

# **THE DISAPPEARING ANGEL: HEEMSKERCK'S 'DEPARTING RAPHAEL' IN REMBRANDT'S STUDIO**

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Artistic plagiarism is part of the process of inventing imagery. Nearly all artists appropriated motifs from others, yet nearly always, they disguised their appropriations so that their copying would not easily be discerned. Recognized borrowings invited criticism, either of mediocrity or of plagiarism. Michelangelo, when viewing a painting by an inferior artist, remarked, "If all these limbs returned to the figures in the paintings from which they have been lifted, there would be nothing left."<sup>1</sup> This criticism of unsanctioned theft was repeated by Philips Angel, citing Aesop's raven who dressed himself in the stolen plumes of the more colorful birds. The birds, seeing their brilliant plumage adorning the raven, took their feathers back and left the raven in his natural monochromatic black.<sup>2</sup> Recognizable thievery revealed the weakness of the artist, in the visual and literary arts. But skillful variation upon another's work indicated surpassing one's prototypes, and was admired. Such imitation of others' works, whether poetic or visual, belongs to well-established literary theory. Three basic kinds of imitation are possible: *translatio*, or straightforward copying in order to study the model; *imitatio*, or closely following the model in order to pay homage to it; and *aemulatio*, or assimilating the qualities of the model and surpassing it.<sup>3</sup>

Rembrandt, however, borrowed frequently from other artists. He generally disguised his borrowings so that they are recognizable only after careful study. Most often, he appropriated single figures because they provided pragmatic solutions to a compositional situation, and he embellished them or altered details to disguise his sources. Exceptionally, one of Rembrandt's borrowings is particularly undisguised. The figure of an angel, seen from the back, and flying from earth to heaven, warrants our

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attention for its versatility and frequent use within the Rembrandt studio. It is prominently featured in Rembrandt's 1637 painting *of The Angel Leaving Tobias and His Family*. (Fig 1)

This work is a small painting that represents the happy conclusion of the complicated story from the Apocrypha of the old Tobit and his son Tobias. The angel Raphael ascends as the two married couples, the young Tobias and Sara, and the old Tobit and Anna, give thanks for the conclusion to the series of events that ends with the marriage of the young couple and the curing of the old Tobit's blindness. Tobit kneels with bowed head and clasped hands upon the ground and Tobias kneels with upraised head and hands, while Anna and Sara stand in the entrance of the house. This small panel is a fully realized and balanced composition: the architectural elements on the left frame the figures, and the landscape, light, and clouds on the right surround the angel.

Throughout his oeuvre, Rembrandt explored the events from this story, demonstrating his careful reading of the Book of Tobit.<sup>4</sup> Tobias is the agent of curing, twice. First, Tobias lifts the curse upon Sara in order to marry her, since her previous seven husbands have died because of this curse; and second, Tobias restores the sight of his father Tobit, whose blindness has been caused by a swallow's excrement. For guidance in these endeavors, Tobias is led by the angel Raphael. En route to Ecbatana to visit Sara, the angel first directs Tobias to catch a fish and use its liver and heart to drive out the evil spirits that plague her, and then to use the fish gall to cure his father's blindness. Tobias knows Raphael as a mortal friend, and his divine identity is revealed only upon his exit at the end of the story. In several dozen paintings, prints and drawings, Rembrandt explored the events of this story, and in particular, the relationship between Tobias and the angel. Repeatedly, Tobias places his faith in the angel, without knowing of the divine plan. Rembrandt was prompted by both the literary rendition and pictorial tradition for his depictions of Tobit's story.

Rembrandt's knowledge of sixteenth-century prints was profound, and he was well-grounded in the tradition of illustrated biblical narratives. When it served his purpose, he consulted other artists' versions. Those by Maerten van Heemskerck provided inspiration on several occasions, and here, specifically, for the same

subject.(Fig 2) Most directly, Heemskerck's departing angel who looks back provided a model for the fleeing, ascending Raphael. Rembrandt took over the contours precisely, but in reverse.<sup>5</sup> Rarely did Rembrandt appropriate another artist's invention with so little revision as with Heemskerck's angel. Reversing the angel is a thin, if any, disguise here for Rembrandt's source.

