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Michaelina Wautier
Diogenes reading, c. 1650

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MICHAELINA WAUTIER
(Mons 1604 - c. 1689 Brussels)

DIOGENES READING, c. 1650

Oil on canvas
48.5 x 45 cm.; 19.09 x 17.71 in.

Remains of a signature (?), along the edge of the cover of the closed book: [...] *W* [...] *fecit*

Inscribed lower centre, below the bookmark of the open book: *diogine*

Inscribed on the reverse: *A[?]lievo di de la Tour / Michelin (Te[s?]to[lin?])*

Provenance

Private collection, Rome, before 2005;

Sale, Christie's, Rome, 13 December 2005, lot 542 (as Follower of Le Nain Brothers, 'Apostolo che legge');

Sale, Dorotheum, Vienna, 21 October 2014, lot 349 (as French Caravaggist, Late 17th/Early 18th Century, 'A man reading, Diogenes');

Sale, Hampel, Munich, 22 September 2017, lot 802 (as Italian Caravaggist, 17th Century);

Sale, Nagel, Stuttgart, 18 March 2020, lot 543 (as Francesco Fracanzano (Kreis));

Sale, Nagel, Stuttgart, 10 December 2020, lot 2057 (as Neapolitan School, 18th Century);

Where acquired by the present owner.

Literature

Jahel Sanzsalazar, 'An Honest Man: An Unknown Diogenes by Michaelina Wautier', in *Art & Deal*, July-August 2024, pp. 14-23.

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Michaelina Wautier ranks among the most original and accomplished painters active in the Netherlands during the seventeenth century. Working across portraiture, religious subjects, and history painting, she produced works of notable ambition and scale. Despite evidence of contemporary recognition, her œuvre fell into obscurity for centuries, in large part due to the circumstances of her gender and the fragmentary survival of documentary sources. Her rediscovery began in earnest with the exhibition held in 2018 in Antwerp, organised by the Rubenshuis and held at the Museum aan de Stroom, which brought her work back into sharp scholarly focus, and was further consolidated by the landmark exhibition devoted to her last year (2025) at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, which will travel to the Royal Academy, London this year. Central to this reassessment has been the work of Dr. Katalijne Van der Stighelen, whose sustained research has led to the identification of numerous works by Wautier and to a fuller understanding of her artistic personality, which reveals a painter of exceptional realism, intellectual seriousness and versatility.

Nothing specific is known about Wautier's formal training. Archival documents indicate that she was born and baptised in Mons in 1604 and, as an unmarried woman, likely remained there to care for her parents until at least her mother's death in 1638. She was active as a painter in Brussels from around 1640 onwards, an opportunity likely facilitated by her younger brother, Charles, who was living and working in the city at that time. In the absence of contemporary documentary sources, Wautier's works themselves provide the clearest insight into her artistic formation. While she may have received some instruction from her brother, her paintings reveal an eclectic visual education, drawing on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italian art as well as the work of Michael Sweerts, who established a drawing academy in Brussels in 1656 following his return from Rome. By this date, Wautier must already have been firmly established as one of Brussels' leading painters.

The provenance of this painting can be traced back to Rome in 2005, where it was identified as an 'Apostle Reading' and attributed to a follower of the Le Nain brothers. Over the past twenty years, it has appeared at auction on several occasions under varying anonymous attributions. Thanks to the original research conducted by Dr. Jahel Sanzsalazar, who identified and published the work in 2024, and to its recent endorsement by Dr. Katalijne Van der Stighelen, to whom we are deeply grateful, the painting is now recognised as a mature work by Michaelina Wautier and may be fully appreciated as a significant addition to her œuvre.

The subject of this nearly square canvas is the philosopher Diogenes, shown half-length, seated against a subdued background and absorbed in reading. A lantern, traditionally associated with Diogenes' search for an honest man, appears here discreetly and unlit behind the figure, rather than in the more familiar depictions in which it is illuminated and held by the philosopher.

