

One Painting Gallery: Georges de La Tour, At the Usurer's

Georges de La Tour

At the Usurer's

(as part of the cycle One Painting Gallery)

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The Grodzka Tower Chamber (ground floor)

A century has passed since the discovery of Georges de La Tour, one of the most eminent and most intriguing French painters, who remained in oblivion for nearly 250 years following his death. As Jacques Thuillier observed in the catalogue of the artist's first monographic exhibition in 1972, the painter's discovery was a triumph of art history and its legitimisation as a scholarly discipline.

When Herman Voss published his first text about de La Tour in 1915, no one suspected that the painting, at that time in the Museum of the Princes Lubomirski in Lviv, part of the Ossolineum, would be linked with this painter's name and will significantly contribute to the discussion about the oeuvre of this enigmatic painter.

The painting entered the holdings of the Lubomirski Museum with the Dąbski collection; in the list of paintings from the Dąbski gallery it was described as showing Usurers, and was attributed to Gerardo della Notte, or Gerrit Honthorst (1592–1656). The Dąbski gallery, set up in the early 19th c. by Łukasz Dąbski (1751–1824), was one of the most magnificent private Polish art collections.

In the late 18th c., the painting was the property of Charles-Eugène de Lorraine, Prince d'Elboeuf de Lambesc (1751–1825), married since 1803 to Anna nee Cetner (1764–1814), primo voto Sanguszkowa, secundo voto Sapieżyna, tertio voto Potocka. On her death in 1814, her property (including most probably paintings) was inherited by Łukasz Dąbski, officially her estate advisor. In 1814 La Tour's painting was recorded as the property of Łukasz Dąbski. In 1829 his heir, Tomasz Dąbski, deposited the collection at the Ossoliński National Foundation in Lviv, where it was part of the Museum of the Princes Lubomirski (set up within the Ossolineum in 1823). In 1832 the Dąbski family withdrew the deposit from the Ossolineum and loaned the collection to the Society of Friends of Fine Arts in Krakow; the painting *At the Usurer's* was on display in the Cloth Hall there. In 1900 the collection returned for close to 3 decades to the family and ultimately, in 1929, Stanisław Dąbski decided to offer it as a gift to the Ossolineum in Lviv. In 1940, along with some of the Ossolineum holdings, the painting was included into the newly established Lviv Art Gallery. At that time it was attributed to Theodoor Rombouts (1597–1637).

It was only at the monograph show of Georges de La Tour in 1972 that the work was exhibited for

the first time as ascribed to this painter and caused quite a stir; actually, as early as 1950 it was attributed to this painter by the Russian scholar Maria Shcherbachova, who regrettably had not published the results of her research at that time. The discovery of a signature on the painting in 1974 finally confirmed the painter's authorship. Unfortunately, the date cannot be made out as only the first two digits are legible.

The painting continues to be avidly discussed by scholars. According to most of them, the traditional title which defines the scene as *At the Usurer's* does not correspond to the painting's content. In French literature it is defined as *Réglement des comptes*, or the settling of payments, or as *Paiement des impôts*, i.e. paying taxes. The latter title, *Payment of Taxes*, has been adopted in English-language publications.

The composition has also been interpreted in religious terms, as the scene of calling St. Matthew, or as Judas receiving pieces of silver, "his payment for blood" (Mt 27:6), finally as the New Testament parable about the labourers in the vineyard (Mt 20:1-16). While the above interpretations seem little convincing (although in a sense justified, since La Tour's art erases the division into the sacred and the profane), it seems that the painting is more of a genre scene. It may be an illustration of an everyday scene from the lives of residents of Lorraine during the Thirty-Year War, i.e. during the fights between the French army and the troops of Prince Charles IV of Lorraine, although it does not represent, as has been implied, the payment of ransom or war contributions as there are no figures in military uniforms here.

The painting may be the artist's commentary on the social status of the inhabitants of Lorraine: the richly-clad men are royal or ducal officials, whereas the bearded old man is a peasant who impersonates the hard plight of impoverished population, unable to bear the fiscal burdens imposed on them by both the King of France and the Prince of Lorraine. Whether the painting represents tax collectors or a usurer cannot be ascertained.

The date of origin of the painting is another debatable issue. Most scientists saw the painting as one of the first works in the artist's entire recognised oeuvre. Therefore its discovery in 1972 called for readjusting an earlier conviction that La Tour began to paint his first nocturne scenes only in the second stage of his career and that initially he only painted daylight pieces.

The painting is expressive and dynamic, which is surprising when one compares it to the artist's other paintings, serene, of balanced compositions, showing simplified and succinctly painted figures which are nearly monumental and resemble sculptures.

La Tour's realism and his depiction of ordinary people brings his works close to Caravaggio's paintings. The work from Lviv, however, as experts on La Tour's oeuvre unanimously observe, shows a bigger influence of North European Mannerism than of Caravaggio. The use of light, so characteristic of La Tour's paintings, probably used for the first time in this very work, does not originate in the paintings by Caravaggio or his Italian imitators. It is rather inspired by the paintings of eminent contemporary Utrecht-based imitators of the Italian painter: Gerrit Honthorst, Theodor Rombouts and Hendrik Terbrugghen. Moreover, *At the Usurer's* proves La Tour's ties with the Netherlandish painting of the 16th century, which both the theme and the composition of the painting no doubt emulate (the scene is shown horizontally, the persons feasting or playing cards are gathered around the table, the vantage point is raised to offer a view of the tabletop, with objects which are arranged in seeming disorder, yet make up a clearly isolated still-life).

Most scholars agree that La Tour's painting was also markedly influenced by the local Lorraine artists, first and foremost by Jacques Bellange (ca. 1575–1616). According to Pierre Rosenberg, Bellange's oeuvre had the most powerful impact on the development of La Tour's painting and if he really got to know works from Caravaggio's circle, this was most likely after his painting of *At the Usurer's*.

The painting from Lviv is the most unique and "most amazing" work (as Georges Pariset observed in 1972) in the artist's entire oeuvre. As none of his other works, it cannot be unambiguously linked to any of the painting currents of the artist's time.

/on the basis of a text by Joanna Winiewicz-Wolska/