In Heemskerck's woodcut, Tobias kneels in thanks and watches the disappearing angel, Tobit crouches in prayer, and Anna watches from the doorway. Heemskerck's Tobit and Tobias provided a loose model for Rembrandt's Tobias kneeling and Tobit bowing upon the ground; Heemskerck's Anna provided a similar prototype for Rembrandt's Anna in the doorway. However, Rembrandt added the figure of Sara, standing in the doorway and looking at the departing angel; she is an adaptation of Heemskerck's Anna. Thus, Rembrandt appropriated the three figures of Heemskerck's woodcut, and added a second woman to include both married couples. Rembrandt designed the group to present symmetry with variation in the pairing of the two women in the doorway, and the two men in front of it. The small dog adds anecdotal interest as he barks at the angel.

In his 1641 etching of Raphael departing from the family, Rembrandt represented a slightly later moment -- the angel is visible only from the waist down, for the head has already disappeared from view. (Fig. 3) The direct correspondences with Heemskerck's woodcut are not so evident here, for Rembrandt has internalized the prototype. Tobit, Sara and Tobias kneel in thanks, and Anna is in the doorway. Rembrandt considered the event as an episode of profound revelation and quiet gratitude, for the two married couples, and of excitement for the added spectators, who watch from the window, doorway, right corner, and distance. Rembrandt's interest is in how the reactions of these various onlookers show a moment unfolding in time. Their responses are more intense as they are nearer the place from which the angel departs, and milder as they are further away; those nearer, are most aware of the revelation of the angel's divinity, and those further away, less conscious or even oblivious.

The Book of Tobit provided Rembrandt with an opportunity to explore differing psychological reactions that are fraught with hope, despair, and practical actions. These

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two works, from 1637 and 1641, reveal the development of Rembrandt's visualization of the same event, from the dynamic expressions in visage and gesture of the 1637 painting, to the restrained gestures and subdued emotions of the 1641 etching. Yet Heemskerck's angel, nearly exactly adapted in the painting, still is present in the etching, although less exactly, in the contours of the feet and swirling drapery. Rembrandt's stylistic shift, from ebullient exteriority to meditative interiority, usually is linked to the events of his life, most especially the death of his wife Saskia in 1641; most obviously, this shift is marked by the *Night Watch* of 1642. The two versions of the Tobias story also mark this shift. They indicate an obvious borrowing of figural motifs, in the context of the same subject.

Heemskerck's angel fascinated Rembrandt. He first appeared in another context, in the drawing of *Manoah's Sacrifice*, probably made a little earlier than the 1637 Tobias painting (Fig. 3). Indeed, one can well imagine Rembrandt studying Heemskerck's print, and thinking about how he could adapt the ascending angel for another subject first, before he would so obviously place it within his painting of the same subject. In the episode of Manoah's sacrifice, the angel, who appeared as a beautiful man, announced to Manoah and his wife that she would bear a child, Samson; Manoah prepared a sacrifice in thanks, and the angel ascended in the flames, thus revealing his divinity (*Judges* 13). Manoah and his wife display a combination of amazement and surprise, as they watch the messenger of the Lord ascend in the column of smoke. Just as Rembrandt read the Book of Tobit with care, he studied the episodes concerning Samson, of which Manoah's sacrifice is among the earliest.<sup>6</sup>

With one leg extended and the other foreshortened so that the soles of both feet are visible, with swirling drapery, and with outstretched wings, Heemskerck's ascending Raphael was a dynamic invention. Most appealingly, seen from the back, he looks down at the mortals on the ground, who either lower their heads in humility or look up in wonder. This exchange of glances between angel and mortals offered the intense communicative exchange so sought by Rembrandt. Rembrandt, fascinated by juxtaposition of the ascending angel and the grateful mortals, first used Heemskerck's angel in the sketch of Manoah and his wife, and then the painting of Tobit.

