

Paintings by Willem Drost (1633 – 1659) in the Hermitage: new research and hypotheses

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Willem Drost (1633-1659), active in Amsterdam and Venice, was for many years one of the most mysterious figures in the circle of Rembrandt's pupils. His early works reveal how he achieved a mastery of Rembrandt's virtuoso manner. He left Holland in 1655 and settled in Italy, where his style changed considerably under the influence of the Venetian *tenebrosi*. His death, at the age of only 25, in February 1659 cut short this outstanding young artist's career, just as it was reaching new heights.

In recent decades the artist has been the subject of considerable scholarly study. A decisive contribution to the reconstruction of his oeuvre was made by Jonathan Bikker, author of the first monograph on Drost (*Willem Drost (1633 – 1659). A Rembrandt Pupil in Amsterdam and Venice*, New Haven & London, 2005). The material gathered there creates a clearer picture of this highly creative individual's formation as an artist.

At present, only 38 paintings are considered undisputed works by Drost. With time, no doubt, a number of other paintings will surface in museum collections, where they are currently hiding under other names. The works in the Hermitage are a case in point.

The earliest (and best known) painting in the Hermitage attributed to Drost is *Timothy and Lois* – as it is known in the modern literature – or *The Prophetess Anna Instructing a Child* (Bikker, cat. 4; Inv. GE 740; oil on canvas, 117 x 89 cm). Painted around 1654, the canvas demonstrates Drost's superb mastery of his teacher's style. It is therefore not surprising that for two centuries the painting was considered to be one of the Hermitage's best works by Rembrandt himself. Drost's authorship was first proposed in 1924 by G. Falck and has since been accepted by most scholars.

In contrast with this history painting, two other Hermitage compositions belong to the type of image known as 'tronies'. One of these, *Youth with an Earring* (Bikker, cat. 36; Inv. GE 57; oil on canvas, 73 x 54 cm), was given to Pietro Novelli, until its true authorship was established by W. Sumowski in 1990 (*Gemälde der Rembrandt Schuler*, vol. 5, 1990, cat. 2036). The appearance of this romantic youth in 16th-century costume conjures up associations with Renaissance images. There can be no doubt that it belongs to Drost's Italian period, but we can now establish a more precise date.

X-ray photographs of the painting reveal beneath the visible layer another composition by Drost, showing a young woman in semi-profile, with her hair smoothly pulled back. She gazes out at the viewer, her fingers clasping at her breast the drapery that enfolds her shoulders. The flowers in her hair and her revealing décolleté suggest that this is not a portrait but a 'tronie'. Similar figures of 'courtesans' appear in a series of works by Drost that can be dated to his Amsterdam period. Closest is the *Young Woman in a Brocade Gown* (Wallace Collection, London, Inv. P61), in which a similar gesture draws the viewer's attention to the half-revealed breast. In terms of the facial features, there are similar features in works such as the *Young Woman with Pearls* (Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden, Inv. 1591) and *Bathsheba with King David's Letter* of 1654 (Louvre, Paris, Inv. R.F.1349).

All this suggests that this must be a work created at the very beginning of Drost's stay in Italy. This assumption is supported not only by the Rembrandtesque style of the original version, but also by some features of the final composition. Flickers of light in the youth's hair, his earring and the fastening of his doublet, and the general nature of the lighting recall the artist's early manner.

In this author's opinion another work in the Hermitage should also be placed within Drost's oeuvre. In the Museum's catalogue *The Young Shepherd* (Inv. GE 9; oil on canvas, 84.5 x 72.5 cm) features under the name of the Bolognese painter Gaetano Gandolfi (1737-1802). The canvas shows a youth in a broad-rimmed hat and tunic *all'antica*. An almost identical attire is worn by the *Young Boy Holding a Flute* in a private collection in Scandinavia (Bikker, cat. 35), where various details identify the boy as a figure from Arcadia.

Thanks to the spontaneity of the youth's pose in the Hermitage painting (the twisting body implies that he is moving fast) and the dramatic gesture of his hand, the composition creates a vivid effect. The painting is executed broadly, with bravura elements to create generalized forms with a restrained coloring.

A comparison of the Hermitage's *Young Shepherd* with the *Youth with an Earring* reveals a number of common features, such as the sitter's characteristic eyes with large lids, the arched brows and clearly defined mouth. Technical analysis has established that the main pigments in both works are lead white, red and yellow ochre and smalt.

The *Young Shepherd* reminds us especially of Drost's Venetian images, such as the *Young Boy with Dove* (Bikker, cat. 34; Tiroler Landesmuseum Ferdinandeum, Innsbruck) and the *Laughing Boy* (Bikker, cat. 33; priv. coll., Italy). All three paintings have a similar compositional structure.

X-rays of the Hermitage painting reveal that the figure's original gesture was different in that he was holding the brim of his hat. The expressive outlines of his fingers are clearly visible and can be compared with a detail in Drost's *Self-Portrait as John the Evangelist* (Otto Naumann Ltd, New York). The idealized nature of the image reveals Neoclassical tendencies of the kind visible in, for instance, *Saint John the Evangelist* (priv. coll., Venice). Also linking the painting with Drost's other late works is the high viewpoint from which we see the figure.