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“This unusual detail invites interpretation: perhaps Diogenes has found enlightenment in the book he reads, or perhaps he has finally discovered an honest person, rendering the lantern unnecessary. One might wonder whether this refers to the commissioner of the painting, the painter herself, or honours the viewer; alternatively, it may stand as the epitome of Cynicism - did Diogenes need to look any further than himself to find an honest man?”.¹ A comparable representation of Diogenes with an unlit lantern occurs in Jusepe de Ribera’s signed and dated work of 1636 (fig. 1, private collection), then in the collection of Prince Karl Eusebius of Liechtenstein. Given Wautier’s evident familiarity with Ribera’s work, she may well have known this image. Nevertheless, her interpretation is highly distinctive in presenting the philosopher wholly absorbed in reading, an iconographic choice that is itself rare and underscores an unusual emphasis on intellectual concentration.

Although Wautier worked fluently across genres, it is in portraiture and genre scenes that her exceptional observational acuity finds its fullest expression. Her true distinction, however, lies in her mastery of *all* major genres, an achievement made remarkable by the fact that portraiture and history painting especially were at the time almost exclusively reserved for men. Portrait production formed an integral part of her practice from the very beginning of her career. Her earliest identifiable work is the *Portrait of Andrea Cantelmo*, now known only through a 1643 engraving by Paulus Pontius, while her first extant signed and dated painting is the *Portrait of a Commander in the Spanish Army* of 1646 (Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium). Although not a portrait in the strict sense, the present *Diogenes* is clearly conceived from life. The sitter’s unidealised features, weathered skin, and slightly furrowed brow convey the presence of a specific individual. Wautier’s handling of the foreshortened hand - firmly modelled, with pronounced creases and traces of dirt beneath the nails and finely rendered hair - testifies to her exceptional mastery of the brush and of realism.

The most compelling comparison within Wautier’s œuvre remains *Saint Joachim Reading*, now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum (fig. 2). Both works depict a bearded male figure in three-quarter profile, bent intently over a book, isolated within a quiet, introspective space. The similarities extend beyond compositional structure to include facial type, the modelling of the eyes and brow, with finely detailed wrinkles, and the same chromatism. Additionally, in both paintings, reading is treated not as a narrative attribute but as a psychological condition. The figures are withdrawn from the viewer, fully absorbed in intellectual labour, their inward focus underscored by posture and slight inclination of the head and torso. Significantly, *Saint Joachim Reading* was one of the four paintings by Wautier recorded in the 1659 inventory of

¹ Jahel Sanzsalazar, ‘An Honest Man: An Unknown Diogenes by Michaelina Wautier’, in *Art & Deal*, July- August 2024, p. 15

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Archduke Leopold Wilhelm, Governor of the Spanish Netherlands (the only works by a female artist included in this prestigious collection).

Further stylistic comparison may be drawn with *The Triumph of Bacchus* (fig. 3), specifically with the faun pulling Bacchus' cart and the satyr furthest right, who holds onto the female figure (a self-portrait of the artist). These figures display striking affinities with the *Diogenes* in terms of physiognomy and corporeal presence - the deeply set eyes, pronounced noses, heavy-lidded gaze, and robust modelling of flesh, with particular similarity in the highlighting of the collarbone and neck muscles of the satyr. Based on the close affinities between these paintings, the present work may be dated to the early-to-mid 1650s, a period during which Wautier had reached full artistic maturity.

The present work bears several inscriptions of interest which, according to Jahel Sanzsalazar, may be read as signatures.² Within the painted surface itself, extremely small handwriting appears beneath the bookmark placed in the open book, where the name "*diogine*" can be read in italics (fig. 4). It is worth noting that the philosopher's name, spelled in this specific way, also appears on the table in the aforementioned painting by Ribera (fig. 1), strengthening the hypothesis that Wautier was familiar with that work. This type of 'micro-writing' finds a parallel in Wautier's *Portrait of Pierre Wautier*, in which the words "Les fiançailles" are concealed within the sitter's shirt fabric. In addition, an inscription running along the edge of the closed book was revealed through photographic manipulation of contrast levels; this partially legible text includes a "W" and the word "fecit" (fig. 5). Lastly, a further annotation appears on the reverse of the canvas, probably written by the restorer and certainly after the canvas was relined, referring to "Michelin" and followed by an additional name in brackets, tentatively transcribed as "Te[s?][to][lin?]" or "Testelin" (fig. 6). It is likely that the reliner encountered Wautier's name or signature on the reverse of the original canvas and recorded it, and that it was mistranscribed in the process. A comparable situation occurred with the aforementioned *Saint Joachim Reading* (fig. 2), which bears the inscription "MICHELLINE WOVTEERS F." on the reverse; this was likewise copied, this time onto the back of the relined canvas. The precise meaning, function, and chronology of these inscriptions remain difficult to establish, but taken together they add a further layer of interest to the work.

