

# Naturalism and Archaism in Hendrick ter Brugghen's *Crucifixion* and *Saint Sebastian Tended by Irene*

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Fig. 1. Hendrick ter Brugghen, *St. Sebastian Tended by Irene*, 1625, oil on canvas, 175 x 120 cm. Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio. R.T. Miller Jr. Fund, 1953, 53.256.

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It is entirely likely that Hendrick ter Brugghen worked on two of his most powerful paintings, *Saint Sebastian Tended by Irene* (Fig. 1) and the *Crucifixion* (Fig. 2), simultaneously or serially in 1625.<sup>1</sup> The paintings share a low horizon with a delicately colored sky, and both depict a single, holy figure accompanied by two others. They are also connected subjects—Sebastian, a saint martyred with arrows by the Roman imperial army and then miraculously revived, was viewed as a post-figuration of Christ. Yet ter Brugghen responded differently to each subject in relation both to its precedents and its religious and cultural significance. In the *Crucifixion*, ter Brugghen took his interest in archaic styles and motifs, demonstrated in several earlier paintings, to a new extreme. Christ's body is narrow waisted and his wounds ooze free-falling blood, two motifs that had disappeared with the increasing naturalism of art in Northern Europe around 1550. He also rendered in detail the specifics of Christ's bodily misery and the homely features of John and Mary. In the *Sebastian*, ter Brugghen treads new territory. While Sebastian's hands and arms share the gruesome intensity of Christ's, the rest of the scene is pleasing: Sebastian, Irene, and her maid are all handsome, and the composition is

surprising but harmonious, drawing on models contemporary to him rather than the past. Its beauty is striking in contrast to ter Brugghen's earlier works, which were distinct for their unflagging attention to the ugly realities of lived existence.

The concurrent production of the two works seems to signal or even to have spurred a turning point in the artist's development. After this year, ter Brugghen increasingly concerned himself with the effects of artificial light and produced some of his most agreeable paintings, beginning with the *Sebastian*.<sup>2</sup> The origins of this transformation in ter Brugghen's art are unknown. Ter Brugghen left no writings, there is little critical response to his work from his lifetime, and we do not know the first owner or original placement for any of his paintings.<sup>3</sup> Examining the similarities between the *Sebastian* and the *Crucifixion*, however, offers a possible understanding of the transition in his work. In noting the links between the two paintings, the composition of *Sebastian* can be seen to narrate a transformation in ter Brugghen's artistic sensibility. To understand this development, it is essential to consider ter Brugghen's work in relation to the two terms most associated with him: naturalism and archaism.



Fig. 2. Hendrick ter Brugghen, *The Crucifixion with the Virgin and St. John*, ca. 1625, oil on canvas, 154.9 x 102.2 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Funds from various donors, 1956, 56.228.



## Naturalism

Naturalism, simply defined, is art that seeks to reproduce the visual effects of the optical world, and it was one of the objectives of Western European art beginning in the early fifteenth century in both Italy and the North.<sup>4</sup> Yet with this new capacity of art came a new question that recurred over the following centuries: how closely should the world be depicted? The chief question was whether art should be made only by copying nature or by applying rules of beauty to render an idealized version of the real world. In other words, should contingent details and individual flaws be eliminated to represent a deeper truth, or embraced as a means of creating a more lifelike image? The outlines of this debate can be traced to antiquity and are found in writing on art throughout Europe in the early modern period.<sup>5</sup> The spectrum of arguments on this question are diagrammed in Table 1 below.

In ter Brugghen's time, positions 1 and 5 are for the most part rhetorical fictions leveled at those in the opposite camp. Positions 2 and 4 more closely represent actual practice, though their characterization also is tinged with rhetoric from their opponents: artists who only painted what they saw without improving it seem to have no agency, presenting the viewer no more than what is offered by a camera obscura. By contrast, artists who did not work sufficiently from life could be seen as imposing excessively their notion of beauty upon the world, thus disconnecting from it.

Early participants in the debate include Alberti ("Demetrius, an antique painter, failed to obtain the ultimate praise because he was much more careful to make things similar to the natural than to the lovely")<sup>6</sup> and Leonardo ("painting is most praiseworthy which conforms most to the object portrayed. I put forward this to

1 Artist looks at life and selects and even prefers ugliness	2 Artist looks at life and simply records what is seen	3 Artist looks at life and selects from it the most beautiful	4 Artist looks at life and improves upon it	5 Artist does not look at life but works entirely from an ideal
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Table 1. Categories of Naturalism and Idealism in Writing on Early Modern Art

embarrass those painters who would improve on the works of nature").<sup>7</sup> In the distinction that he made between Michelangelo (more idealizing) and Titian (more interested in nature) and thus between Venetian and Florentine art in his *Lives of the Artists* (1550, enlarged 1568), Giorgio Vasari amplified the debate.<sup>8</sup> The Dutch writer and painter Karel van Mander included a translation of Vasari's *Lives* in his useful compendium for artists, the *Schilderboeck* (1604), thus communicating such ideas to the North.<sup>9</sup> Later writers adhered to the same concerns. Throughout the seventeenth century, art was assessed through this lens, with artists like Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69) and Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571–1610) exemplifying those who worked from nature and others, such as Annibale Carracci (1560–1609) and Guido Reni (1575–1642), seen as improving nature in their paintings.