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Yet that seems to have been only the beginning of a fairly extended appearance of Heemkerck's angel in Rembrandt's workshop. The 1637 panel *The Angel Leaving Tobias and His Family* served as a prototype for paintings by Rembrandt pupils, of the Tobit and Manoah stories.<sup>7</sup> The composition of figures gathered in a doorway and the departing angel offered basic elements that served for works by Rembrandt and his studio. Indeed, it may be considered one of their versatile templates. And most interestingly, it seems Rembrandt may have kept Heemkerck's woodcut around the studio as a teaching tool. Heemkerck's Raphael reappears with little variation in the works of Rembrandt's pupils. Govert Flinck's horizontal painting of 1640, *Manoah's Sacrifice*, is an adaptation of Rembrandt's 1637 painting, in the figures; in format, it relates to the 1641 etching. (Fig 5) Flinck retained the contours of Heemkerck's angel, even placing him in the same direction, and only altered the position of the arms. Flinck, like Rembrandt, was clearly fascinated with the fluttering sash and drapery.

Another appearance of Heemkerck's angel in Rembrandt's studio permits us to look over the master's shoulder as he instructed one of his pupils. Samuel van Hoogstraten arrived in Rembrandt's studio in 1641 and was assigned the theme of Gideon's Sacrifice.<sup>8</sup> (Fig. 6) As related in Judges 6:19-21, Gideon asked the angel for a sign that the Israelites would be saved from the Midianites, with whom they were at war. After Gideon prepared a sacrificial offering and placed it on a rock, the angel put forth his staff to touch the meat and cake; a fire rose up from the rock, consumed the offering, and the angel departed.

Hoogstraten drew Gideon standing in a setting framed by a tree and some vegetation and watching the angel, who rises directly above the rock from which the smoke also rises, at the center. For the figure of Gideon, he turned to one of the astonished shepherds in Rembrandt's etching of *The Annunciation to the Shepherds* of 1634. (Fig. 7) And for the angel, he turned to Heemkerck's Raphael, keeping the same direction. But a closer look reveals telling alterations made by the master. Van Hoogstraten's angel initially had his arms upraised and a broader wing span, so that the

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right wing arched over Gideon's head. Rembrandt's modulated pen strokes gave the angel a left arm, pointing over to the corner, presumably where the camp of the Midianites might be. He delineated the edges of the wings to make them a bit smaller, to make the angel appear lighter and as if moving more swiftly, and he went over Gideon's head, hands and cloak, and also the foreground rocks, trees and plants, and the dog. Taken together, these corrections emphasize the foreground elements to create depth and enhance the contrast between the foreground and the luminous central area. Rembrandt may have directed Hoogstraten to represent Gideon and the angel, and he may have indicated their models in his own shepherd and in Heemskerck's Raphael. The staff, mentioned in the text, seems to have been deliberately omitted, as if it might be awkward to show an ascending angel holding a rod. Hoogstraten's tentative lines reveal his initial design that derives from available models. But it is in Rembrandt's bold corrections that this composition gains movement and depth, and becomes a unified whole.

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There are essentially two dominant types of angels in Rembrandt's workshop: those who make announcements with speech, as in *The Annunciation to the Shepherds*, and those who leave upon completing their mission.<sup>9</sup> Artists struggled with the problems inherent in representing these divine messengers, who were not supposed to be recognized by the people with whom they communicated, at least not until the final moment of their departure. Heemskerck's angel provided a solution to this problem, allowing the divine messenger to be recognized upon departure through eye contact with the people below. With swirling robes and sashes, Heemskerck's angel departed with speed, showing the soles of his bare feet. But, contrary to nearly all borrowings in Rembrandt's work, Heemskerck's angel appears with little disguise. It seems that Rembrandt wished this angel to be recognized, and that, in his instruction, he gave it to his pupils as a model. Maerten van Heemskerck, one of the foremost North Netherlandish painters and printmakers of the sixteenth century, represented an artistic authority that

was Dutch. In this way, Rembrandt put 'imitatio' into practice, and used an angel with an impeccable pedigree from his illustrious predecessor.

