

# Jan de Bray

*and the Classical Tradition*



Jan de Bray (c. 1627–1697) was one of the foremost Dutch artists working in the classical tradition, a style of painting in Holland that fused naturalism with ideals of beauty that originated in antiquity. Although De Bray was also an architect and an

inventor, he was primarily a painter of portraits

and historical subjects. Often he blended these

two genres in what is known as the *portrait*

*historié*, or historicized portrait. Works

of this type portrayed contemporary indi-

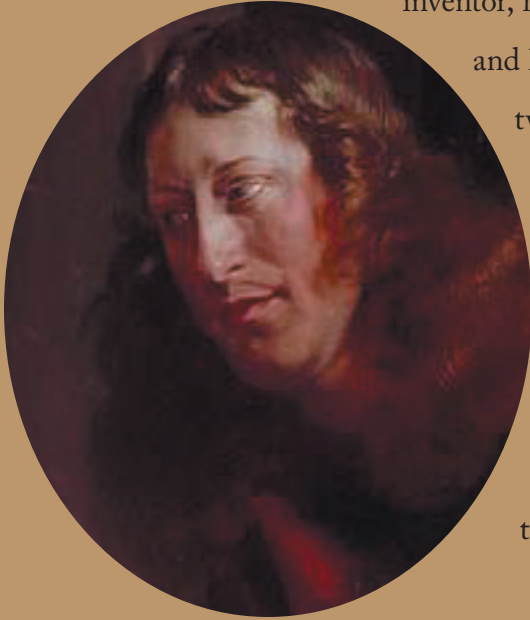
viduals in the guise of figures from the

Bible, mythology, or ancient history and

literature, thereby drawing parallels

between the virtues of the sitters and

those of the historial personages.



Detail, *A Couple Represented as Ulysses and Penelope*. (See no. 4.)

The five paintings by De Bray in this small exhibition, all from American collections, demonstrate his remarkable skills in portraiture, with emphasis on the *portrait historié*. These paintings also reveal much about the artist's devotion to family members, particularly his parents, whom he celebrated and memorialized in his art.

## THE ARTIST'S LIFE

Jan de Bray was born in Haarlem into a creative, cultured family. His father, Salomon de Bray, with whom he presumably studied, was a painter and architect who helped establish the painter's Guild of St. Luke in Haarlem in the 1630s. He was also a poet and a member of a rhetorician's society in the city. Jan's mother, Anna Westerbaen, who came from an artistic family in The Hague, was the sister of the portrait painter Jan Westerbaen, and of the poet and physician, Jacob Westerbaen. Two of Jan de Bray's brothers, Dirck and Joseph, were also painters. Tragedy struck the family when both of Jan's parents, whom he represented in an imposing double portrait (no. 2), and four of his siblings, including Joseph, died in a plague that ravaged Haarlem from 1663 to 1664.

Jan suffered further losses. Raised a Catholic, he was married three times, each time to a woman of that faith. De Bray lost his first wife, Maria van Hees, in 1669, the year after their marriage. His second wife, Margaretha de Meyer, died in 1673, within a year of their wedding. He married his third wife, Victoria Magdalena Stalpert van der Wielen, in 1678, but he became a widower yet again when she died in childbirth in 1680. Although no known portraits of Margaretha exist, De Bray depicted Maria in 1668 in a *portrait historié* of the couple as Ulysses and Penelope (see no. 4) that he painted in the year of their marriage. Similarly, in 1678, the year of his third marriage, he portrayed Victoria Magdalena as her namesake, Mary Magdalene (no. 5).

Despite the tragedies of his personal life, De Bray pursued a successful artistic career in Haarlem, where he was named dean of the Guild of St. Luke several times in the 1670s and 1680s. In 1686 he moved to Amsterdam and helped design a freshwater reservoir near the river Amstel in 1688. A year later he suffered financial setbacks and was forced to declare bankruptcy. By 1692 his fortunes had sufficiently rebounded for him to be granted citizenship in Amsterdam. Although he remained there for the rest of his life, after his death his body was brought back to Haarlem where he was buried on 4 April 1697.

## DUTCH CLASSICISM

Dutch seventeenth-century artists are usually celebrated for their extraordinary ability to render the physical reality of the Netherlands. They were particularly renowned for their skill depicting the effects of light, color, atmosphere, and texture, often making paintings so realistic that the eye is momentarily deceived by the illusion. However, other styles and interests coincided with Dutch realism and were seen by contemporaries as being equally, if not more, important. Primary among these was classicism.