Ter Brugghen's experience as an artist exposed him directly to the terms of this debate. Ter Brugghen was a student of the Utrecht artist Abraham Bloemaert (1566–1651) sometime around 1604, when Karel van Mander's biography of Bloemaert was published in his *Schilderboeck*.<sup>10</sup> In it, van Mander admires Bloemaert's landscapes—"not overloaded with detail"—and then identifies him as a

painter whose art adheres to the ideal: "He allows no place for portraying from life, in order for his intellect not to be obstructed by this."<sup>11</sup> Although Bloemaert's style transitioned during his lifetime from the Mannerism that van Mander described in 1604 to a refined classicism, he was committed to creating idealized forms throughout his career, and his teachings would have certainly centered the importance of seeking the ideal in making art.<sup>12</sup>

Van Mander's biography of Caravaggio in the *Schilderboeck* presents the opposite side of the debate. Van Mander reports that Caravaggio was doing "extraordinary things" in Italy by working only from life, and that Caravaggio had even described any art not made that way as "a bagatelle, or child's work."<sup>13</sup> Sometime around 1607, ter Brugghen traveled to Rome to continue his artistic education, remaining there until 1614.<sup>14</sup> Although Caravaggio had already fled Rome by the time ter Brugghen arrived in the city, the reputation of the former's art was at its peak, with many Italian and foreign painters adopting his style. Major artworks by Caravaggio were accessible in Santa Maria del Popolo (*Conversion of Paul* and *Crucifixion of Peter*), the Chiesa Nuova (*Entombment*), S. Agostino (*Madonna of Loreto*), and San Luigi dei

Francesi (*The Calling of Matthew* and *Martyrdom of Matthew*). Ter Brugghen also likely had contact with Vincenzo Giustiniani, one of Caravaggio's most ardent collectors and supporters. Giustiniani owned several of Caravaggio's paintings, including the *Doubting Thomas* (1601–2, Sanssouci, Potsdam).<sup>15</sup> Demonstrating his attention to Caravaggio, ter Brugghen later borrowed elements from both *The Calling of Matthew* and *Doubting Thomas* for his own versions of those subjects.<sup>16</sup>

Thus exposed to two opposite ends of the debate on painting, ter Brugghen chose to work from life, like Caravaggio. In his brief biography of ter Brugghen in his *Teutsche Akademie*, a didactic history of Northern art, Joachim von Sandrart (1606–88) confirms this: “[Ter Brugghen] imitated nature and its unhappy shortcomings very well, but disagreeably.”<sup>17</sup> None of ter Brugghen's Italian period paintings survive, and his output upon his return to Utrecht in 1614 was low. Those paintings that are known adhere to Caravaggio's “from nature” sensibility, however, even when they are not explicitly “Caravaggesque,” with half-length figures, strong light effects, or referencing the Italian painter's compositions.<sup>18</sup> This is especially clear when comparing ter Brugghen's *Adoration of the*

*Kings* (Fig. 3) to the painting of the same subject by Bloemaert (Fig. 4). Bloemaert's canvas offers the same range of figures as ter Brugghen's—old and young, European and African, male and female—but in the older man's canvas, each is idealized and poised, where in ter Brugghen's they are careworn and graceless. In Bloemaert's painting, Mary is lithe and energetic, holding a precocious and charming Christ with a mop of blond hair, while in ter Brugghen's work, Mary is hunched over Christ, who is bald and sunken into rolls of flesh—suggesting the use of an unknown but very eager eater, and perhaps that same child's exhausted mother, as models.

### Archaism

Archaism, the self-conscious use of a style or motif from an earlier time period, is closely related to the development of naturalism. Artists' habitual strategies for depicting the optical world became distinct stylistic markers of their time period as later artists found more effective means of capturing visual effects. Archaism has been identified in both Northern and Southern art after the disruptions of the Reformation.<sup>19</sup> In Utrecht, archaism emerged largely in paintings created for *schuilkerken*, or clandestine Catholic churches. Although Catholicism had been illegal in the



Fig. 3. Hendrick Ter Brugghen, *Adoration of the Kings*, signed and dated 1619, oil on canvas, 132.5 x 160.5 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Purchased with the support of the Vereniging Rembrandt, the Prins Bernhard Fonds and the Stichting tot Bevordering van de Belangen van het Rijksmuseum.

Dutch Republic since 1580, Catholic worship was tolerated as long as it was not public. Clandestine churches, frequently concealed behind a façade of domestic architecture, were often amply decorated. Inventories show a high number of archaizing paintings in this context. Some required close examination to determine that they were not actually older paintings; others subsumed archaizing motifs into

the style of the moment.<sup>20</sup> Ter Brugghen, by contrast, chose to include archaic stylistic elements and motifs within his otherwise stylistically contemporary paintings. In his *Calling of Matthew* (1622, Centraal Museum, Utrecht), for instance, the crumpled paper on the table and the wall and the old man with an underbite refer directly to depictions like Marinus van Reymerswaele's *Tax Collectors*



(1542, Alte Pinakothek, Munich), while the table, tilted slightly out of perspective, and play of hands around it reference Jan van Hemessen's *Calling of Matthew* (1535–40, Alte Pinakothek, Munich).<sup>21</sup> In these works, ter Brugghen both embraces the effects of immediacy in his naturalism and also creates a link to the art of the past, calling attention to the time that passed between the period of his model and the style of his present.<sup>22</sup> As Thomas

Greene noted of Renaissance poetry that referenced the Classical period, works of art with archaism acknowledge a tradition broken by an intervening period.<sup>23</sup> In ter Brugghen's work, this period was the turbulent years of the Reformation, when the artistic tradition was literally broken by iconoclasm. His archaism is thus inseparable from a concern with the status and function of religious art within the continuing tradition of Northern art.



