

DIGITAL AGNES

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Looking Queerly or Queerly-Looking?

Queering the Collection

SPEAKERS

Marcus Baron Young and Dr Suzanne van de Meerendonk

KEYWORDS

The Bader Collection of European Art, biblical stories, queer art

TRANSCRIPT

[Music]

Marcus Baron Young: Nicolaes Maes was a 17th-century Dutch artist. He was a student of Rembrandt and, like Rembrandt, he foregrounded emotions in his artworks. And this is really what "Abraham's Sacrifice" is about. It is about this tension between Abraham and Isaac and letting the spectator live in this liminal moment anticipating what was going to happen after—if Abraham did continue to strike Isaac.

Dr Suzanne van de Meerendonk: It is a work by a young artist in many ways trying to establish himself, maybe making a mark. And while Maes later on in life would create work that was quite different from Rembrandt's, you see here that he is still incorporating a lot of lessons from his training. And of course, because this is a biblical painting, this would have been considered quite an intellectually ambitious work. Because as a painter not only did you have to know Scripture, you also had to convincingly portray a scene that's set in biblical antiquity, and in this case of course also incorporate a high sense of emotion and drama. So that would've been quite a challenge. Light is very important in this composition. So you see that the figure of Isaac is really well-lit, more lit than any of the other figures. And his body is sort of elongated. And the direction of the light -- the light source is not per se depicted, but you can imagine that angel who was part of this composition emits this heavenly light that illuminates Isaac's body. And because the rest of the composition is fairly dark, you immediately are drawn into looking at this figure.

So there are several drawings known today that can be connected to the painting in Agnes's collection, and this is quite extraordinary. This is not always the case that we have this insight into the creative process. And so one example is a drawing in the collection of the Louvre in Paris, which is basically quick schematic of the whole composition. It's a quick pen-and-ink drawing, and in it you see the three main protagonists. So this is Isaac, Abraham and the angel. And you see that Maes is trying to figure out exactly how they are positioned in relationship to each other, how the dynamic between these different protagonists is. And through those very small differences in position and action determine precisely what exact moment in the story of Isaac's sacrifice is portrayed.

Marcus: I think with this image there's a visual awareness of Isaac as the subdued character. You can see a bit of a patriarchal relationship going on between Isaac and his father Abraham where he's

saying yes to the sacrificial offering. But also between Abraham and God where he's saying yes to God's command. And on the other hand, we're seeing a mirroring of the Christian sacrifice of the Mass or the Eucharist where Maes has depicted a top-down kind of hierarchy or distribution of power. Where you see God represented by the angel on top, you've got Abraham in the middle as a priest, and then you've got Isaac at the bottom of this hierarchy as the sacrificial offering. So all these characters are contributing to a story of Isaac as the overpowered or subdued figure.

Suzanne: Another preparatory drawing that we look at here which is in the collection of the V&A in London is a slightly different kind of preparatory drawing. So it's focussing all on the figure of Isaac and trying to, you know, zoom in on how this particular pose, which is quite a complicated pose, you know? He's tilted towards the viewer. It's a foreshortened view. So that's very complicated to depict, and so this necessitated, you know, study from a live nude model. And this was something that Maes had already probably learnt to do in Rembrandt's workshop. And, in this case, he is using that practice of, you know, drawing after a nude model to get, you know, this very complicated kind of ambitious pose right in this artwork. And so very particular details like exactly how the arch in the back works when someone is tilted like that or, you know, how the cheeks are flushed when someone is positioned with their head down, how the ribs kind of protrude when you're in that position. All these kind of things he was able to observe from life.

Marcus: I think Maes's intentions here were twofold. On the one hand, you've got the heightened eroticization of Isaac. We're comparing the nude sketch to the painted Isaac. The painted Isaac's loincloth is actually a bit lower below the navel. In a way, this loincloth acts as a curtain or a peep show enticing us, the spectator, to think what is lying underneath, teasing us, as opposed to showing Isaac fully nude with his genitals up front.

Suzanne: So I think what the drawings show us is that you have a young artist who is trying to set up quite an ambitious composition and through a series of drawing is working out exactly how to create this very heightened sense of emotion and in doing so also portraying Isaac as the main centre and therefore the most important figure that we relate to as a viewer.

Marcus: I think what makes these renditions of Isaac queerly looking is the way in which Maes depicted the Isaac character through the male nude body. By offering him as a sexual provocation, he becomes this sort of visual temptation for the spectator, and this opens up a queer way of looking. And what I mean by that is a way of looking at this biblical narrative in a transgressive way, and perhaps for our purposes in a less than holy way where eroticism and desire have become very present messages. I think it's important to do queer readings of these strictly religious narratives because, one, it opens up an inclusive way of seeing it. It is disidentificatory in a way that you're recognizing the visual elements of the piece. Although you're not discarding the history, you're reinterpreting it in a way that is inclusive of say queer desire. And that's important, especially in the history of Christianity which uses the story of Abraham and Isaac as canons to its story, seeing yourself not depicted can be a bad feeling because -- especially if you are a Christian or identifying as a Christian. But by re-inscribing yourself in the story through desire, it becomes a more inclusive narrative. So that's where the strength of the queering comes from.

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