

‘The anointing of Solomon’ by Gerard de Lairese discovered in the Cartwright Hall Art Gallery, Bradford

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19. *The anointing of Solomon*, by Gerard de Lairese. ?1668. Canvas, 130 by 200 cm. (Cartwright Hall Art Gallery, Bradford).

BEFORE THE PAINTER Gerard de Lairese (1640–1711) found success and fame in Amsterdam, he had endured some turbulent years. Lacking commissions in his native Liège, he was obliged to look for work elsewhere, going to Cologne and Aachen, where he painted an admirable *Martyrdom of St Ursula*.¹ On his return to Liège, he began to build up a clientele, but in 1664 a love affair forced him to flee the city. He married Maria Salme in 1664 in Utrecht, moving to Amsterdam soon afterwards. While trying in vain to obtain commissions during the second Anglo-Dutch war, not the most auspicious of circumstances, he made some prints of historical subjects. A print of the *Sacrifice of Polyxena* appeared in 1667,² followed by one depicting *Joseph recognised by his brothers*.³

Any weaknesses present in these works had been remedied by 1668, the date of De Lairese's print of *The anointing of Solomon* (Fig.20), described by J.J.M. Timmers and Alain Roy as 'one of the masterpieces of his early years in Amsterdam'.⁴ The subject-matter, the composition's monumental architecture and the dedication to Maximilian-Henry of Bavaria (1621–88), Archbishop-Elector of Cologne, Bishop of Hildesheim and, significant for De Lairese, Bishop of Liège, bear witness to the artist's ambitions. We might imagine how the print was made on the basis of a drawing by De Lairese,⁵ but in fact an autograph painting of this composition has surfaced in the collection of the Cartwright Hall Art Gallery, Bradford (Fig.19), where it is currently described as an anonymous French painting. Its provenance

¹ Destroyed; see A. Roy: *Gérard de Lairese (1640–1711)*, Paris 1992, p.60; and *idem*: 'Quelques nouvelles œuvres attribuées à Gérard de Lairese', *Les Cahiers d'Histoire de l'Art* 2 (2004), pp.117–42, esp. p.117 and p.119, fig.1 (from an old photograph).

² Roy 1992, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.65 and p.416, no.G9.

³ *Ibid.*, p.423; J.J.M. Timmers: *Gérard Lairese*, Amsterdam 1942, I, no.8, pl.II. This print appears to be after the painting that was offered for sale with an attribution to a

'follower of Antoine Coypel' at Sotheby's, London, 3rd July 2007, lot 420. The treatment, halfway between a grisaille and a painting, as well as the slight awkwardness of the figures (particularly the one kneeling on the steps) make it evident that this is an early work.

⁴ *Ibid.*, I, no.9, pl.I; Roy 1992, *op. cit.* (note 1), pp.420–22, no.G16.

⁵ See Timmers, *op. cit.* (note 3), I, pp.94 and 99, no.9.



20. *The anointing of Solomon*, by Gerard de Lairesse after his own painting. 1668. Etching, 39 by 52 cm. (British Museum, London).

is a mystery as it was not listed in the collection of Cartwright Hall until 2006.⁶

The ritual anointment of the king takes place at the foot of an obelisk erected in the middle of a public square surrounded by various classical buildings. Solomon kneels before Zadoc, the high priest, who is preparing to anoint him.⁷ The man in the striped turban to Zadoc's right can be identified as the prophet Nathan. The biblical text informs us that Nathan took part in the ceremony, as did the commander-in-chief of the royal guard, Benaiah, who is the figure in a red robe proffering the sceptre to Solomon. In compliance with the Book of Kings (I Kings:33), David's mule, led by a servant, can be seen to the right. Around the obelisk a throng of people are witnessing the anointment of the king as winged Victories sound their trumpets in celebration.

De Lairesse made some important changes in the print. The crowd has become more scattered, and on the bridge, empty in the print, can be seen people arriving to take part in the event. The crowd at the foot of the obelisk has become more dense, to underline the importance of the ceremony. In fact, the subject may not be the anointment of Solomon but a celebration of the bishopric of Liège and those in charge of its administration. In the painting, the artist introduced in three places the pine cone that symbolises Liège: it is seen in silhouette on the balustrade in the centre foreground, in front of the obelisk (although only partially), as well as on top of the building in the

right background. In the print the increased height of the composition makes the pine cone in front of the obelisk more visible, and its slightly awkward use as an ornament on the balustrade in the painting being superfluous, it was replaced by a simple sphere in the print.