Fig. 4. Abraham Bloemaert, *Adoration of the Kings*, signed and dated 1624, oil on canvas, 168.8 x 193.7 cm. Centraal Museum. © Centraal Museum Utrecht.



## ***The Crucifixion***

None of ter Brugghen's paintings is more archaizing than his *Crucifixion*, a subject that also complicates the debate over the role of depicting the ugliness of life. The humiliating death of Christ on the cross is central to Christian theology. Christ, son of God, willingly suffers and dies at the hands of his persecutors, serving as, in the words of John the Baptist, "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,"<sup>24</sup> redeeming humanity from Original Sin by his death. Christ's sacrifice and redemptive role is predicted in the Old Testament. Isaiah describes the forthcoming Messiah as having "no beauty in him, nor comeliness: and we have seen him, and there was no sightliness, that we should be desirous of him, despised and the most abject of men, a man of sorrows."<sup>25</sup> As Saint Augustine wrote, "For he [Christ] hung ugly, disfigured on the cross, but his ugliness was our beauty."<sup>26</sup> Particularly in Northern art from the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries, such writings are interpreted in vividly imagined pictures of the bloody and miserable crucified Christ, best exemplified in the work of the German artist Matthias Grünewald (1470–1528). Such works disrupt the otherwise standard correlations of ugliness with evil and beauty with good,<sup>27</sup> and, in order to fully honor

the description in Isaiah, adhere to extreme naturalism to mortify the body of Christ.

When this sort of art is addressed in theoretical writing, the significance of naturalism to depicting religious subjects and its effect on the viewer become part of the debate. For instance, the Amsterdam poet Jan Vos (1612–67) linked showing Christ's misery to successful art: "He who portrays the wholly misshapen Christ / Has come closest to portraying life."<sup>28</sup> By contrast, Francisco da Holanda's treatise *Da Pintura Antiga* (1548) remarked unfavorably on the naturalism of Northern religious art. His treatise takes the form of a (possibly fictional) conversation with Michelangelo in which "Michelangelo" avers that art in Flanders is overly laden with detail and made "without reason or art" or "skillful choice." Such works, in his view, appeal especially to the devout, causing them to "shed many [tears]." By contrast, Italian art is "nothing else but a copy of the perfections of God."<sup>29</sup> In this view, rather than depicting life with all of its tear-inducing, earth-bound defects, the Italian artist understands and manifests life's ideal forms. This link between religious intensity and naturalism reverses direction in other writings, which characterize unnecessary attention to naturalistic detail in general as a kind of

deranged religious devotion. The Dutch painter and writer Jan de Bisschop (1628–71) wrote of naturalist painters: “almost everything that was reprehensible to the eye was selected—indeed sought out—to be painted and drawn, *as if it were sacred and special*.”<sup>30</sup> The Italian art theorist Giovanni Bellori (1613–96) similarly described painters who followed Caravaggio’s example: “in imitating bodies, they  *dwell with all their zeal on wrinkles and defects of skin and contours, they make fingers knotty, limbs altered by disease*.”<sup>31</sup>

In ter Brugghen’s *Crucifixion*, his devotion to naturalism and his interest in archaism merge. His Christ, with an idiosyncratically long nose, is greenish and emaciated, his torso collapsed at the waist in the pictorial schema of earlier Northern artists.<sup>32</sup> Bright drops of blood hang from Christ’s hand, foot, and chest wounds in a manner not found in painting after 1550. The archaism of Christ is such that scholars have looked for a specific source for ter Brugghen’s painting in order to explain it.<sup>33</sup> Many possibilities have been proposed, including Matthias Grünewald’s *Small Crucifixion* (1528, National Gallery, Washington), which was circulated after 1605 as a reproductive engraving by Raphael Sadeler I; *The Van Rijn Calvary* (1363, Koninklijk Museum voor

Schone Kunsten, Antwerp), which has a similar low horizon and (albeit abstracted) starry sky; and a large altarpiece, also with a starry sky, from Zutphen, a village near Utrecht (1400, Stedelijk Museum, Zutphen). The large number of similar works suggests that ter Brugghen sought not to reference a work of art directly but to allude generally to the image type, including sculptures on medieval rood screens.<sup>34</sup>

The specificity of ter Brugghen’s approach to the *Crucifixion* emerges in comparison to Bloemaert’s 1629 *Crucifixion* (Fig. 5), which is also archaizing.<sup>35</sup> With its pale, slender Christ, floating loin cloth, writhing thieves on the crosses to either side, and distant view of Jerusalem, the painting evokes compositions such as Jan van Eyck’s *Crucifixion* (1440–41, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). However, in contrast to the van Eyck (and others like it), Christ’s anatomy is accurate and the blood that pours from Christ’s wounds stays on the surface of his body. In contrast to ter Brugghen’s version, Bloemaert’s scene, though its motifs allude to past compositions, is rendered entirely in his idealizing style that does not brook the illogic of the archaic style.

