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Matthias Stomer (c.1600–after 1652)

The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew

Oil on canvas

44 x 62 in. (111.8 x 157.5 cm.)

Painted circa 1630-1635



Provenance

Gargallo Collection, Syracuse, Sicily.

Private Collection, Sicily.

Anon. sale, Christie's, New York, 28 January 2015, lot 26.

Literature

S. Bottari, 'Aggiunte al Manfredi, al Renieri e allo Stomer', *Arte Antica e Moderna*, nos 29–32, 1965, pp. 57–60, ill. p. 59, plate 23b.

B. Nicolson, *The International Caravagg-esque Movement: Lists of Pictures by Caravaggio and His Followers throughout Europe from 1590 to 1650*, Oxford, 1979, p. 95.

B. Nicolson, *Caravaggism in Europe*, 2nd edition revised and enlarged by Luisa Vertova, Turin, 1989, vol. 1, p. 184.

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Matthias Stomer (c.1600–after 1652) ranks among the most important and prolific Netherlandish masters of the seventeenth century who were active in Italy. This talented painter, among the last of the famed Dutch Caravaggisti, is also, unjustly, one of the most under-studied artists of that entire era.¹ Indeed, the sheer paucity of scholarly publications on Stomer stands in sharp relief to the quality and significance of his ample oeuvre. Compounding our difficulties in assessing Stomer is the sheer lack of geographical documentation and firmly dated pictures, despite his high output.

Stomer's birthplace cannot be documented with any certainty. G.J. Hoogewerff, writing in 1942, declared that the artist was born in Amersfoort, near the city of Utrecht; unfortunately, Hoogewerff's documentary source for this information has long since disappeared.² In preparing his biography on the artist for the critically acclaimed exhibition, *Nieuw Licht op de Gouden Eeuw: Hendrick ter Brugghen en tijdgenoten* (1986–1987), Marten Jan Bok was unable to locate any information about Stomer in the municipal archives in Amersfoort.³ Bok also pointed out that the name, Stom – the actual name by which our painter was known during his lifetime even though he is generally called Stomer in modern art historical literature – is of Southern Netherlandish (Flemish) derivation and that many people bearing the name in the Dutch Republic had emigrated from that region of the Low Countries.⁴ So it is entirely conceivable that Stomer himself was a Flemish émigré to the North or, perhaps, spent most of his early life and career in the Southern Netherlands.⁵

If, in fact, Stomer, did emigrate, like so many of his countrymen, to the Dutch Republic, he might have received his artistic training in Utrecht or possibly Amersfoort because the influence of Dutch painters from both those towns in terms of style and subject matter is readily detectable in his earliest work. In this regard, he was once said to have studied with the prominent Utrecht painter, Gerrit van Honthorst (1592–1656).⁶ However, since Stomer was probably born around 1600 (see below) and since Honthorst himself did not return to his native city after his extended Italian sojourn until the summer of 1620, it seems very unlikely that he

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would have embarked upon an apprenticeship with the famed painter as a twenty-year-old. Nevertheless, given the ample stylistic and thematic connections between these two artists, Stomer could have received supplemental instruction with Honthorst after having undergone preliminary training elsewhere.

If that earlier training did take place in the studio of a major artist in Utrecht, the only plausible candidates would be Hendrick ter Brugghen (1588–1629), who returned home in 1614 after his own protracted stay in Italy or, much more likely, Joachim Wtewael (1566–1638), Paulus Moreelse (1571–1638) or the venerable Abraham Bloemaert (1566–1651), who all schooled many members of the younger artistic generation.⁷ There are certain stylistic parallels between Stomer's early work and their own, among them the use of metallic colours and figures whose plasticity is enhanced by the silvery daylight that envelops them. Be that as it may, there exists no documentary evidence that Stomer studied with any of these masters. Moreover, we presently cannot exclude the possibility that Stomer was initially trained in the Southern Netherlands, perhaps by Abraham Janssens (c.1575–1632) in Antwerp, because his pictures exhibit some connections with early seventeenth-century Flemish painting.⁸

