

# At National Gallery, two paintings by one Dutch master add up to a sublime exhibition

Advertisement

By Jason Edward Kaufman  
Sunday, February 20, 2011; E04

One of the most admired Old Masters paintings in the United States is making a guest appearance at the National Gallery of Art. You've probably never heard of the painting or even the artist, yet experts rate it among the most prized artwork in the country.

The painting is "Saint Sebastian Tended by Irene, 1625," a religious scene by the Dutch artist Hendrick ter Brugghen. It is among the pictures that Oberlin College's Allen Memorial Art Museum, which is closed for renovation, loaned to the Phillips Collection for an exhibition that ended in January. Fortunately for Washington audiences, Arthur Wheelock, curator of Northern Baroque paintings at the National Gallery, asked the Ohio college to extend St. Irene's visit to the capital to show her alongside the gallery's own ter Brugghen, "Bagpipe Player, 1624," a major recent museum purchase.

The entire exhibition consists of those two paintings tucked into the rest of the gallery's superb holdings of Dutch art. It may sound a bit skimpy, but focusing attention on two great pictures can offer an experience in some ways superior to the mega-shows that have become the norm, where visitors wind up rushed and skim many of the works on view - the artistic equivalent of speed dating.

So who was ter Brugghen (1588-1629) and what is so special about his St. Sebastian and St. Irene?

He grew up in the Dutch city of Utrecht, then went to Italy in his mid-teens to further his artistic education. In Rome he was influenced by several painters, particularly Caravaggio, and brought the fabled Italian's avant-garde style back to Utrecht.

Ter Brugghen and several of his townsmen became known as the Utrecht Caravaggisti. They painted religious and mythological scenes featuring realistic figures in contemporary dress, and made genre paintings of peasants, drinkers and musicians. These subjects were often depicted half-length and close up, cast in dramatic contrasting light and shadow ("chiaroscuro" in Italian) and set in a shallow, stagelike space - all pictorial innovations adopted from Caravaggio. This new approach had the power to bring the viewer into the action with compelling immediacy.

The Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens, who visited ter Brugghen in 1627, deemed his work "above that of all the other Utrecht artists."

In my estimation, the St. Irene is his greatest work. It depicts the moment when the third-century Roman soldier Sebastian, having refused to renounce his Christianity, has been sentenced to death by emperor Diocletian, tied to a tree and shot by archers. Irene, a Roman widow, and her maidservant find him on the verge of death, remove the arrows and nurse him back to health. (His martyrdom came later when the persistent emperor had him clubbed to death and thrown into a sewer.)

The oil on canvas, around 5 feet high and 4 feet wide, is a masterpiece for several reasons. The tightly interwoven composition is remarkably harmonious and graceful, its structure an example of the classic pyramid, with Irene's serene face at the apex and Sebastian's feet defining the base. The emotional content is intense, with Sebastian slumped in near-death as Irene gently pulls an arrow from his side and her maid unties one of his hands.

The intimacy of their tender ministrations is underlined by the close alignment of the three figures' heads and the cruciform configuration of the maid's and Sebastian's hands. And the understated and beautiful palette, a blend of pallid greys and silvery greenish hues, casts the scene in a crepuscular light that lends a somber mood to the episode.

Scholars think it was painted for the chapel of a hospital in Utrecht. That makes sense. Irene is venerated by Christians for her virtuous care in attending the ill, and Sebastian, who recovered from mortal wounds, was invoked for salvation from the plague. Ter Brugghen painted this work just as an epidemic had begun to decimate the city, an outbreak that would count among its victims the artist himself, who died at the age of 41. (By 1634, his wife and three of their six children also had died.)

Since Oberlin purchased the painting from a French dealer in 1953, it has been in constant demand, traveling for exhibitions in North America and Europe. Its current display enables the National Gallery to highlight the recently acquired "Bagpipe Player," one of ter Brugghen's great genre pictures.

Until two years ago, "Bagpipe Player" was in the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum in Cologne, Germany, but the work was revealed to have been seized by the Nazis in 1938 from the collection of Dr. Herbert von Klemperer of Berlin. In 2008 the museum restituted it to his heirs, who sold it the following year at Sotheby's in New York to a consortium of dealers for \$10 million, a record for the artist.

The National Gallery was the underbidder at that auction, but after the sale it was able to cut a deal to secure the work for the collection. To pay for the prize, the gallery combined acquisition funds with a contribution from Greg and Candy Fazakerley, D.C. area collectors of Dutch art.

Why is this painting worth \$10 million? Because it is a well preserved, beautifully realized, handsome example of a rare luxury object from centuries ago. The painting fills a gap at the National Gallery; until recently ter Brugghen and the Caravaggisti did not fit into what Americans valued in Dutch Golden Age art, namely Rembrandt and Vermeer.

To modern eyes, "Bagpipe Player" is indeed an odd picture. The canvas shows a rough-hewn shepherd with a moustache and brown cap, seen in profile and from the waist up, his shirt fallen off his shoulder and the instrument resting on his knee. Dutch artists excelled at portraying these sorts of characters - hurdy-gurdy players, smokers, drinkers, prostitutes. It is said that patrons considered these images moralistic warnings against bad behavior, but one imagines they also just found them amusing. (Wheelock thinks "Bagpipe Player" was painted for one of the large aristocratic homes around Utrecht where the hosts might have presented plays and readings with musical accompaniments.)

Each of ter Brugghen's paintings occupies its own wall in a room between galleries centered on Rubens and Van Dyck. The proximity is deliberate - Wheelock has been mixing Dutch (Protestant) and Flemish (Catholic) paintings to show that the traditionally separate schools were closely interconnected.

But the main event is the juxtaposition of the St. Irene, a monumental and intricately composed religious tableau of tremendous pathos, and "Bagpipe Player," a less ambitious picture about the simple pleasures of music. They are distinct species of painting made for different audiences but united by ter Brugghen's masterful drawing and paint handling and his subtle sense of color.

Like most Old Masters, the works of ter Brugghen have been scattered, but this is an ideal opportunity for Washingtonians to see two wonderful examples side by side. It is a connoisseur's delight that is not to be missed.

*Kaufman is a freelance writer.*

*Larger Than Life: Ter Brugghen's Saint Sebastian Tended by Irene remains in the West Building's Dutch and Flemish galleries (main floor, Gallery 44) through May 15.*

© 2011 The Washington Post Company