

***Temptation of Saint Anthony* by Jan Wellens de Cock: a war loss of the National Museum in Warsaw, rediscovered**

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The New Millennium has been quite favorable for the Gallery of European Painting of the National Museum in Warsaw as regards the restoring of some of its war losses. Since the restitution campaign after the Second World War was finished around 1948 only very few paintings were found - in spite of the publication of the war losses in 1950. The frequency was much intensified after 2000, which coincided with a second edition of Polish war losses, although this fact did not affect the hitherto discoveries, half of them rather owing much to the alertness of our colleagues from CODART and RKD.

In 2001 a flower piece by Jacob van Walscappelle returned to the Museum, after having emerged in the United States. Next year saw a spectacular come-back of two paintings: one of the versions of the *Holy Trinity* from the workshop of the Master of the Lille Adoration, which in the past had been donated to the Vizcaya Museum in Miami, Florida without the knowledge of its provenance, and *The Smokers* by Adriaen Brouwer, purchased by Johnny van Haefen at Christie's, sold and repurchased in order to return it to us. Our attention to the *Trinity* in the Vizcaya Museum was drawn by our colleague Peter van den Brink, while the information about Brouwer's *Smokers* was first given us by Fred Meijer of the RKD.

In January this year I was informed that the Wawel Royal Castle in Cracow came into possession of a bequest from a private person, which included, among other objects, a painting by Jan Wellens de Cock, *Temptation of St. Anthony*¹. In all likelihood the painting was identical with the one from our collection, published in the catalogue of 1938, in the "War Losses" in 1950, in a big compendium of European paintings in Polish collections (ed. by J. Białostocki and M. Walicki) in 1955, 1957 (German edition) and 1958 and again in the "War Losses" of 2000². This picture was removed from the National Museum in Warsaw by the Nazi authorities (the team directed by Joseph Mühlmann, the Special Plenipotentiary for Art, District North) as early as November 1939 and transported, together with numerous other works of art classified as the first selection, to the depot of the same Office, Section South (Dienststelle des Sonderbeauftragten Süd) in Cracow. The painting traveled in a crate marked with a symbol 15. M.O. (foreign schools) as the position 2429 on the list of objects then plundered from the collections of the Warsaw National Museum³. It later figured on the Nazi check list of the second selection and finally was crossed out from this list

¹ Oak, 45 x 57 cm

² The painting donated by Andrzej and Hanna Garbiński in 1938, inv. no. 126215 MNW, published: J. Starzyński, M. Walicki, *Katalog galerii malarstwa obcego*, Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie, Warszawa 1938, no. 111 (as Lucas Cornelisz. de Kock); W. Tomkiewicz, *Catalogue of Paintings Removed from Poland by the German Occupation Authorities during the Years 1939-1945*, I, *Foreign Paintings*, Warszawa 1950, p. 38, no. 75, pl. 75; J. Białostocki, M. Walicki, *Europäische Malerei in Polnischen Sammlungen 1300-1800*, Warschau 1957 (1. Polish ed. 1955, 2. Polish ed. 1958), p. 499, no. 135, pl. 135; M. Romanowska-Zadrożna, T. Zadrożny, *Straty wojenne. Malarstwo Obce / Wartime Losses. Foreign Painting*, I, Poznań 2000, p. 130.

³ The National Museum's archives, v. 674: *Das ehemalige polnische Nationalmuseum. 1005. Sichergestellte Kunstgegenständen. Verzeichnis der im November und Dezember 1939 nach Krakau überführten Kisten mit Museumgegenständen*, p. 70.

as well with a note that it had been handed over to the architect Franz Koettgen, responsible for the decoration of the residence of Hans Frank, Governor General of the occupied Poland. This was the last information about the lost painting⁴.

Whether it was later (i.e. 1943-1944) transported, as was the fate of the majority of the looted works of art, to Germany and recuperated after the War from the collecting points in Salzburg or Munich or if it never left Cracow, cannot be ascertained now. At any rate, the painting bequeathed to the Wawel Castle was identified beyond any doubt as the property of the National Museum. The inventory number 126215, chemically removed from the wooden support of the painting at an unknown date, was revealed in the IR reflectography.

The presently accepted author of the painting – Jan Wellens de Cock - is an extremely controversial person, whose identity most likely touches on more than one individual. Various scholars wanted to see in him either a Leiden artist – a pupil or one of the sons of Cornelis Engelbrechtsz. (and it's to one of them – Lucas Cornelisz, that the Warsaw painting was attributed in the catalogue of 1938) or a painter in Antwerp. What more, two dated works, which present evident stylistic affinity with the oeuvre of this artist were executed after the death of a person referred to as Jan Wellens de Cock, documented in Antwerp in 1521.

Without possibility of going into details and into a biographical discussion here⁵, an attempt however should be undertaken to embody the new painting into a group of works traditionally connected with this painter. His oeuvre, basing only on attributions, combines elements of both northern and southern Netherlandish art. Beside the stylistic relations to the Leiden masters, Jan Wellens de Cock frequently used fantastical motives borrowed from Hieronymus Bosch, which makes him one of the earliest followers of this Master. There is also some affinity with the Antwerp Mannerists in expressive gestures of his figures, and his landscape backgrounds owe much to Joachim Patinir. It's above all his landscapes – advanced in composition and intriguing in their atmosphere - that decide on the painter's artistic personality as an important early landscapist. His role in development of this genre of painting is quite essential. Mature landscape qualities are prominent in another painting by this artist in the National Museum in Warsaw - *Saint Anthony Abbot and Saint Paul of Thebes in the Wilderness*, a variant of the composition in the Liechtenstein collection⁶. The landscape here is not just a backdrop for the represented scene, but all the elements of the composition are well integrated, making a harmonious unity that embraces nature, human beings and animals. It's not so perfect in the newly recuperated National Museum's painting, which resembles more a tapestry with numerous bizarre and decorative motifs. In this respect it is comparable rather to Jan Wellens de Cock's composition in the Museum de Lakenhal in Leiden which shows again the scenes from the life of Saint Anthony⁷, evidently a favorite hero of the artist. He painted this first Christian hermit in many variations, most often in the scenes of the