### List of Illustrations

1. Rembrandt, *Angel Leaving Tobias and his Family*, painting, Paris, Louvre, 1637
2. Heemskerck, *Angel Leaving Tobias and his Family*, woodcut. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.
3. Rembrandt, *Angel Leaving Tobias and his Family*, etching, Washington, National Gallery of Art, 1641.
4. Rembrandt, *Angel leaving Manoah and Wife after the Sacrifice*, drawing, Berlin, SMPK, ca. 1635-37.
5. Govert Flinck, *Angel leaving Manoah and Wife after the Sacrifice*, painting, Kingston, Bader Collection, Queen's University Art Museum, 1640. © Agnes Etherington Art Centre, gift of Dr. and Mrs. Alfred Bader, 1975, acc. no. 18-114
6. Samuel van Hoogstraten, *Angel leaving Gideon after the Sacrifice*, drawing, Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, ca. 1641-42.
7. Rembrandt, *Annunciation to the Shepherds*, etching, 1634, National Gallery of Art.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> G. Vasari, *Le Vite...*, G. Milanesi ed., 11 vols., Florence, 1906, VII, p. 281; Carel van Mander, *Het Schilder-Boeck*, Haarlem, 1604, 172v (reprint edition New York 1980).

<sup>2</sup> P. Angel, *Lof der Schilder-konst*, Leiden, 1642, 37 (reprint edition Utrecht 1969).

<sup>3</sup> See J.D.P. Warners, "Translatio-Imitatio-Aemulatio," *De Nieuwe Taalgids*, Part I: 49 (1956), 289-95; Part II: 50 (1957), 82-88; Part III: 50 (1957), 193-201. See also T. D. Kauffman, "Reading Van Mander on the Reception of Rome: A Crux in the Biography of Spranger in the *Schilder-Boeck*," *Bollettino d'arte*, Supplement to vol. 100, 1997, 295-304, esp. 300 and see notes for additional bibliography. Especially relevant to Rembrandt and Dutch painting are the articles in *De zeventiende eeuw*, vol. 21, nr. 2, 2005, by T.

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Weststeijn, “‘Imitatie’ in Samuel van Hoogstraten’s *Inleyding tot de Hooge Schoole der Schilderkonst*,” 243-65, and E. J. Sluiter, “Over ‘rapen’ en wedijver in de Nederlandse schilderkunst van de zeventiende eeuw,” 267-91.

<sup>4</sup> See J. S. Held, “Rembrandt and the Book of Tobit,” in *Rembrandt Studies*, Princeton, 1991, 118-43.