Meanwhile, in ter Brugghen’s painting, while Christ is clearly marked as from the past, Mary and

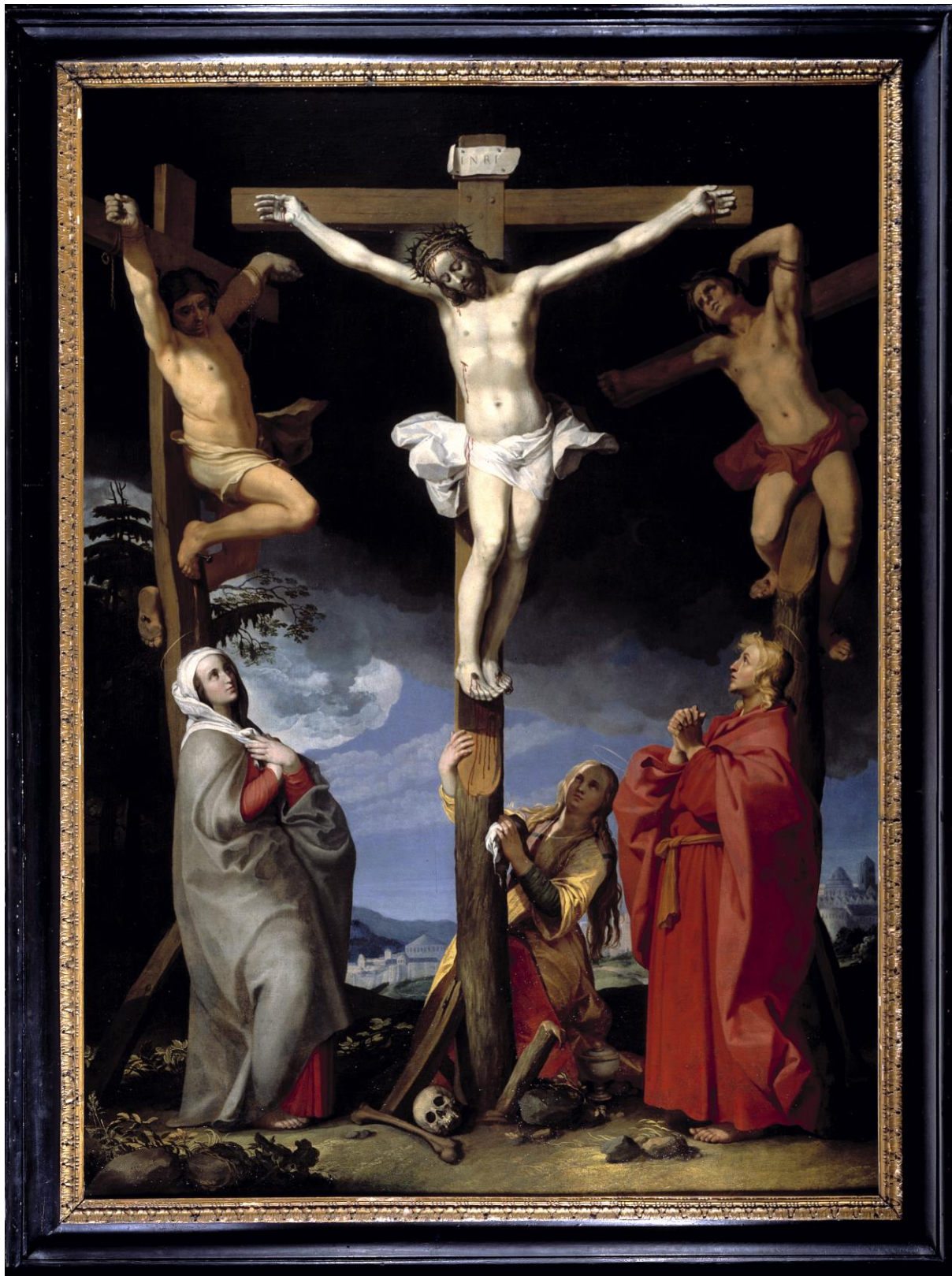


Fig. 5. Abraham Bloemaert, *Crucifixion*, 1629, oil on canvas, 230.5 x 164.5 cm, Museum het Catharijneconvent, Utrecht.



John are in the style of international Caravaggism, an effect intensified in the figure of John, whose red and green robes are layered around a seventeenth-century doublet.<sup>36</sup> Ter Brugghen renders the figures in his distinctively harsh naturalism. Mary's face, particular and not particularly lovely, is blanched with sorrow. John's nose is red with crying, and his face is awkward and coarse, his mouth agape. Next to them, the figure of Christ has the uncanny quality of a work of art brought to life, even as he is dead: he shares their sense of volume and careful attention to detail in the drapery and flesh. This is emphasized in the vibrant red of his dripping blood, carefully rendered to capture its viscous pendulousness. I have elsewhere described the presence of the modern figures framing Christ as protective in a context where devotional images of Christ were subject to iconoclasm.<sup>37</sup> In shifting the attention to the question of naturalism and working from life, we can see that ter Brugghen's depiction of Christ also exalts the lineage of ugliness and its affective potential in religious art, eschewing the idealizing Mannerist style of the generation just before him. By appearing in the privileged body of Christ and in the pictorial vocabulary of the great past artists, the depiction of ugliness of life as it is

lived rather than as it can be idealized is both elevated and brought into the present.