Dutch classicism, the style of painting with which De Bray is most closely associated, drew its inspiration from many of the same ancient writers and pictorial sources that underlie fifteenth-century Italian Renaissance art. Artists working in the classical tradition emphasized harmony, proportion, and balance in their compositions in order to arrive

at an idealized beauty. These qualities appear in the *portraits historiés* on display here, particularly *Banquet of Antony and Cleopatra* (no. 3), where symmetrically arrayed figures are situated in an imposing architectural setting. However, classicizing elements also appear in subjects more typically associated with Dutch painting, such as landscapes, scenes of daily life, or portraits. For example, *Boy Holding a Basket of Fruit* (no. 1), is the most naturalistic of Jan de Bray's paintings shown here, yet at the same time, the painting's smooth brushwork, color harmony, and use of light and shadow contribute to the idealization of the youth.

Dutch interest in classical traditions, evident among early seventeenth-century humanists, received its most important visual manifestation in Haarlem in the work of the painter Hendrick Goltzius (1558–1617), the teacher of Jan de Bray's father Salomon. Goltzius largely abandoned the prevailing mannerist style with its elongated, contorted figures after he visited Italy in 1591. In Rome, he made a number of

drawings after antique sculptures and the works of Raphael and Michelangelo, drawings that later served as inspiration for some of his influential woodcuts and engravings. Goltzius' classicizing tendencies were further shaped by his encounter with Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), who came to Haarlem in 1613 to meet him. Rubens, who had been in Italy during the first decade of the seventeenth century, had studied the antiquities he found there even more extensively than had Goltzius, examining not only sculpture and architecture, but also coins, medallions, and cameos.

Rubens' sojourn in Italy had an enormous impact on his style. After the artist returned to his home in Antwerp in 1609, he formulated a manner of painting that fully incorporated classical ideals. For example, in the double portrait, traditionally identified as *Tiberius and Agrippina* (fig. 1), Rubens posed the two figures in the manner of an ancient Roman cameo. By the time the young Salomon de Bray came to study with Goltzius in the mid-1610s, the older master was painting mythological and biblical scenes with large-scale, idealized human figures reminiscent of those Rubens had depicted (see fig. 2). Salomon de Bray adopted this style and passed it on to his son Jan when he joined his studio, presumably in the 1640s.

While Jan de Bray's artistic lineage is firmly linked to the stylistic innovations of Goltzius and Rubens in the 1610s, the ideals underlying Dutch classicism in the 1650s and 1660s have a far broader basis. Dutch theorists, including Carel van Mander (1548–1606) and Franciscus Junius (1589–1677), estab-

Figure 1  
Sir Peter Paul Rubens,  
*Tiberius and Agrippina*,  
c. 1614, oil on panel,  
26<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 22<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub>.  
National Gallery of  
Art, Washington,  
Andrew W. Mellon  
Fund (included in  
exhibition)





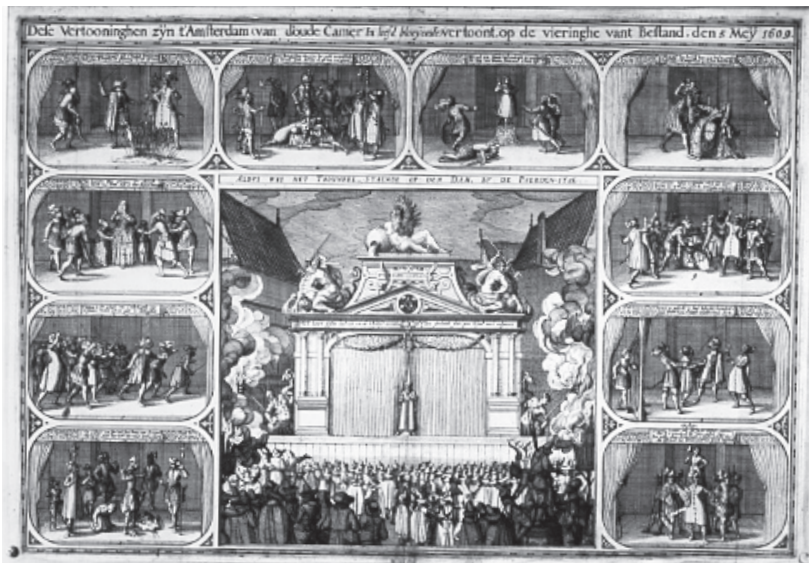
Figure 2  
Hendrik Goltzius,  
*The Fall of Man*, 1616,  
oil on canvas.  
National Gallery of  
Art, Washington,  
Patrons' Permanent  
Fund