At some point before 1630, Stomer travelled to Rome. The earliest known archival document concerning our artist is dated to that year: Stomer is recorded as sharing a house on the Strada dell'Orso in the eternal city with the now-obscure French painter Nicolas Provost in the *Stato delle Anime* (annual Easter census) for the parish of San Nicolà in Arcione, as '*Mattheo Stom, fiamengo pittore, di anni 30.*'⁹ (The stating of his age in this census, thirty, enables us to posit a birth date of c.1600.) Curiously, Stomer was living in the very same house occupied several years earlier by the Amersfoort painter, Paulus Bor (c.1601–1669).¹⁰ Bor, who had returned to Amersfoort in 1626 after several years in Rome, might have recommended this lodging possibility to Stomer before the latter departed on his own trip there. *Stati delle Anime* for 1631 and 1632 again place Stomer at the same location, though his name was garbled by the notary as, respectively, '*Sthem*' and '*Schem*'.

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Stomer's Roman period encompasses the years 1630 (if not slightly earlier) to 1635 – he is already documented in Naples by the latter date.¹¹ Our picture, the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, was painted during Stomer's Roman period. Additional documentation for Stomer's presence in Italy does not appear again until 1641, the year that he signed and dated his altarpiece of *The Miracle of S. Isidorus Argicola*, for the high altar of the Chiesa degli Agostiniani in Caccamo, near Palermo in Sicily. By 1641, Stomer was certainly living in Sicily. He entered into a period of intense activity there, executing many pictures for churches in such towns as Messina, Monreale, Palermo and the aforementioned Caccamo. In between his time in Rome and Sicily, Stomer spent a number of years in Naples; he probably arrived there in early 1635 and remained in that vital artistic centre until roughly 1640. Although there is no firm documentation for Stomer's stay in Naples, several late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Italian authors mention specific pictures that Stomer made for the Capuchin Church of Sant'Efemo Nuovo, now unfortunately lost, presumably dispersed around 1865, after this church and its convent were converted into a prison.¹² Other paintings by the artist are known to have come from various Neapolitan palaces. Moreover, the influence of Stomer's work on the Neapolitan painters – Domenico Viola (d.1696) and, especially, Domenico Gargiulo, known as Micco Spadaro (c. 1609/10–1685) – suggests the Netherlander's presence in that city.¹³

Several pictures by Stomer also have Maltese provenances, suggesting that Stomer had clients on Malta, though it is not known whether he actually travelled to that island. Stomer also worked for the important Neapolitan connoisseur and collector, the Duke of Messina, Antonio Ruffo, who is best known among specialists today as a patron of Rembrandt (1606–1669). Ruffo owned at least three pictures by Stomer, acquired from our painter between 1646 and 1649.¹⁴ The latter year, 1649, is the last for which we have documentation for Stomer's activities in Sicily. Thereafter, in 1652, we find a reference to a large altarpiece of the *Assumption of the Virgin with Three Saints* for the church of Santa Maria de Lorino, in the town of Chiuduno near Bergamo in Lombardy.¹⁵ Stomer might have shipped this altarpiece from Sicily but it is more likely that he

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was active in northern Italy in the last years of his life – 1652 is the final year for which we have documentation for the artist. In connection with Stomer and northern Italy, perhaps some significance should be attached to the presence in that region of a certain Mathäus Stom, a member of a late seventeenth-century family of battle-scene painters, who may, in fact, be our artist's son.¹⁶

The *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* is not a well-known work by Matthias Stomer, but it is nevertheless an important picture within his overall oeuvre. St Bartholomew is traditionally identified as one of Christ's original twelve apostles. After the Resurrection, Bartholomew is believed to have preached the gospel in India and Armenia. In the latter region, he was flayed alive and then hung upside down for refusing to worship idols. In Stomer's dramatic canvas, the doomed saint is posed frontally in half-length. He is stripped to his loincloth and one of the executioners has already begun his grisly task. Stomer has added the remarkable motif of a figure in a striking terracotta-coloured robe at the far left – perhaps a pagan priest – who holds a golden statuette of Minerva before the elderly saint, thereby contextualising the immediate cause of his martyrdom.