## Sebastian

Contrasting approaches to naturalism also emerge along cultural borders in depictions of Saint Sebastian. The story of Sebastian was best known through the account in Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend*, a compendium of the lives of the saints first compiled around 1265 and widely reproduced around Europe throughout the early modern period.<sup>38</sup> A member of the Roman emperor Diocletian's Praetorian Guard, Sebastian was sentenced to death by a rain of arrows for his conversion to Christianity. This he miraculously survived; he was then beaten to death and his body was thrown in the Cloaca Maxima. Although she is not included in Voragine's account, Irene, a Christian woman who nursed Sebastian back to health after the attack by arrows, is part of the tradition of the story.<sup>39</sup> Catholic Church historian Cardinal Caesar Baronius (1538–1607) emphasized her role in the account of the saint's life in his *Annales Ecclesiastici* (1592), which may have spurred her increased appearance in paintings after this date.<sup>40</sup> Because he survived the assault with arrows, which were associated with the plague, Sebastian was

viewed as having special powers against the disease and was frequently depicted both north and south of the Alps. Utrecht saw a surge of depictions of Sebastian as it endured plague years in 1613–17 and again in 1624–29.<sup>41</sup>

Particularly before 1600, Italian and Northern European artists depicted the saint in a manner that corresponds to the different approaches to naturalism in the two regions. A pair of engravings from around 1500 by the German artist Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), who traveled twice to Italy, exemplify these differences. One, following the Northern type, depicts Sebastian slumped against a tree, his arms tied above his head to emphasize the misery of his body (Fig. 6). The other print, following the Italian type, depicts Sebastian standing in contrapposto, arms tied at his waist to a Tuscan column (Fig. 7). Confirming the differences between the types, Dürer endowed his Northern-style depiction with greater naturalism, depicting Sebastian with contemporary underpants and leg hair. By contrast, his Italianate Sebastian is shown smooth-skinned and in a classical loin cloth.

Despite his previous predilection for reviving older Northern motifs, for his depiction of Saint Sebastian, ter Brugghen looked to the work of his Utrecht contemporaries.<sup>42</sup> He takes the seated pose of the

Sebastian from Gerrit van Honthorst's *Saint Sebastian* (1620–23, National Gallery, London), which may have been painted in Rome or Utrecht, but was likely seen in Utrecht after 1620.<sup>43</sup> Like the versions by Cornelis de Beer (1615, Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, Madrid),<sup>44</sup> Dirck van Baburen (1623–24, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg),<sup>45</sup> and Jan van Bijlert (1624, private collection), ter Brugghen includes Irene and her maid.<sup>46</sup> For the play of rope around Sebastian's hands, ter Brugghen apparently drew on van Baburen's and de Beer's paintings, as well as that by Joachim Wtewael (1600, Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City).

Even beyond drawing on these contemporary sources rather than older motifs, ter Brugghen changed his approach to depicting the subject. Sebastian is slender but well-muscled. His face follows the convention of depicting Sebastian as a beardless youth, and he is handsome, with strong cheekbones.<sup>47</sup> Irene exudes a warm charm enhanced by her pink-tipped nose and dimpled chin. Rejecting van Baburen's and van Bijlert's characterizations of Irene's maid as a haggard old woman, ter Brugghen rendered her as a younger, fine-boned woman, intent upon her work. The composition itself has a pleasing logic. Ter Brugghen avoids the



Fig. 6. Albrecht Dürer, *Saint Sebastian Bound to the Tree*, ca. 1501, engraving, 11.6 × 7.1 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The George Khuner Collection, Gift of Mrs. George Khuner, 1968.





Fig. 7. Albrecht Dürer, *Saint Sebastian Bound to the Column*, ca. 1499, engraving, 10.7 × 7.6 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The George Khuner Collection, Gift of Mrs. George Khuner, 1968.

awkwardness of the position of Irene and her servant in both van Bijlert and van Baburen's versions, placing them instead behind Sebastian. Although Irene is largely concealed by Sebastian's body, ter Brugghen illuminates her head and her succoring hand to give them prominence and to advance the narrative. The painting has a beauty and grace as never before in his work. Yet, as is clear from comparison of the figures to van Honthorst's depiction of Sebastian and any of the faces repeatedly deployed by Bloemaert, the painting's new beauty is not based on a shift to an idealized type, but on an acceptance of the possibility of beauty—as much as ugliness—in what is before the eyes.

Overall, therefore, in contrast to his *Crucifixion*, in the *Sebastian* ter Brugghen rejected old Northern precedents. He inserted himself into the contemporary artistic mainstream and combined naturalistic detail with a tightly choreographed composition to produce an appealing scene of tender, salvific care. The subject matter is obviously important here. The motif of Sebastian had elsewhere served as an opportunity for demonstrating artistic powers and as a site of artistic innovation, while the *Crucifixion*, freighted with sacred significance, was both bound by convention and invited expressive depiction of

