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Hendrick Munniks,  
*Hercules Freeing Prometheus*

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HENDRICK MUNNIKS  
(Active in Utrecht, c. 1624-1643)

## *HERCULES FREEING PROMETHEUS*

Oil on canvas.  
172.5 x 218 cm.; 68 x 85 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in.

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Provenance

Private Collection.

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The discovery of this beautifully preserved mythological painting, commanding in scale and drama, sheds new light on the impact of Caravaggio's manner in the Northern Netherlands. It constitutes the highlight of the early career of Hendrick Munniks, who, after a brief sojourn in Rome, became a successful painter in Utrecht and The Hague (ca. 1623/24-1648).<sup>1</sup>

Prior to the discovery of the present work, most of our knowledge about Hendrick's early career relied on archival sources and just a few signed paintings.

In 1624, Munniks is still listed among the pupils of Abraham Bloemaert, while in 1633 he is registered as a master painter himself.<sup>2</sup> Eleven years later, he joined the painters' guild in The Hague. He enjoyed high esteem among the art lovers of his time. In 1643, he received 120 guilders from Stadholder Frederik Hendrik for a painting of Venus. Furthermore, the militia of The Hague asked Munniks to paint a group portrait for which it was agreed that he would receive the high sum of 900 guilders.<sup>3</sup>

The stylistic roots of Munniks's early work are to be found in Rome. Munniks seems to have been one of the early members of the society of Netherlandish artists in Rome known as the *Schildersbent*. On one of the drawings with portraits of the *Bentveughels* (Hamburg, Kunsthalle), datable around 1622, we find a portrait of "Monaco van Utrecht" who can almost certainly be identified with Hendrick Munniks. Indeed, two signed works from his Utrecht years clearly betray the impact of the art of Caravaggio and his followers: the *Laughing Democritus*, now in the Cobbe Collection at Hatchlands Park (fig. 1),<sup>4</sup> and the painting of a *Fluteplayer*, formerly offered for sale in Paris at Beaussant & Lefèvre, 11 June 2010, lot 20 (fig. 2).<sup>5</sup> These works bear highly distinctive stylistic and technical characteristics, which can also be found in the painting under discussion.

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<sup>1</sup> Between 1646 and 1648, Munniks's career took a drastic turn. In 1646, shortly after the death of his wife, he sold many of his household effects. In 1648, he entered the service of the Swedish diplomat and military commander Magnus Gabriel De la Gardie. Once in Stockholm (1650/51-1664) he also worked for Queen Christina and the local aristocracy. He became known as a portrait painter under the name Hendrick Munnichhoven Erik Steneberg, *Kristinatidens måleri*, Malmö 1955, pp. 159-174. Several archival sources confirm that Munniks continued his career in Sweden under the name Munnichhoven, for instance a record in the Utrecht archives dated 25-10-1669, concerning Hendrick Munniks's heirs. In Stockholm, Munniks painted many portraits that are close in style to the portraits by (the late) Honthorst. In 1652, when Munniks had joined the Swedish court, an inventory was made up that records several mythological works by "Munickhoven", including *Hercules*, *Venus and Cupid*, a *Nude Venus* and *Mars*, clearly reflecting the Italian influence of his artistic environment in Utrecht.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Muller, *Schilders-vereenigingen te Utrecht. Bescheiden uit het Gemeente-archief*, Utrecht 1880, pp. 118, 121.

<sup>3</sup> Edwin Buijsen et al., *Haagse schilders in de Gouden Eeuw. het Hoogsteder Lexicon van alle schilders werkzaam in Den Haag, 1600-1700*, Zwolle 1998, p. 331.

<sup>4</sup> Benedict Nicolson, *Caravaggism in Europe*, Turin 1990, p. 51, pl. 1361.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51, pl. 1362.

# COLNAGHI

In the well-preserved picture of *Democritus*, Munniks proves his competence in depicting the nude and in conveying the tension of the muscles of the limbs. The smooth modelling of Democritus' left arm is achieved with a particular technique. Munniks works from light to dark: the lighter areas of the skin are confidently painted, while the deeper shadows are applied in brown hues on top of the skin tones. At close examination the shadowed areas are composed of even patches of brown paint. The borders are abrupt and irregular, but the optical effect tends to be smooth. Munniks's handling of light, i.e. his application of lighter and darker pigments to achieve effects of chiaroscuro, is thus distinctive from anything by Honthorst or Baburen.