If Stomer's initial training did take place in the studio of a major artist in Utrecht (see above), the most plausible candidate would be Hendrick ter Brugghen, who returned home in 1614 after a protracted stay in Italy. In fact, Ter Brugghen himself provided an interesting prototype for Stomer's painting. The older painter's lost *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, known today only from a copy (Private Collection, Germany), likewise portrays the story on a rectangular canvas with physically assertive, half-length figures positioned before a neutral background.¹⁸ A further Utrecht connection is the wonderful Prussian blue robe with yellow trim worn by the soldier standing beside the priestly figure holding the statuette of Minerva. Attire consisting of this combination of colours appears repeatedly in paintings by Gerrit van Honthorst and Dirck van Baburen (c.1592/93–1624) dated 1623 onwards (fig. 1).¹⁹ Despite its Utrecht-based precedents

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for composition and colour, Stomer's *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* dates to his Roman period, specifically, c.1630–5[repeat from page 4]

Our canvas compares favourably with a number of religious paintings in daylight that Stomer executed during his years in Rome, including *Christ among the Doctors* (Private Collection, Bergamo),²¹ *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery* (Museum of Fine Arts, Montreal) (fig. 2),²² and *Christ Driving the Money Changers from the Temple* (Sale, Christies, London, 5 July 1985, lot 23). A particularly noteworthy comparison is with Stomer's *Salome receives the Head of John the Baptist* (The National Gallery, London) (fig. 3). Although it is a night scene, it is approximately the same size as our picture and likewise displays similar seams at the top and bottom of the canvas.²³

All of the paintings listed above share the same compositional arrangement of animated figures pressed close to the picture plane before an unarticulated background with an additional head or two looming in the interstices behind the main protagonists. As for the subject of our canvas, the Spaniard Jusepe de Ribera (1591–1652) made the most pictures by far of the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, but all of these were executed in Naples during the 1620s and beyond.²⁴ Nevertheless, Stomer was probably familiar with a picture of the saint's martyrdom painted in Rome by the French Caravaggist Valentin de Boulogne (1591–1632), datable to c.1616 (fig. 4).²⁵ The hoary-headed saint's face in Valentin's work recalls Stomer's, as does his leathery, wizened body, clothed only with a loin cloth. More significantly, both painters employ a similar facture, accentuated by rich impasto highlights, even if the Frenchman's tonalities are more silvery.

Stomer's St Bartholomew also reveals his familiarity with the so-called *Borghese Fisherman*, a monumental second-century Roman copy in black marble of a Greek original (fig. 5).²⁶ This statue belonged to Cardinal Scipione Borghese (1576–1633) during the early seventeenth century and was well known to many artists, most notably Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), who made several carefully drawn copies of it in black chalk.²⁷ At that time, it was thought to represent the suicide of the famous Roman Stoic philosopher, Seneca. The facial features of Stomer's saint

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recall those of the statue though the latter's hair and beard are closely cropped. Curiously, in some humanistic circles, Seneca was upheld as a model for Christians in that he taught strict virtue and accepted his unjust death – he was forced to commit suicide by the emperor Nero – with calm resignation.²⁸ Perhaps these potential associations between the pagan philosopher and the condemned Christian saint were not lost on Stomer or the original owner of our compelling picture.



Fig. 1: Dirck van Baburen, *Granida and Daifolo*, 1623, Private Collection



Fig. 2: Matthias Stomer, *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery*, c.1630–5, Museum of Fine Arts, Montreal

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Fig. 3: Matthias Stomer, *Salome receives the Head of John the Baptist*, c.1630–5, oil on canvas, 109.2 x 155.7 cm., The National Gallery, London