lished rules of painting to guide artists in creating works that could rival those of the ancients. At the same time, artists, including the painter/architect Salomon de Bray, drew inspiration from important architectural treatises by the Roman theorist Vitruvius and the sixteenth-century Italian theorists Andrea Palladio (1508–1580) and Vincenzo Scamozzi (1548–1616). The buildings Salomon de Bray and other Dutch architects designed in the 1640s and 1650s, including municipal struc-

tures, large country estates, and palaces, were often decorated with large-scale allegorical paintings in the classical manner. The influx of Italian architectural traditions into the Netherlands thus reinforced the importance of painting in the classical tradition around mid-century. Jan de Bray's imposing *Banquet of Antony and Cleopatra* (no. 3), with its pronounced architectural elements, is exactly the type of painting that would have been placed within a classically conceived building.

Classical traditions were also important for Dutch humanists because they saw historical parallels between the Roman Republic and the formation of the Dutch Republic. In 1609, for example, at the celebration of the signing of the Twelve Year's Truce between Spain and the Netherlands (which de facto established the Dutch Republic), a theatrical performance devoted to the story of the legendary Roman heroine Lucretia was performed in Amsterdam (fig. 3). The significance of the story was

Figure 3  
Claes Jansz Visscher,  
*The Play of Lucretia's  
Sacrifice*, 1609,  
engraving. Rijks-  
prentenkabinet,  
Amsterdam



not lost on the audience: after her brutal rape, Lucretia had committed suicide to protect her patrician family's honor, precipitating the revolt that instituted the Roman Republic. Roman heroes and heroines such as Lucretia resonated with the Dutch, so much so that the *portrait historié* became increasingly important in Dutch artistic practice, with sitters portrayed not only as classical heroes but also as religious ones. In assuming the roles of such virtuous figures, the Dutch, to a far greater extent than other Europeans at the time, drew upon a tradition of symbolic portraiture that extended as far back as antiquity.

Jan de Bray felt entirely comfortable within this tradition, in both its stylistic approach and its thematic emphasis, and, as is evident in this selection of paintings, utilized the *portrait historié* extensively when representing his family. He clearly viewed the *portrait historié* as an ideal vehicle for conveying the virtues of his loved ones and the bonds that existed in their relationships with each other. Although stylistically all of these works fit comfortably within the classical tradition, he associated his family members with heroes from both antiquity and the Bible. A number of these paintings depict deceased family members, which suggests that he conceived them as commemorative images.

## 1

### *Boy Holding a Basket of Fruit*

1658

oil on panel, 26<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 22<sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub>

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Charles H. Bayley Picture Fund and other funds

The smooth brushwork and even illumination that Jan de Bray used in this appealing painting are consistent with classical traditions in mid-century Haarlem. De Bray modeled the boy's facial features with subtle gradations of light and shadow to create an idealized image of the young sitter. He used a similar approach to render the fruit and the ivy wreath. Color enhances the harmony of the image, as, for example, in the application of red accents throughout the composition, whether in the ruddy tone of the boy's cheeks, the silky hue of the bow tie, the velvet cuff on his sleeve, or the crimson blush on the apples.

Despite the carefully constructed composition, the apparent informality of the sitter's pose and the directness of his gaze evince a naturalness that is an important component of the artist's classicism. De Bray's career





Figure 4  
Frans Hals, *Adriaen van Ostade*, 1646/1648, oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington, Andrew W. Mellon Collection

overlapped that of Frans Hals (c. 1582/1583–1666), the leading portrait painter in Haarlem during the artist’s formative years. Hals’ distinct style, which is characterized by loose brushwork and relaxed poses, creates a sense of immediacy that the younger artist apparently emulated in this relatively early work. As in Hals’ depiction of the artist *Adriaen van Ostade* (fig. 4), the slight turn of the boy’s head creates a sense of physical depth and psychological presence.