The same technique is used – but on a larger scale and with greater *bravura* – for the modelling of the (semi)nude, muscular bodies of Hercules and of Prometheus, who lays outstretched naked on a rock, chained by the wrists and ankles. When it comes to depicting hair or animal skin (notably Hercules's lion skin), Munniks's brushwork becomes looser. The beard and hair of Democritus and that of Hercules and Prometheus are painted in a spirited manner. The brushwork appears lively in contrast to the smoothness of the skin areas.

Further evidence in favour of the attribution of *Hercules Freeing Prometheus* to Munniks is provided by the stylistic similarities of the present painting with the picture of a *Fluteplayer*, which also bears the artist's signature. The elements that connect both pictures are the characteristic handling of the sharper creases of the skin – as can be seen around Hercules's right armpit, in the hero's hands, and in the palm of the flute player – as well as the sharp definition with subtle highlights of Hercules's wooden quiver filled with arrows and the flute player's instrument.

Apart from the peculiar handling of the powerful chiaroscuro, and the characteristic rendering of the details described above (the hair, the creases of the skin, the shiny wooden objects), the three pictures also share a restricted palette, which may be considered typical for the artist in this stage of his career. In the present picture only the blue ribbon that crosses Hercules's breast and the one around the quiver provide colour accents. Munniks uses a blue colour that recalls certain works by Gerard van Honthorst from the 1620s and 1630s. The rest of the painting is largely done in neutral or earth tones.

*Hercules Freeing Prometheus* must have been among Hendrick Munniks's most ambitious works, and it reveals the artist's mastery over a large and complex composition, heroic nudes, and the portrayal of human emotions.

# COLNAGHI

The subject was particularly challenging for any seventeenth-century painter. In the Renaissance and early Baroque the story of Prometheus was considered highly appropriate to illustrate one's ability in rendering monumental figures in complex foreshortenings. This is the central idea behind works depicting the *Punishment of Prometheus* by artists like Pieter Paul Rubens and Jusepe de Ribera.<sup>6</sup>

As to the Northern Netherlands, it is significant that nearly all of the early seventeenth-century Dutch paintings of Prometheus originated in Utrecht.<sup>7</sup> The most important work is Dirck van Baburen's large canvas in the Rijksmuseum, signed and dated 1623.<sup>8</sup> With remarkable inventiveness and subtle wit, Baburen tells the story of the *Chaining of Prometheus*. His portrayal of the story presupposes a close reading of Lucian's satirical recasting of the myth.<sup>9</sup> Around 1634-38, Paulus Moreelse, painted a *Prometheus Bound* (fig. 3), in which the giant is presented as a half-figure while the eagle picks his liver (Utrecht, Centraal Museum). Another depiction of *Prometheus Bound* is still in its original location in the city of Utrecht. The painting – tentatively attributed to Petrus Portengen by Paul Huys Janssen – bears an inscription on the frame stating that it was presented in 1643 to the Sint Eloyen Gasthuis (the hospice for the old members of the Smiths' Guild) by the guild's deacons and housemaster. Further evidence of the popularity of the theme of the punishment of Prometheus (or Tityus) among the painters of the Utrecht school is provided by a number of sketches and drawings by Abraham Bloemaert.

Most seventeenth-century painters focused on the theme of the punishment or suffering of Prometheus. Instead, Hendrick Munniks chose (or was asked) to depict the moment when Hercules frees Prometheus. This episode is described in the so-called *Bibliotheca*. Hercules wandered into the Caucasus region seeking for the apples of the Hesperides: "... And having crossed to the opposite mainland he shot on the Caucasus the eagle, offspring of Echidna and Typhon, that was devouring the liver of Prometheus, and he released Prometheus, after choosing for himself the bond of olive, and to Zeus he presented Chiron, who, though immortal, consented to die in his stead."<sup>10</sup> The theme of the *Freeing of Prometheus* appears to be unique in Dutch painting. The pictorial roots for the present work lay mainly in Italian art. The prostrate position of the dramatically foreshortened Prometheus, with arms stretched out wide, constitutes an appropriation of one or two Italian prototypes that may have been

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<sup>6</sup> Silke Kurth, *Das Antlitz der Agonie. Körperstrafe im Mythos und ihre barocke Rezeption*, Weimar 2009.

