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HENDRICK ter BRUGGHEN

(The Hague or Utrecht 1588-1629 Utrecht)

SAINT STEPHEN IN PRAYER

1610-12 *circa*

oil on canvas

72 x 57.5 cm.; 28 1/3 x 22 2/3 in.

Provenance

Koelliker Collection, Italy.

Literature

Gianni Papi, "Il soggiorno italiano di Hendrick Terbrugghen" in *Un misto di Grano e di pula. Scritti su caravaggio e l'ambiente caravaggesco*. Rome 2020, 52.

T. Borgogelli, in *Ter Brugghen. Dall'Olanda all'Italia sulle orme di Caravaggio*. Exh. cat. Modena (Gallerie Estensi) 2023-24, cat. no. 8.

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Together with the *Portrait of a Yong Man* (Galerie Leegenhoek, Paris, **Fig. 1**), this magnificent *Saint Stephen in Prayer* constitutes the entire known nucleus of half-figure paintings produced by the Flemish painter Hendrik ter Brugghen during his little-known, yet extremely formative Italian Period.¹

From about 1605 to 1615, the Dutch ter Brugghen came to Italy, absorbing the lessons of the rich Roman artistic scene. Though he took many sources of inspiration in the city (works by the Carracci, Bartolomeo Manfredi, and his collaborator Giulio Cesare Procaccini), ter Brugghen was most drawn to the work of Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio.² This latter artist's radically new way of modelling form through light and shadow left a strong impression on Ter Brugghen, whose Italian period is marked by dark canvasses with strong highlights. Upon his return to the Netherlands in the latter half of the 1610s, the artist -- along with Gerard van Honthorst and Dirck van Baburen -- became one of the seminal members of the so-called "Utrecht Caravaggisti", a group of Flemish artists who inflected the innovations of Caravaggio in a more northern light, typically concentrating on scenes known with the somewhat outdated term of "genre painting".

This image represents an up-close view of Saint Stephen, the first Christian Martyr, praying whilst being put to death by stoning. The Saint's eyes look up toward a rock that has landed on his forehead after being hurled at him. A pool of blood is discreetly visible on his forehead, realised in such a way as to not distract the viewer from the incredible pathos of his expression.

Beyond having a striking presence, this work represents a crucial *trait d'union* between ter Brugghen's Italian and Dutch period. Scholarship has noted a similarity in the somatic character of the Saint both in earlier works such as the *Adoration of the Shepherds* (Speier collection, London, **Fig. 2**), and paintings produced after the artist returned to the Netherlands, such as *Esau Selling His Birthright* (Gemäldegalerie, Berlin, **Fig. 3**).

This work is unique in ter Brugghen's oeuvre for its textural quality: rather than the pristine volumes usually seen in his paintings (see, for example, his Saint John in the *Crucifixion* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, **Fig. 4**), here, the artist renders the Saint through quick blows of paint to the canvas which guide the eye

¹ For more information of ter Brugghen's recent Italian sojourn, see the catalogue of the recent exhibiton at the Gallerie Estensi: *Ter Brugghen. Dall'Olanda all'Italia sulle orme di Caravaggio*. Exh. cat. Modena (Gallerie Estensi) 2023-24.

² To view Ter Brugghen's work in the context of other caravaggisti, see Benedict Nicholson, *Caravaggism in Europe* (2nd ed.), Rome 1979, 189-96.

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across the composition, letting the viewer contemplate the passion and intensity of emotions expressed.

Tommaso Borgogelli has suggested a possible date of 1610-12 for the painting, noting its similarities in style and *ductus* to the *Denial of Saint Peter* (Speier collection, London, Fig. 5).

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Fig. 1. Hendrick ter Brugghen, *Portrait of a Young Man*, 1605-15.
Paris, Galerie Jaques Leegenhoek.

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Fig. 2. Hendrick ter Brugghen, *Adoration of the Shepherds*, 1605-15.
London, Speier Collection.

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Fig. 3. Hendrick ter Brugghen, *Esau Selling His Birthright*, 1627 circa.
Madrid, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza.

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Fig. 4. Hendrick ter Brugghen, *Crucifixion* (detail), 1624-25.
New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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Fig. 5. Hendrick ter Brugghen, *The Denial of Saint Peter* 1607-13.
London, Speier Collection.