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Matthias Stom
A Philosopher Holding a Book

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MATTHIAS STOM

(Flanders, c. 1600 - After 1650, Italy)

A PHILOSOPHER HOLDING A BOOK

Oil on canvas.

80 x 64 cm; 31 1/2 x 25 1/4 in.

Provenance

Private collection.



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The present work can safely be attributed to Matthias Stom, on account of the evident stylistic correspondences with his oeuvre.

The chronology and trajectory of the painter's career remain, however, extremely difficult to reconstruct. Stom's artistic formation is in fact one of the most problematic question marks in the Roman artistic scene of the third decade of the seventeenth century. We do not know when he arrived in the city, nor whether he already possessed a clearly defined training acquired in the Northern Netherlands, probably in Utrecht. It cannot be excluded that he may have come to Rome at a very early date (perhaps in the first half of the third decade), a circumstance that would open up numerous hypotheses and scenarios and would render even more plausible a direct and decidedly more up-to-date engagement with the works of Honthorst and Baburen, produced in the papal city only a few years earlier.

Despite a fairly dense sequence of studies in recent years, the first phase of Stom's activity (between the Netherlands and Rome) remains obscure and extremely difficult to define. Nothing is certain, beginning with the artist's origins which, at least since the proposals advanced by Bok,¹ would seem rather to identify him as a native of Brabant; thus today - by contrast with the many years during which the painter was thought to be Dutch - he would be regarded as a "Belgian", who may have migrated to the Netherlands (to Utrecht?) as a consequence of the religious wars. Nor do we know of any work that can with certainty be placed before, or securely within, the Roman years; equally unknown is the duration of his stay in the papal city, which could range from a very long period (as much as twelve years) to a relatively brief one (four or five years, bearing in mind in any case a *terminus ante quem* that cannot be later than 1634 or the beginning of 1635).² We are, however, certain of his presence in Rome only for the period between Easter 1630 and Easter 1632, since in those years Stom appears in the *stati d'anime* of the parish of San Nicola in Arcione, residing in Via dell'Olmo.³

Before departing for Italy, he had probably already become acquainted with Rubens, to whom he would return on several occasions during his career, and in Utrecht he may have encountered Honthorst and Baburen on their return from Rome. Yet it is

¹ M. J. Bok, in *Holländische Malerei in neuem Licht. Hendrick Terbrugghen und seine Zeitgenossen*, exhibition catalogue (Braunschweig-Utrecht), ed. A. Blankert and L. J. Slatkes, Braunschweig, 1986, pp. 333-334.

² Stom is securely documented in Naples (and must have been there for at least several months) on 28 July 1635: see M. Osnabrughe, 'New Documents for Matthias Stom in Naples', *The Burlington Magazine*, 1331, 2014, pp. 107-108.

³ For an accurate and up-to-date exposition of our current knowledge and of the hypotheses relating to these obscure years of Stom's career, see the recent contribution by C. Malice, *Matthias Stom: oltre i confini del naturale. Un "caravaggesco romanzato" on the road*, in *Zeusi*, 3, 2017, nos. 5-6, pp. 68-82, with bibliography.

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my conviction that both painters may have influenced him also, and perhaps above all, through their works left in Italy in the second decade.

The work under examination - within a still hypothetical reconstruction of the painter's development - could belong to an early phase, perhaps still Roman, since in this looser and more luminous painting one may discern certain echoes of his knowledge of Rubens. In my view this connection, at the level of *ductus*, becomes attenuated in Naples and even more so in Sicily, where the luminism is reduced and the paint surface becomes more defined and less mobile.

Among the works that may usefully be set in comparison with the idiom of this painting, one should cite *The Angel Announcing the Flight into Egypt* in the Fondazione Longhi, Florence, *Tobias and the Angel* in the Bredius Museum, The Hague (fig. 1), and the two paintings of the Evangelists: the first, with Mark and Luke, recorded in 1976 with the Trafalgar Galleries in London (fig. 2), and the second, with Matthew and John, at Columbia University, New York.⁴

Gianni Papi

⁴ For illustrations of these paintings see B. Nicolson, *Caravaggism in Europe*, 2nd edn, revised and enlarged by L. Vertova, Turin, 1990, vol. III, figs. 1562, 1471, 1512, 1514.

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Fig. 1. Matthias Stom, *Tobias and the Angel*, c. 1630–1632, Oil on canvas, 111 × 125 cm.
The Hague, Museum Bredius



Fig. 2. Matthias Stom, *The Evangelists Saint Mark and Saint Luke*, c. 1635, oil on canvas
113 × 154 cm. Formerly London, Trafalgar Galleries.

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