<sup>7</sup> With the exception of the painting by Hendrick Goltzius, dated 1613, that is now in the Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem.

<sup>8</sup> Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. SK-A-1606. Wayne Franits 2013, *The paintings of Dirck Van Baburen, ca. 1592/93 – 1624. Catalogue raisonnée*, Amsterdam 2013, pp. 151-154, no. A30.

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Bikker, 'Lucian's Prometheus as a source for Jordaens and van Baburen', *Simiolus* 32 (2004-5), pp. 46-53

<sup>10</sup> Apollod. II, 120; Hyginus, *Fabulae*, 144.

# COLNAGHI

familiar to the artist. The first and most significant example of the theme of *Prometheus Unbound* can be found in the Galleria Farnese in Rome, painted by Annibale Carracci and his assistants.

The second example is known only through a 17th century description. Joachim von Sandrart writes about a work by Bartolomeo Manfredi in his *Teutsche Academie* of 1675, describing a painting (now lost) that impressed him: Tityus shown in foreshortening chained to the floor of Hades, his chains ripped apart by Hercules, who releases him in defiance of Cerberus.<sup>11</sup>

As often happened, Tityus and Prometheus are being confused. Indeed, it is highly likely that the painting Sandrart saw was actually a Prometheus, since Hercules freed Prometheus, not Tityus. Unfortunately, no visual records are preserved that might help us reconstruct the original appearance of Manfredi's painting. Given the popularity of Manfredi's work among the Northern European artists who stayed in Rome between 1615 and 1625, it is likely that Hendrick Munniks was acquainted with Manfredi's canvas.

However, in terms of style and iconography the present painting clearly betrays its Utrecht origins. What distinguishes this canvas from Annibale Carracci's classicizing rendition of the theme is the human air and less exalted tone that the artist has imparted to the mythological narrative. Munniks deliberately uses the potential of humanizing the classical (semi)gods and heroes. Particularly striking is the robust earthiness of Hercules that distances him from the more idealized mythological figures that inhabit the paintings of the Italian masters. The angular movements of Hercules's legs and arms, the sharp rendering of his muscles and veins, and the naturalistic expression on his face vividly convey the concrete physical effort that he puts into breaking the chains. While Hercules exerts all his strength, he screws up his eyes, presses his lips and his cheeks turn purple. His powers seem to be human rather than supernatural. Hendrick Munniks fully seizes the opportunity to depict the male nude in full action (Hercules) and strong foreshortening (Prometheus), but the tendency towards direct realism and playful satire echoes that of Dirck van Baburen. This strengthens the hypothesis that the canvas was painted in Utrecht in the very years in which this peculiar, naturalistic approach to classical mythology was still *en vogue*, i.e. around 1630-1635.

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<sup>11</sup> Sandrart writes: "In einem andern Gemähl sind ganze Bilder /wie Hercules Hölle dem auf der Erden an Ketten geschmidten / und in Verkürzung ligenden / Titio seine eiserne Bänder zerreisset und ihn erlediget/ zu Trutz des dabey gebildten Cerberus, welches alles mit grosser Verwunderung zu sehen / und billich hoch gelobt und gepriesen wird", see Joachim von Sandrart, *Deutsche Academie der Bau-, Bild- und Mahlerey-Künste*, Nuremberg 1675, p. 190

# COLNAGHI

Munniks appears to have been quite an important painter of mythological subjects in his own time. The present work constitutes an early and therefore highly significant proof of his mastery in this field. As such, it adds to our understanding of the crucial role of the Utrecht *Caravaggisti* in the development of history painting in the Northern Netherlands, in the third and fourth decade of the 17th century.

Gert Jan van der Sman, 20 February 2017.