⁴ National Archives, Institute of National Memory, sygn. GG I/5990: *Regierung des Generalgouvernement. Staatssekretariat. Amt für die Pflege alter Kunst. Krakau. Gruppe Süd*, p. 5, no. 6.

⁵ For the most recent discussion on Jan Wellens de Cock's identity comp.: Jan van der Stock, *Printing images in Antwerp*, Rotterdam 1998, p. 115-124; M. Matile, *Die Druckgraphik Lucas van Leydens und seiner Zeitgenossen. Bestandeskatalog der Graphischen Sammlung der ETH Zürich*, Basel 2000, p. 174-177, no. 158; exh. cat. *Een huis vol kunst: Rubens als verzamelaar* (K.L.Belkin, F. Healy), Rubenshuis & Rubenianum, Antwerpen 2004, cat. no. 20, pp. 146-148 (K.L. Belkin); exh. cat. *ExtravagAnt! A Forgotten Chapter of Antwerp Painting 1500-1530* (ed. P. van den Brink, M.P.J. Martens), Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen, Bonnefantenmuseum Maastricht 2005-2006, no. 93 and p. 224 (Yao-Fen You). I want to express my heartfelt thanks to Yao-Fen You for sending me xeroxcopies of some of the above mentioned literature.

⁶ Oak panel, 33,5 x 44 cm; inv. no. M.Ob.820 MNW

⁷ Oak panel, 66 x 106 cm, inv. no. 1130, in the coll. cat. Stedelijk Museum de Lakenhal Leiden, 1983 under Cornelis Cornelisz.

temptation, which in his epoch, marked by religious inquietudes, was very popular. Two panels from the former J. Goudstikker collection, at present in the collection Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid and in a private collection in Antwerp are representative for this thematic group of paintings.

A landscape with a fanciful "Patinir" rock and a distant sea bay makes the background for the narrative story of St. Anthony's torments in the recently rediscovered Warsaw painting. The ascetic godly hermit, who is regarded as a founder of monasticism, spent almost all his life on prayer, fasting and vigilance on the desert. The trials of devils' attacks and temptations which he experienced there, were described in the IV century by his follower, Saint Athanasius the Great, one of the four Fathers of Greek church, and popularized in the Middle Ages by the *Legenda Aurea* of Jacobus de Voragine. We see the Saint worried by demons which acquire here the form of hybrid creatures, very reminiscent of those created by Hieronymus Bosch. He is also tempted by a beautiful woman in fashionable dress, riding on a monster's back, with a golden vessel in her hands. She is a personification of *Luxuria* – Lust, one of the deadly sins – with the symbolic cup of desire, as shown also in the images of the "whore of Babylon" from St. John's Revelation. All those afflictions are further intensified by the fire of the town behind the church. The castle in the right background may be a symbol of the riches left behind by the holy man in his youth. Amidst the distressful experience the Saint finds recourse in Christ on the cross and in the Bible he is holding in his hand. The bizarre, old tree is a frequent motif in Jan Wellens de Cock's paintings. Its central situation here most probably alludes to and prolongs the significance of the crucifix, placed against it.

The Warsaw panel has a loose connection with a woodcut, executed in 1522 and ascribed to Jan Wellens de Cock, in spite of the date of his death one year earlier. A horizontal composition with numerous details, the landscape background comprising such characteristic component parts as a castle, a tree, a hermit's hut and a throng of monsters are quite similar in both works, suggesting a rather close date of their execution.

The dating of the Warsaw painting to the period of early 1520s finds also support in the composition attributed to Jan Wellens de Cock in the Detroit Institute of Art, showing *Lot and his Daughters*, which bears a date 1523⁸. The landscape is more coherent there, with space and depth well organized. The Detroit picture lacks the fantastic Hieronymus Bosch imagery, but the way of painting the foliage and other plants as well as picturesque rock formations and the skies with typical white clouds and black birds spread like necklace against them are analogical if not identical in both pictures. The fashionable female figures - even if the Warsaw one seems more stiff in her profile rendering - are quite similar.

The Warsaw *Temptation* has a variant in The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco collections (the Palace of Legion of Honor)⁹ which varies only by a more compact composition, a more hilly landscape and a different selection of monsters in the foreground. This version is dated to around 1526, that is some four years after the woodcut. It is more mature in its form to the Warsaw version, therefore I believe the latter was painted as the first.

The sequence of horizontal, narrative *Temptations* connected with Jan Wellens de Cock would then start with the woodcut of 1522, followed by the Warsaw version, executed after 1523 and crowned by the painting in San Francisco from ca. 1526.

The restituted painting adds up to the documentation of this rare artist, even if it does not cast any new light on his identity. What more, as a result of the rediscovery the National Museum in Warsaw can boast now two works ascribed to him.

⁸ Panel, 36,2 x 48,9 cm; inv.no. 25.65

⁹ Panel, 48,6 x 62,2cm; inv. no. 1960-22.