² Jahel Sanzsalazar, 'An Honest Man: An Unknown Diogenes by Michaelina Wautier', in *Art & Deal*, July-August 2024, pp. 19-20.

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Fig. 1. Jusepe de Ribera, *Diogenes*, 1636, oil on canvas, 120 x 95 cm, private collection.



Fig. 2. Michaelina Wautier, *Saint Joachim Reading*, 1650s, oil on canvas, 75 x 64 cm. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.

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Fig. 3, Michaelina Wautier, *The Triumph of Bacchus and Ariadne*, 1650-1656, oil on canvas, 270 x 354 cm. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.

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Fig. 4. Detail of current painting.

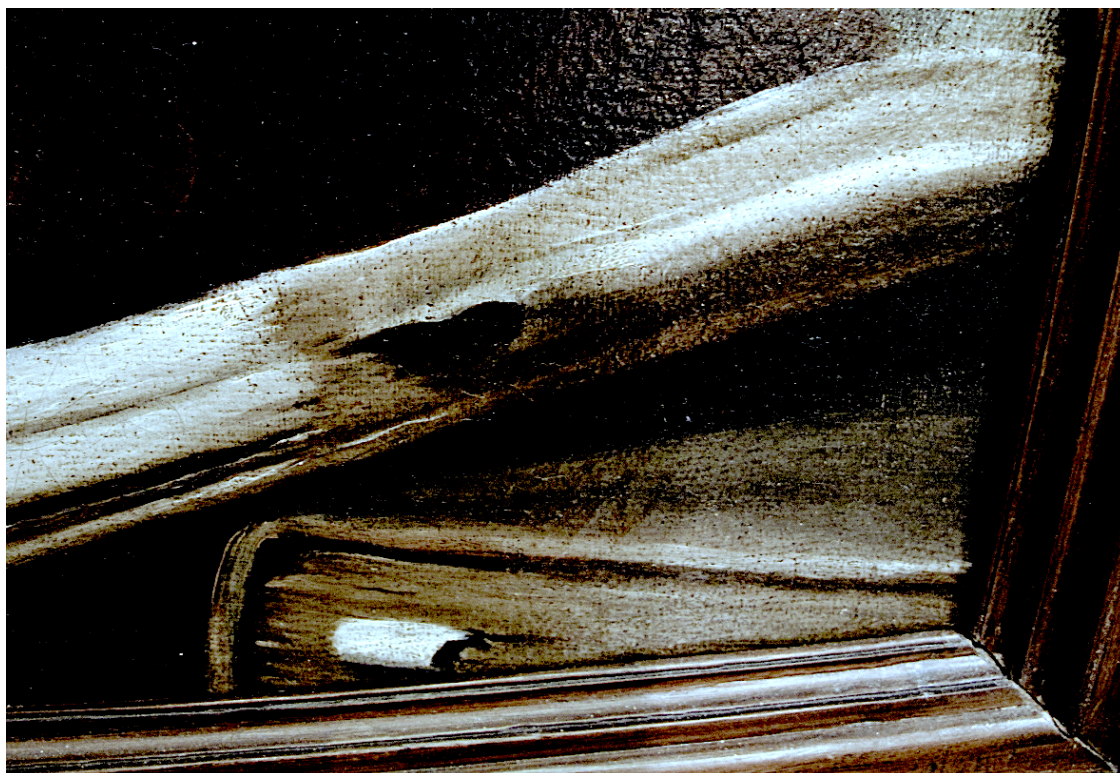


Fig. 5. Detail of current painting with photographic manipulation.

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Fig. 6. Detail of reverse of current painting.

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