Christ's sufferings. Despite these differences, one key feature of the *Sebastian* links it to the *Crucifixion*: the right arm of Sebastian. Like Christ's, Sebastian's arm is emaciated, resembling an *écorché*, and it is greyish green. Ter Brugghen enhanced the connection of the two holy figures by the placement of his monogram in both paintings: at the base of the cross in the *Crucifixion* and on the tree in the *Sebastian*, near the top edge of the painting. The two supports of martyrdom (cross and tree) are further linked by the straggly twigs emanating from the main branch of each, a naturalistic and contingent detail that nonetheless clarifies their shared status. Christ and Sebastian also occupy similar roles in the painting, their wounded, almost naked bodies drawing the attention of the two other figures. The subjects of the crucified Christ and martyred Sebastian are naturally linked for reasons other than ter Brugghen's painting them at the same time. Sebastian was viewed as a post-figuration of Christ, his revivification after the arrow attack likened to Christ's resurrection.<sup>48</sup>

The attending figures, however, provide a key point of contrast between the paintings. In the *Crucifixion*, they are John and Mary. As their prayerful gestures emphasize, the *Crucifixion* is naturally a hands-off affair. The difference in



artistic style between Christ and his mother and beloved disciple emphasizes this distance. By contrast, Irene and the servant have a very different relationship to Sebastian, more akin to how other figures relate to Christ in a Deposition.<sup>49</sup> One hand on Sebastian's sternum, the other delicately removing an arrow from his side, Irene directly attends the wounded man while the servant unties his bound arm. The women's contact with Sebastian creates a significant counterpoint to the distance innate to the *Crucifixion*.

The servant's action reveals even more. One of her hands plucks at the strap at his wrist, and the other is tightly wrapped in a length of the same strap. If one examines her action, there is no logical reason for her hand to be bound in the act of untying. This is rather a small act of what we could call *imitatio Sebastiani*, intended most of all to show the difference between her active hand and his inert, bloodless one. The act of untying together with her focused gaze on it call particular attention to the Christ-like arm of Sebastian, the flesh of which bulges hideously around the bindings, outdoing its source in the van Baburen. By its elevation and by its attachment to a tree, the arm evokes the *Crucifixion*, yet it is distinct from it. This is not the end: by their tender ministrations, Irene

and her servant will in fact resuscitate Sebastian. They are quite literally releasing the holy body from its suffering.

In this way, they can be seen as surrogates of the painter within the painting. Michael Fried explores the significance of hand gestures visible in some early modern self-portraits, especially those of Caravaggio—for example, *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* (1593–94, National Gallery, London). He identifies in them the pose that a painter might take while painting with one hand and holding a palette with another, with the tools removed to conceal the pose's origins in a mirror reflection.<sup>50</sup> While the *Saint Sebastian* is not a self-portrait and there is no suggestion of a mirror, the servant's fingers are posed as if holding a brush. Her gesture is similar to Irene's maid in van Baburen's version. However, ter Brugghen accentuates the sense that she holds a brush by tightening the grip of the maid's thumb and forefinger and moving her action closer to the edge of the painting. His monogram is inscribed directly to the right of her hand. This artistically self-referencing action is also precisely at the point of the painting's greatest resemblance to the *Crucifixion*. When the servant unties Sebastian's arm, she will release him from the abjection native to the Northern image. The untormented



body will be restored, and, in fact, created by their efforts. As much as it is possible to depict “becoming” in a single image, ter Brugghen shows his own transformation as an artist.

In the *Sebastian*, ter Brugghen demonstrates a new sensibility, a choice that he will make again in later paintings, religious and secular.<sup>51</sup> His transformation is clarified in comparing his two versions of the Annunciation. In ter Brugghen’s *Annunciation* from 1624 (Fig. 8), Mary, pressed to the back of the painting, is plain and stolid, reading a prayer book with rumpled pages. A studio-worn dove with ragged feathers is suspended directly above her. We view the angel Gabriel in *profil perdu*, his body overlapping hers, his inexplicably filthy foot directly in front of our eyes. In his 1629 version (Fig. 9), Gabriel has been rotated to the left to allow a full profile view, his feet firmly on the ground. Mary faces Gabriel, her eyes downcast. Her pose reveals a more graceful form, and her face is unostentatiously pretty. The dove is sleekly feathered and gleamingly white. The comparison between an earlier *Liberation of Peter* (1624, Mauritshuis, The Hague) and a later version (1629, Staatliches Museum, Schwerin) offers similar results. This change perhaps signals a new source of patronage or simply a new artistic interest. Although

ter Brugghen’s sensibility shifted away from the ugly and the archaic, his continued commitment to depicting idiosyncratic facial types and life’s clutter show that he did not change completely—the peculiar crown-bearing angels in the 1629 *Annunciation* alone are evidence of this. However, he did slide to the center on the spectrum of naturalism to encompass the possibility of selecting more beautiful models and engineering less awkward compositions. Ter Brugghen also returned with new conviction to depictions of artificial light, an effect he attempted a few times in the early 1620s. In the last four years before his untimely death in 1629 at age 42, he painted, among others, *Old Man Writing by Candlelight* (ca. 1626–27, Smith College, Northampton, MA), *Melancholia* (1627–28, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto), *The Denial of Peter* (1626–27, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago), *Jacob and Esau* (1627, Thyssen-Bornemisza National Museum, Madrid), and *The Concert* (ca. 1626, National Gallery, London). As it is not actually possible to paint by candlelight because of its effects on colors, the depiction of artificial light not only implies artistic imagination, but also, like the selection of more beautiful subjects, greater artistic agency.