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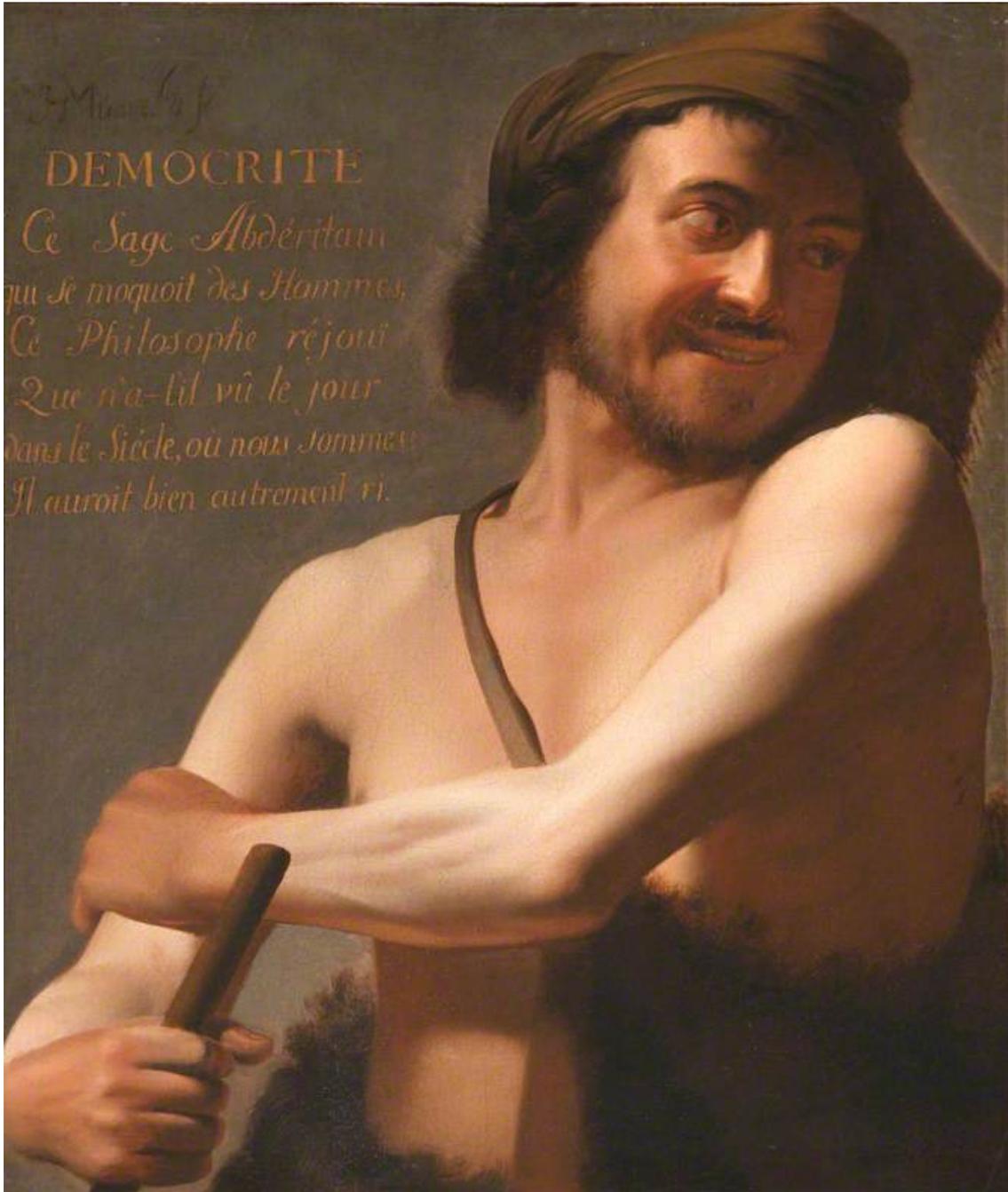


Fig. 1, Hendrik Munniks, *Democritus Laughing*, 1633, oil on canvas, 71 x 60 cm. Hatchlands Park, Cobbe Collection.

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Fig. 2, Hendrick Munniks, *Flutist*, oil on canvas, 80.5 x 64.5 cm.  
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Fig. 3, Dirck van Baburen, *Prometheus being chained by Vulcan*, 1623, oil on canvas, 202 x 184 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

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