Bearing in mind the prominence given to the pine cone, the symbol of authority of the Prince-Bishops of Liège, and the dedication in the caption to the print, it seems very possible that the painting in Bradford was originally executed for Maximilian-Henry, Duke of Bavaria and Prince-Bishop of Liège. The son of Duke Albert VI of Bavaria, Maximilian-Henry succeeded his uncle in 1650 as Archbishop-Elector of Cologne and Prince-Bishop of Liège.⁸ His appointment aroused strong opposition among the inhabitants of Liège because the position of bishop was threatening to become hereditary. Hostility towards Maximilian-Henry led to political oppression, even to some executions. In this context, De Lairesse's intention may have been to boost the Prince-Bishop's authority through an allegorical depiction of the anointment of Solomon.⁹ As we also know that Maximilian-Henry distinguished himself by rebuilding the Citadel of St Walburga in Liège in 1650, the metaphor of Solomon and the part played by architecture in the composition become easier to understand.

The glorification of the Prince-Bishop of Liège, however, seems at odds with De Lairesse's exile in Amsterdam. In reality his stay in Holland was perhaps only intended to be temporary and, as Alain Roy suggests, the artist may have intended to return to Liège.¹⁰ In addition, the history painter Bertholet Flemalle (1614–75), then the star of the artistic firmament in Liège, was about to return to France, and De Lairesse may well have seen this as an opportunity to return to his native town.¹¹

In his early days De Lairesse had often illustrated water rituals and ceremonies in subjects as diverse as the *Deification of Aeneas*,¹² *Achilles in the river Styx*,¹³ *The baptism of St Augustine*,¹⁴ *The washing of Ulysses*,¹⁵ and of course the painting under discussion here. Beyond the anointings, deifications and other purifying rituals, it was often the allegorical import of such scenes that interested De Lairesse. He later gained a reputation as the best painter of allegorical subjects in Amsterdam. There is no doubt that the theatricality of such events played a role in the success of these paintings: the motif of the crowd watching (as we do) the anointment of Solomon and the motif of the balustrade, suggesting both audience and performance, was employed by the artist again and again.¹⁶

That only two other paintings by De Lairesse were known to exist in British public collections makes the discovery at the Cartwright Hall Art Gallery all the more important as an addition to De Lairesse's painted *œuvre*.¹⁷

⁶ We have no way of knowing if the painting was owned by Edmund Cartwright (1743–1823), whose collections form the nucleus of the collection of the Bradford museum. I wish to thank Kathryn Barker for her kind help with the painting's provenance.

⁷ I Kings:38–40.

⁸ W. Killy and R. Vierhaus: *Dictionary of German Biography*, Munich 2003, VI, p.708.

⁹ In the painting, the face of Solomon bears a striking resemblance to that of Joseph in *Joseph before Pharaoh* (sale, Sotheby's, London, 12th December 1990, lot 161), a painting thought previously to represent *David and Saul*.

¹⁰ Roy 1992, *op. cit.* (note 1), pp.65 and 421.

¹¹ On the life and work of the painter Bertholet Flemalle, see P.-Y. Kairis: *Bertholet Flemal (1614–1675)*, Paris 2015.

¹² Roy 1992, *op. cit.* (note 1), pp.201–02, no.P15 (present whereabouts unknown).

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp.197–98, no.P11 (Palace of Sanssouci, Potsdam).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.192–93, no.P6 (Landesmuseum, Mainz).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.205–06, no.P20 (Alte Pinakothek, Munich).

¹⁶ See, in particular, *The circumcision* (sale, Sotheby's, London, 8th April 1987, lot 69) and the *Allegory of the glory of Amsterdam* (Amsterdam Museum).

¹⁷ The *Allegory of the Senses* (Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow) and *Jacob and Rachel at the well* (Dick Institute, Kilmarnock). Although listed as a work by Gerard de Lairesse, the *Homage to Venus* in the Glynn Vivian Art Gallery, Swansea, bears no relation to the artist's work and in my opinion is the work of a Northern painter active around 1700.