and the death of the newborn baby conceived with David. Similarly, there is a resonance between Psyche’s travails and her ultimate acceptance by the gods, and Callisto, whose ravishment by Jupiter leads to banishment, near murder by her own son, and finally, elevation to the heavens.

In 1654 Hendrickje was pregnant with Cornelia, and was called before the church authorities. Eric Jan Sluijter has explored the moral and erotic implications of David’s lust for Bathsheba, her obedience to him, and the consequences for both. If Rembrandt serves as David in the narrative of Bathsheba, then he may also serve as Jupiter in the narrative of Callisto. Callisto was raped by Jupiter through the god’s deception, and against her will and better judgment, just as David commanded Bathsheba and she, also against her better judgment, obeyed David. Callisto was chaste until deceived by Jupiter who ultimately conferred immortality upon her and her son, just as David legitimized his affair with Bathsheba by first killing off her husband and then marrying her. Bathsheba is virtuous and loyal to her husband until David enters the scene, and Callisto is chaste until Jupiter deceives her. Ovid’s sympathy for Callisto is apparent in her modesty, sincerity, and thoughtfulness. As David/Jupiter, Rembrandt regards Bathsheba/Callisto with lechery and sympathy, at the same time. He is both the lover of the women he compromises, and portrayer of a single woman in a moment that conveys the larger narrative; in both Bathsheba and Callisto, he captures a range of emotions, in a single figure, that in the original texts are revealed through time.

Two approaches belong to the discourse on art in the seventeenth century: referring to other’s inventions to show wit, and crafting novel inventions to surpass them. That Rembrandt did both has been well established. Rembrandt appropriated from both northern and Italian artists, repeatedly and purposefully, as his own challenge to surpass his predecessors. Indeed, where Rembrandt seems to craft a unique invention, we may well suspect that he was prompted by an earlier image or text. By depicting Callisto bathing alone, Rembrandt followed precedent in the work of Reni, which he would have known from Marino’s literary description. And, by recognizing his dialogue with both visual and literary precedents, we may gain a better grasp on the wide and deep range of his associations.
Notes
1 J. Leja, 'Rembrandt's Woman Bathing in a Stream', Simiolus, 24 (1996), 321-327. The painting has been called Hendrickje Bathing (G. Schwartz, Rembrandt, his Life, his Paintings, New York 1985, 295); Hendrickje Bathing in a River (C. Tümpel, Rembrandt, Antwerp 1993, 265); A Woman Bathing in a Stream (D. Bomford et al., Art in the Making: Rembrandt, 2nd ed., London 2006, 138; Bathing Woman (so called 'Hendrickje'), (E.J. Sluijter, Rembrandt and the Female Nude, Amsterdam 2006, 330); or Unchastity (A.W.G. Poseq, 'Rembrandt's Obscene Woman Bathing', Source 19 (1999), 30-38). In A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings: The Small-Scale History Paintings, vol. 5, Dordrecht 2010, no. 19, the painting is titled A Woman Wading in a Pond (Callisto in the Wilderness) and interpreted to represent Callisto after her banishment from Diana's entourage. I am grateful to Ernst van de Wetering for kindly making this text available to me; it analyses the painting as representing Callisto according to Van Mander, when she is alone in the wilderness following her banishment from Diana's sacred spring, and also, presumably, following the birth of her son.
2 Ovid, Metamorphoses II: 401 ff. See Johannes Floriusianus, Metamorphosis, (...), Antwerp 1615, 27 ff. Ovid explicitly states that nine months passed from Jupiter's rape of Callisto to the time of Diana's suggestion that the nympha, out hunting, should bathe together, the event resulting in Callisto's banishment. Implicit in the Ovidian text is that poor Callisto did not bathe during these nine months.
3 Corpus, vol. 5 (n. 1).
4 G.B. Marino, La Galeria, Venice 1620, 19: Callisto di Guido Reni
Non languir Verginella,
Scoprendo al fonte sacro
Spogliata à forza de la propria veste,
L'inganno de l'adultero celeste;
Che l'ago simulaco Ti mostra, e nel laucro,
E nel bosco, e nel Cielo.
Con forma humana, e con ferino velo,
E con luce immortal sempre piu bella
E Ninfa, & Orsa, e Stella.
I thank Giancarlo Maiorino for emending my translation. Marino's Galeria was known in Amsterdam, as Vondel translated its Hero and Leander by Rubens, before 1650; see A. Golahny, 'Rubens' Hero and Leander and its Poetic Progeny', Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin (1990), 20-37. And as Rembrandt owned a version of Rubens' Hero and Leander, during the years 1637-1644, he would have been well informed about Marinos collection of poems on art works.
6 Schwartz, op. cit. (n. 1), 138.
8 The Montias Database: Inventories of Amsterdam Art Collections, Frick Art Reference Library, Inventory of Samuel Godijn, inv. no. 1123,0015 and 0016. I thank Richard Spear for confirming that Reni's Sophonisba pendants and Callisto Bathing are not known. For the Jacomo Noirot document, see The Montias Database, inv. no. 227,0004; for the Reynst collection, see A.-M.S. Logan, The ‘Cabinet of the Brothers Gerard and Jan Reynst, Amsterdam/Oxford/New York 1979, 139, cat. 23; for the Lenarts inventory, see The Montias Database, inv. no. 1264,0001.
9 Schwartz, op. cit. (n. 1), 134.
13 Both Perrier volumes were owned by Filipps De Fliens; for his library and art collection, see A. Golahny, Rembrandt’s Reading, Amsterdam 2003, 31. Jan Six owned two copies of Perrier’s Statuen (1637) and one of the Icones (1645), as listed in his Catalogus of art, Amsterdam 1702, under bound volumes of prints, 18, nos. 22-24.
14 Household parallels are discussed by Carroll, op. cit. (n. 11).
15 Sluijter, op. cit. (n. 1), 355.