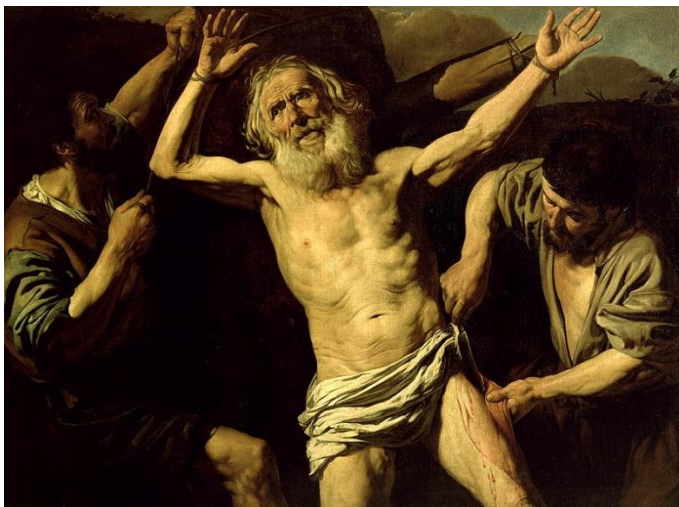


Fig. 4: Valentin de Boulogne, *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, c.1616, Private Collection



Fig. 5: *Borghese Fisherman (The Dying Seneca)*, second century AD, black marble, Musée du Louvre, Paris

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We are grateful to Professor Wayne Franits for the above catalogue entry.

1. There have been scattered studies of Stomer's art over the last sixty years. Examples of his work have also frequently featured in exhibitions dedicated to broader themes. Foundational are: C.H. Pauwels, 'De schilder Matthias Stomer', *Gentse Bijdragen tot Kunstgeschiedenis*, vol. 14, 1953, pp. 139–92; C.H. Pauwels, 'Nieuwe toeschrijvingen aan M. Stomer', *Gentse Bijdragen tot Kunstgeschiedenis*, vol. 15, 1954, pp. 233–40. Thereafter, Benedict Nicolson made a valiant effort to organise the artist's imposing oeuvre in: 'Stomer Brought Up-to-Date', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 119, 1977, pp. 230–45. See also Benedict Nicolson, *Caravaggism in Europe*, revised edition, 3 vols, ed. by Luisa Vertova, Turin, 1989, vol. 1, pp. 179–88; vol. 3, figs 1460–1563. More recently, there has been a dissertation addressing Stomer's Sicilian period, published by Franziska Fischbacher, *Matthias Stomer: Die sizilianischen Nachtstücke*, Frankfurt am Main and Berlin, 1993; an exhibition at The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham, Richard Verdi, *Matthias Stom: Isaac Blessing Jacob*, exh. cat., 1999–2000 (the exhibition was reviewed by Leonard J. Slatkes in *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 142, 2000, pp. 181–3); and a small collection catalogue from Palermo: Angheli Zalapì and Stefania Caramanna, *Matthias Stom: Un caravaggesco nella collezione Villafranca di Palermo*, 2010. Curiously, Stomer was not included in the recent comprehensive study of international Caravaggism, edited by Alessandro Zuccari, *I Caravaggeschi: percorsi e protagonisti*, 2 vols, Milan, 2010.
2. G.J. Hoogewerff, *Nederlandschekunstenaarste Rome (1600–1725): uittrekselsuit de parochialearchieven*, The Hague, 1942, p. 279, note 2. Within eleven years of Hoogewerff's important book, Pauwels 1953, p. 142, note 15, declared that this document was no longer accessible.
3. Marten Jan Bok, 'Matthias Stom', in Albert Blankert et al., *Nieuw Licht op de Gouden Eeuw: Hendrick ter Brugghen en tijdgenoten*, exh. cat., Centraal Museum, Utrecht and Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum, Braunschweig, 1986–7, p. 333.
4. Ibid., p. 333 and his notes 16 and 17.