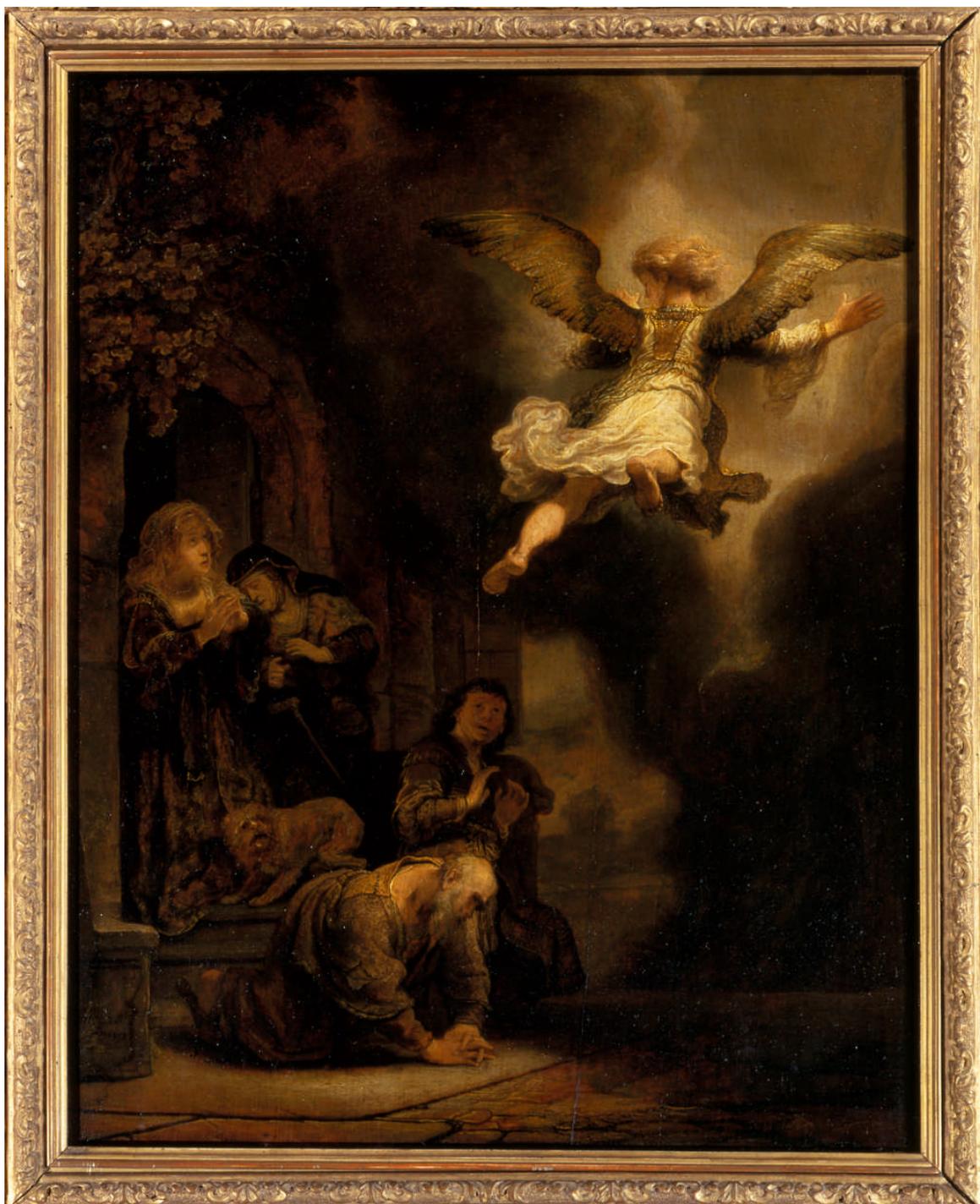
<sup>5</sup> This connection is well established in the Rembrandt literature for the 1637 painting and the other related works by Rembrandt discussed here. See B. P. J. Broos, *Index to the Formal Sources of Rembrandt’s Art*, Maarssen, 1977, p. 52 under Bredius 503, for bibliography.

<sup>6</sup> See F. Saxl, “Rembrandt’s Sacrifice of Manoah,” *The Warburg Institute. Studies of the Warburg Institute*, vol. 9, London, 1939, 7-15 (Kraus reprint 1968).

<sup>7</sup> Among the many adaptations of Rembrandt’s 1637 painting for the same subject, there are these: Salomon Koninck, *Angel Leaving Tobias and his Family* (art market 1994), see Blankert 2004, p. 244; and Jan Victors, *Angel Leaving Tobias and his Family*, painting, 1649, Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum. In some of these derivations, the artists replaced Heemskerck’s departing angel, seen from the back, with a variant seen from the front.

<sup>8</sup> This drawing was acquired by the Ashmolean in 1953 and is little known. It was published by E. and O. Benesch, *The Drawings of Rembrandt*, 6 vols., London, 1973, IV, cat. 853A, fig. 1061, as by Samuel van Hoogstraten corrected by Rembrandt; Benesch noted that the angel derived from the 1637 Rembrandt *Angel Leaving Tobias and his Family* and that the figure of Gideon derived from a shepherd in Rembrandt’s 1634 etching *The Annunciation to the Shepherds*.

<sup>9</sup> The other kinds of angels involve divine interception, as in Abraham’s Sacrifice, and physical struggle, as in Jacob wrestling with the angel.



Golahny Fig. 1



Golahny Fig. 2



Golahny Fig. 3



Golahny Fig. 4



Gohlany Fig. 5



Golahny Fig. 6



Golahny Fig. 7