A range of views on working from life could be found in writing—



Fig. 8. Hendrick ter Brugghen, *Annunciation*, ca. 1624, oil on canvas, 103.8 x 84.3 cm, private collection.  
Photo Collection RKD – Netherlands Institute for Art History, The Hague.





Fig. 9. Hendrick ter Brugghen, *Annunciation*, signed and dated 1629, oil on canvas, 216.5 × 176.5 cm, Stadsmuseum de Hofstadt, Diest, Belgium.



and in art—throughout the early modern period. Ter Brugghen's exposure to these ideas was certain and his choice of naturalism was firm, reinforced by his interest in bringing the styles and proclivities of earlier Northern art into the present of his paintings. Yet, as he worked on his most archaizing painting, the *Crucifixion*, alongside a subject in which artists had traditionally explored physical beauty, Saint Sebastian, he pointed himself in a new direction by revising the compositions of his contemporaries. In this way, *Saint Sebastian Tended by Irene* can be read as a pictorialization of the process of ter Brugghen's own release from concern with the qualities of the art of the North before 1550. Ter Brugghen relinquished not only ugliness, but also what some of the ugliness signified: a deep engagement with pre-Reformation religious art of the North. In its place is an interest in pictorial beauty and a different kind of artistic self-consciousness, one that relates less to metabolizing past art and has more to do with evolving his own artistic identity. *Saint Sebastian Tended by Irene* is a triumph, and it is so because it is a mastering, and a synthesis, and a letting go, and a way forward.

*The 2013 Icons session offered three different analyses related to Hendrick ter Brugghen's Saint Sebastian. This paper was one of them.*

<sup>1</sup> *Saint Sebastian* is signed and dated 1625. The *Crucifixion* is signed and dated 16[2][.]—the last two digits have not been readable since the painting's acquisition, but the consensus is that it was painted the same year. See Leonard J. Slatkes and Wayne Franits, *The Paintings of Hendrick ter Brugghen (1588–1629)* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2007), 40, 106, 134.

<sup>2</sup> Slatkes and Franits, *Paintings of Hendrick ter Brugghen*, 23–24.

<sup>3</sup> The first record of ownership of *Saint Sebastian* is 1668; for the *Crucifixion* it is 1657 (Slatkes and Franits, *Paintings of Hendrick ter Brugghen*, cat. nos. A38 and A19).

<sup>4</sup> David Summers, *The Judgment of Sense: Renaissance Naturalism and the Rise of Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 3.

<sup>5</sup> For an overview, see Eric Jan Sluijter, “Rembrandt and the Rules of Art Revisited,” *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen* 51 (2009): 121–29; D. Y. Kim, “The Horror of Mimesis,” *Oxford Art Journal* 34, no. 3 (2011): 346.

<sup>6</sup> Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. John R. Spencer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 92.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Naomi Baker, *Plain Ugly: The Unattractive Body in Early Modern Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 23.

<sup>8</sup> For example, see the life of Titian in Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (London: Everyman's Library, 1963), 489–508.

<sup>9</sup> Sluijter, “Rembrandt and the Rules of Art Revisited,” 127.

<sup>10</sup> Marten Jan Bok, “Biographies,” in *Masters of Light: Dutch Painters in Utrecht During the Golden Age*, ed. Joaneath A. Spicer with Lynn Federle Orr (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 379.

<sup>11</sup> Karel van Mander, *Het Schilderboek* (Haarlem: Passchier van Wesbusch, 1604), folio 297 f2., excerpted and translated in Marcel G. Roethlisberger, with Marten Jan Bok, *Abraham Bloemaert and His Sons: Paintings and Prints*, trans. Diane L. Webb (Doornspijk: Davaco, 1993), 41.

<sup>12</sup> See Gero Seelig, *Abraham Bloemaert (1566–1651): Studien zur Utrechter Malerei um 1620* (Berlin: Mann, 1997) and Roethlisberger and Bok, *Abraham Bloemaert*.

<sup>13</sup> Van Mander, *Het Schilderboek*, folio 191r., excerpted and translated in Howard Hibbard, *Caravaggio* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 344.

<sup>14</sup> Bok, “Biographies,” 379.

<sup>15</sup> Liesbeth M. Helmus, “The Utrecht Caravaggisti: Imitation and Improvement,” in *Utrecht, Caravaggio, and Europe*, ed. Bernd Ebert and Liesbeth Helmus (Munich: Hirmerverlag, 2018), 57, 61.

<sup>16</sup> For more on ter Brugghen in Italy and his attention to Caravaggio, see Natasha Seaman, *The Religious Paintings of Hendrick ter Brugghen: Reinventing Christian Painting After the Reformation in Utrecht* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012), ch. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Cited in and translated by Marten Jan Bok, "Was Hendrick ter Brugghen a Melancholic?," *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 1, no. 2 (Summer 2009), DOI: 10.5092/jhna.2009.1.2.2, ¶9.

<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of ter Brugghen's art in relation to Caravaggism, see Seaman, *Religious Paintings*, 12–16.

<sup>19</sup> Seaman, *Religious Paintings*, ch. 2.

<sup>20</sup> Xander van Eck, *Clandestine Splendor: Paintings for the Catholic Church in the Dutch Republic* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2008), 24ff.; Seaman, *Religious Paintings*, 55–59.

<sup>21</sup> For further discussion of ter Brugghen's *Calling of Matthew*, see Seaman, *Religious Paintings*, ch. 6.