The basket of fruit held by the boy and the ivy vine draped over his arm invests this

portrait with symbolic meaning. In Dutch emblematic literature, fruit was frequently associated with fertility and human potential. However, just as fruit needs to be cultivated to ripen, a child needs to be properly reared to reach full potential. A similar parallel was made between ivy and education. When not controlled, ivy grows wild. Thus, its presence reinforces the message that human potential is reached through discipline and good upbringing.

## 2

*Portrait of the Artist's Parents,  
Salomon de Bray and Anna Westerbaen*  
1664

oil on panel, 31<sup>5</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 25<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub>

National Gallery of Art, Washington,  
Gift of Joseph F. McCrindle

While this compelling double portrait traditionally has been dated to around 1660, it is more likely that Jan painted it in May 1664 as a posthumous portrait of his parents shortly after they had succumbed to the plague in Haarlem. This stark double profile image has a timeless quality, enhanced by the parents' simple black dress and their austere surroundings. De Bray stipulated in his will that the painting should be given to the city of Haarlem, an indication that he viewed this work as a commemorative portrait, one that would ensure that his parents would not be forgotten.

The profile portrait was a common format on Roman coins, cameos, and celebratory medals depicting individuals of high

birth and rank. The tradition of using profile portraits when representing famous men and women was revived in the Renaissance and is even found in the seventeenth-century Netherlands, specifically in representations of the prince and princess of Orange. De Bray's use of overlapping profile portraits, on the other hand, is rarely found in seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish painting, the most important precedent being Rubens' *Tiberius and Agrippina* (see fig. 1). Rubens, who studied and collected antique cameos and medallions, explicitly adapted this format for his painting of these Roman aristocrats, which he probably executed shortly after he visited Goltzius in Haarlem in 1613. De Bray, who may have been familiar with this evocation of a cameo, chose a similar pose when depicting his parents to evoke classical ideals of dignity and permanence.

Jan represented Salomon de Bray with his left hand outstretched as though he were about to speak, a rhetorical pose that identified his father as a man who excelled at intellectual pursuits. Such associations are enhanced by his skull cap, dark mantle and simple white collar, all common scholarly attire. Anna is depicted in a similar fashion. She wears a pointed skull cap and dark mantle of thick velvet. In 1664 Jan, in collaboration with his brother Dirck, who was a printmaker, also produced a second commemorative portrait of his father (fig. 5), a woodcut image based on a drawing he had made in 1657 (Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett).

Figure 5  
Dirck de Bray after  
Jan de Bray, *Portrait  
of Salomon de Bray*,  
1664, woodcut.  
National Gallery of  
Art, Washington,  
Rosenwald Collection  
(included in  
exhibition)







*Banquet of Antony and Cleopatra*

1669

oil on canvas, 98 1/16 × 74 13/16

Currier Museum of Art, New Hampshire, Museum Purchase, Currier Funds

The implicit classical associations contained in De Bray's double portrait of his parents are made explicit in this monumental painting, dated 1669. This *portrait historié*, an enlarged and augmented version of a composition De Bray first conceived in 1652 (fig. 6), represents De Bray's parents as Antony and Cleopatra, with other family members included in the scene. Nothing is known about the circumstances surrounding the creation of these large *portraits historiés* or why De Bray chose this subject with which to portray his family on two different occasions, the latter one some five years after his parents' deaths.

The grand scale of both works, however, indicates the significance De Bray attached to these representations of his family, which

commemorate his parents' exemplary virtues and values.

The story of the banquet of Antony and Cleopatra, which Pliny the Elder described when discussing pearls in his treatise on *Natural History* (IX.58.119–121), would have been most familiar to a Dutch audience through the writings of the popular author and moralist Jacob Cats (1577–1660). Cats included the story of Antony and Cleopatra's banquet in a collection of rhymed essays on marriage and conjugal fidelity entitled *Trou-ringh* (Wedding Ring) that he published in 1637. In Pliny's account and Cats' retelling, Antony and Cleopatra wager on who can arrange the most elaborate banquet possible. At Cleopatra's banquet, Antony is initially mystified when he is offered only a simple repast. However, in the climactic moment De Bray depicts, Cleopatra raises her hand to unhook a pearl earring, which Pliny describes as the finest example of the jewel known to mankind. With her left hand, she holds a glass containing strong vinegar that will dissolve the pearl and allow her to drink it, thus consuming an object of incomparable worth and winning her grandiose bet in a single swallow.