<sup>22</sup> Seaman, *Religious Paintings*, 21–22.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas M. Greene, *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 40.

<sup>24</sup> John 1:29 (New Revised Standard Version).

<sup>25</sup> Isaiah 53:2–3 (Douay-Rheims Bible).

<sup>26</sup> Jeffrey F. Hamburger, "'To Make Women Weep': Ugly Art as 'Feminine' and the Origins of Modern Aesthetics," *Res* 31 (1997): 19–22.

<sup>27</sup> Hamburger, "'To Make Women Weep,'" 20.

<sup>28</sup> Cited in Eric Jan Sluijter, *Rembrandt and the Female Nude* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 199.

<sup>29</sup> Francisco da Holanda, *Four Dialogues on Painting*, trans. Aubrey F. Bell (London: Oxford University Press, 1928), 15–16.

<sup>30</sup> Cited in Sluijter, *Rembrandt and the Female Nude*, 198 (emphasis added).

<sup>31</sup> Pietro Bellori, *The Lives of Modern Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, trans. Alice Sedgwick Wohl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 185 (emphasis added).

<sup>32</sup> For further analysis and examination of sources related to the *Crucifixion*, see Seaman, *Religious Paintings*, ch. 4; Natasha Seaman, "Materiality and the Presence of the Past in Hendrick ter Brugghen's *Crucifixion*," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 74, no. 4 (2011): 489–516; Wayne Franits, "Hendrick ter Brugghen's Paintings of the Crucifixion in New York and Turin and the Problem of His Early Chronology," *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 9, no. 1 (Winter 2017), DOI: 10.5092/jhna.2017.9.1.3; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Hendrick ter Brugghen | The Crucifixion with the Virgin and Saint John," accessed February 23, 2022, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collecttion/search/435817>; Walter Liedtke, *Dutch Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), x–xi, 109–18, no. 25.

<sup>33</sup> Claus Virch, "The *Crucifixion* by Hendrick Terbrugghen," *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 16, no. 8 (1958): 217–26; Slatkes and Franits, *Paintings of Hendrick ter Brugghen*, cat. no. A19.

<sup>34</sup> As Benedict Nicolson wrote, "[Ter Brugghen] may have had in mind some



medieval Gothic wood carving with life-size figures which had struck him forcibly as he gazed up at it" (*Hendrick Terbrugghen* [The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1958], 81 [emphasis original]).

<sup>35</sup> Museum Catharijneconvent Utrecht, *Goddelijk geschilderd: Honderd Meesterwerken van Museum Catharijneconvent* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2003), 137–38.

<sup>36</sup> Seaman, *Religious Paintings*, 90.

<sup>37</sup> Seaman, *Religious Paintings*, 92.

<sup>38</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. William Granger Ryan, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 97–101.

<sup>39</sup> She appears, for instance, in a panel from 1497 of Josse Lieferinxe's altar-piece in the Saint Sebastian chapel of Notre-Dame-des-Accoules, Marseilles, done in collaboration with Bernardino Simondi.

<sup>40</sup> Caesar Baronius, *Annales Ecclesiastici*, ed. Augustin Theiner (Barri-Ducis: Guerin, 1864–83), 3:295–96. For a discussion of how Baronius's ideas may have reached artists, see Valerie Hedquist, "Ter Brugghen's *Saint Sebastian Tended by Irene*," *Journal of the Historians of Netherlandish Art* 9, no. 2 (2017): ¶25.

<sup>41</sup> Ter Brugghen may have died of the plague during the 1629 outbreak. See Bok, "Biographies," 380. For an overview of Utrecht's experience with the plague and the relationship of ter Brugghen's *Sebastian* to it, see Hedquist, "Ter Brugghen's *Saint Sebastian Tended by Irene*," ¶5.

<sup>42</sup> Ebert and Helmus, *Utrecht, Caravaggio, and Europe*, 242–47.

<sup>43</sup> Cat. no. 9 in Spicer and Orr, *Masters of Light*, 155.

<sup>44</sup> Wayne Franits, *The Paintings of Dirck van Baburen (ca. 1592/3–1624): Catalogue Raisonné* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2013), 42.

<sup>45</sup> Franits doubts the autograph status of the Hamburg painting, seeing it as a late-seventeenth-century copy. He identifies several other paintings showing similar compositions as workshop copies (*Paintings of Dirck van Baburen*, 41).

<sup>46</sup> Cat. no. 10 in Spicer and Orr, *Masters of Light*, 160.

<sup>47</sup> For a discussion of the transition in the depicted age of Saint Sebastian, see Karim Ressouni-Demigneux, "The 'Imaginary' Life of Saint Sebastian," in *The Agony and the Ecstasy: Guido Reni's Saint Sebastians*, ed. Piero Boccardo and Xavier F. Salomon (Milan: Silvana Editore, 2007), 19.

<sup>48</sup> Slatkes and Franits, *Paintings of Hendrick ter Brugghen*, 134.

<sup>49</sup> Wolfgang Stechow, "Terbrugghen's 'Saint Sebastian,'" *Burlington Magazine* 95, no. 609 (1953): 71.

<sup>50</sup> See Michael Fried, *The Moment of Caravaggio* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), ch. 1.

<sup>51</sup> Slatkes and Franits, *Paintings of Hendrick ter Brugghen*, 23.