De Bray's banquet scene evokes a lavish theatrical performance, or *tableau vivant*, an effect reinforced by the drawn curtain and raised proscenium-like platform. The figures glance at one another in seeming anticipation of the central drama. The richness of the elaborately patterned Turkish carpet draped over the balustrade, the various golden objects and glass vessels, as well as the sumptuous colors and intricate patterns of the costumes and surroundings contribute to the splendor of the image.

The couple is placed behind a linen clad table and surrounded by family members. Jan portrayed himself as the soldier at the left,

Figure 6  
Jan de Bray, *The Banquet of Antony and Cleopatra*, 1652, oil on canvas. Hampton Court, Collection of Her Majesty the Queen





possibly in the role of Antony's friend Lucius Plancus, who convinced Cleopatra not to dissolve her second pearl earring. Jan's brother Dirck is probably the figure standing to the right who looks out at the viewer from behind the two female attendants. Five other children, presumably younger brothers and sisters, occupy the foreground. The children reinforce the sense that the union was fruitful. As neither Pliny nor Cats mention any children, their presence indicates that De

Bray consciously included them to emphasize the family's closeness.

With the exception of a second female attendant nearest Cleopatra, De Bray replicates the figures and their poses from his 1652 painting. The added female attendant appears to be Jan's first wife Maria van Hees, whom the artist married in 1668 (see no. 4). Since Maria died in 1669, it may be that her death sparked De Bray's decision to reconstitute the 1652 painting as a commemorative

group portrait including all the family members who had died since the plague struck Haarlem in 1663–1664.

While the story of Antony and Cleopatra's banquet was depicted by numerous Dutch artists, none other than De Bray used it as the basis for a *portrait historié*. At first, this story of Cleopatra consuming her precious pearl seems to be an example of wasteful extravagance. Nevertheless, De Bray infuses the scene with great dignity and imparts a sense of wonder at Cleopatra's act through the upright poses of the attendants and the curious glances of the children. Even Antony responds approvingly to Cleopatra as he turns toward her with an open and loving expression. The key to the story's positive message lies in the pearl, which was associated with chastity and virginity as well as wealth.

De Bray, following Jacob Cats' interpretation of the story, uses the banquet scene as a means of celebrating both his mother's chastity—equated with marital fidelity—and, surprisingly, her frugality. In Cats' retelling of the story, Antony lauds Cleopatra for sparing her other pearl earring and “praises her brave heart.” In De Bray's painting, Cleopatra prominently holds her pearl earring, emblematic of her marital fidelity, while Antony, wearing a laurel wreath, symbol of his lasting fame, brings his right hand to his heart and gazes toward her in approval. The dog, a common symbol of fidelity, wears a heart on his collar, a motif that further emphasizes the celebration of a deeply loyal and loving relationship. Thus, in this remarkable *portrait historié*, De Bray commemorates the ideals for which this family stood and the lasting bonds that united parents, children, and spouses despite the cruelty of fate that prematurely claimed so many of their lives.

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## 4

*A Couple Represented as  
Ulysses and Penelope*  
1668

oil on canvas, 43¼ × 65  
Collection of The Speed Art Museum,  
Louisville, Kentucky

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In this imposing *portrait historié*, dated 1668, De Bray chose a well-known antique exemplar of marital fidelity—the reunion of Ulysses and Penelope—to celebrate his marriage to Maria van Hees. Depictions of scenes from the *Odyssey*, which had been translated into Dutch as early as 1561, were rare in the seventeenth century. Nevertheless, Homer's text must have been well known in the De Bray household since both Salomon and Jan painted various episodes from this epic poem.

De Bray depicts the moment recounted by Homer in the *Odyssey* when Ulysses, the king of Ithaca, returns to his faithful wife Penelope twenty years after leaving to fight the Trojans. During Ulysses' extended absence, Penelope devised a scheme to ward off suitors by promising to marry only after she had finished weaving a cloth for her father-in-law. Each night she unraveled the cloth she had woven that day, thereby remaining true to Ulysses during her steadfast wait for his return.

Even though Maria wears a dress fashionable in the 1660s, she is identifiable as Penelope by the loom she holds on her lap. The columns behind her further symbolize her constancy. Penelope indicates her sincerity and devotion by placing her right hand



over her heart, a gesture similar to that of Antony in the banquet scene of *Antony and Cleopatra* (no. 3). De Bray, in the guise of Ulysses, wears historical garb, in particular the cloak and armor, then associated with classical antiquity. The dog that jumps onto his lap is an integral part of Homer's narrative, for the faithful Argus was the first to recognize Ulysses upon his return.

With its large-scale, three-quarter length figures, this painting demonstrates De Bray's masterful ability to render the human form in a manner that seems both natural and idealized, a fundamental characteristic of his classical style. He also sought to convey both

inner warmth and personal dignity in his portraits, as is apparent in the exchange of glances between the two figures as they bend toward each other. Finally, his remarkable ability to create a range of textures, from the soft fur of the dog, to the sheen of Penelope's satin dress, to the hard, reflective metal of Ulysses' armor, enhances the pictorial appeal of this image.

## 5

### *The Penitent Magdalene*

1678

oil on panel, 28½ × 22

Private collection, New Haven

De Bray painted *The Penitent Magdalene* in 1678, the year that he married Victoria Magdalena Stalpert van der Wiele, who came from a prominent Roman Catholic family. Executed with broad brushwork and even illumination, this image portrays Jan's third wife in the guise of her namesake, Mary Magdalene. In De Bray's tender image, the penitent Magdalene quietly gazes at the viewer while bending toward a crucifix, which she has partially wrapped in her golden tresses as it rests against her shoulder. In addition to this expression of spiritual devotion, the still-voluptuous penitent lays her left hand on a skull, symbolic of life's transience, which she has placed on an open book before her.

The story of Mary Magdalene's life as a repentant sinner captured the imagination of Catholic and Protestant alike, but it especially resonated with Catholics. Numerous representations of her were made in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, many of which depicted biblical stories in which she participated, as, for example, the prostitute washing Christ's feet with her long, golden hair, and, having chosen the right path, sitting before Christ listening to his words. Other images isolated her from such biblical narratives, focusing instead on the very separate, yet related, messages that her life came to exemplify—the transience of worldly pleasures and the importance of repentance as a means to salvation. Depictions of Mary Magdalene as a *portrait historié*, however, are extremely rare, which makes this painting all the more remarkable.

A long pictorial tradition existed, to which this painting belongs, of depicting Mary Magdalene near a cave where, according to legend, she lived in penance for the last thirty years of her life. Many of these representations were of a recumbent Mary Magdalene reading a sacred text next to her crucifix and ointment jar. The full implications of the relationship between the Magdalene's sensual appearance and her penance became fully realized only after the Council of Trent (1545–1563), when the idea developed that Mary Magdalene's seductive physical appearance was essential for expressing the fullness of her spiritual conversion.

Almost all seventeenth-century artists depicted Mary Magdalene as a sensual being: a young attractive female with long, flowing blond hair, and loosely robed in a manner that reveals both the fullness of her breasts and her smooth, pale skin. Although De Bray modestly clothed his wife in a white blouse and red dress, she evokes a sensual beauty similar to that celebrated by poets who praised Magdalene's mouth, her snow-white hand, her clear alabaster skin, and her long, golden hair. Despite emphasizing her sensuality, De Bray alludes to the chaste devotion of the repentant Magdalene to Christ by including an earthenware sieve in the background (a symbol of virginity because of a Roman legend of a virgin who proved her purity by carrying one filled with water without spilling its contents). Finally, with her right hand the Magdalene gestures to herself as an indication of her devotion and her role as a spiritual intermediary between Christ and the viewer. As indicated by the number on the cross, this painting is one that De Bray kept in his possession and bequeathed to his son in 1689.



Contributors to this brochure include Phoebe Avery and Robin Brinkerhoff from the University of Maryland, College Park; Kurt Sundstrom, curator, Currier Museum of Art; and Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., curator, northern baroque paintings, National Gallery of Art. The brochure was edited by Margaret Doyle and produced by the department of exhibition programs and the publishing office at the National Gallery of Art.

Note: Measurements are given in inches.

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cover: Detail, *Banquet of Antony and Cleopatra*, 1669. Currier Museum of Art, New Hampshire, Museum Purchase, Currier Funds (See no. 3.)

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