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5. The form of the signature recorded on a now-lost picture by Stomer, '*Flandriae Stomus ...*' provides no specific evidence concerning the country of his birth because it makes no distinction between the Northern and the Southern Netherlands; see further *ibid.*, p. 333 and his note 15.
6. G.J. Hoogewerff, 'Rembrandt en een Italiaan schemae cenas', *Oud Holland*, vol. 35, 1917, p. 132. For Honthorst, see J. Richard Judson and Rudolf E.O. Ekkart, *Gerrit van Honthorst 1592–1656*, Doornspijk, 1999.
7. For Ter Brugghen, see Leonard J. Slatkes and Wayne Franits, *The Paintings of Hendrick ter Brugghen 1588–1629. Catalogue raisonné*, Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 2007; for Wtewael, Anne W. Lowenthal, *Joachim Wtewael and Dutch Mannerism*, Doornspijk, 1986; for Moreelse, Eric Domela Nieuwenhuis, *Paulus Moreelse (1571–1638)*, Proefschrift, University of Leiden, 2001; and for Bloemaert, Marcel G. Roethlisberger, *Abraham Bloemaert and His Sons*, 2 vols., Doornspijk, 1993.
8. This was first proposed by Richard Spear, writing in R. Spear, *Caravaggio and His Followers*, exh. cat., Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, 1971–2, p. 114, with no supporting evidence, however. See also Verdi 1999–2000, p. 34, note 13.
9. Hoogewerff 1942, p. 279. The designation, *fiamengo* (Flemish), in this Italian document, was one routinely invoked by notaries for all inhabitants of the Low Countries, regardless of whether they were from the north or south.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 279. Bok 1986–7, p. 333, note 7, rightly wonders whether this document formed the basis for Hoogewerff's opinion that Stomer hailed from Amersfoort.
11. Marije Osnabrugge, 'New Documents for Matthias Stom in Naples', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 156, 2014, pp. 107–8.
12. See Nicolson 1977, p. 230, and the literature he cites in his note 5.
13. With regard to Gargiulo, see his *David with the Head of Goliath*, a picture once attributed to Stomer and, indeed, remarkably close to Stomer in technique. It was auctioned at Sotheby's in London on 8 July 1992, lot 27.

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14. See Jeroen Giltaij, *Ruffoen Rembrandt. Over een Siciliaans ever zamelaar in de zeventiende eeuw die drieschilderijen bij Rembrandt bestelde*, Zutphen, 1999, pp. 30, 98, 103–5, 117, 121–2, 127, 135–6 *passim*.
15. This large altarpiece is presently on view in the church of Santa Maria Assunta in Chiuduno. See Francesco Rossi et al., *Il Seicento a Bergamo*, exh. cat., Palazzo Ragione, Bergamo, 1987, p. 203, cat. 52; Enrico de Pascale et al., *Dipinti caravaggeschi nelle raccolte bergamasche*, Bergamo, 2000, pp. 74–9, cat. 12.
16. See Rodolfo Palluchini, *La pittura Veneziana del Seicento*, Milan, 1981, p. 323.
17. Hoogewerff 1917, p. 132, had posited that Stomer studied with the prominent Utrecht painter, Gerrit van Honthorst (1592–1656). However, since our painter was most likely born around 1600 (see below) and since Honthorst himself did not return to his native city after his extended Italian sojourn until the summer of 1620, it seems very unlikely that he would have embarked upon an apprenticeship with the famed painter as a twenty-year-old.
18. Ter Brugghen's lost painting was recorded in the sale of the collection of Abraham Perroneau in Amsterdam in 1687; see further, Slatkes and Franits, 2007, p. 266, cat. L7.
19. See, for example, Honthorst's *Merry Company*, dated 1623 (National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC) and Baburen's *Granida and Daifolo*, likewise dated 1623 (Private Collection) and that master's final painting, *Achilles before the Dead Body of Patroclus* (Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Kassel), signed and dated 1624. For these two latter works, see Wayne Franits, *The Paintings of Dirck van Baburen, ca. 1592/93–1624: Catalogue Raisonné*, Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 2013, pp. 154–6, cat. A31, plate 31; pp. 166–8, cat. A36, plate 36.
20. See note 11 above.
21. See De Pascale et al. 2000, pp. 66–9, cat. 10.
22. This picture was most recently on view at the exhibition, *Corps et ombres: Caravage et le caravagisme européen*, Musée des Augustins, Toulouse; Musée Fabre, Montpellier, 2012–13, pp. 322–3, cat. 86.

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23. This painting, from the Sir Dennis Mahon Collection, is dated c.1630–2 and measures 109.2 x 155.7 cm. Otto Naumann, who pointed out the connection to the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, wonders whether the canvases for both pictures were cut from the same bolt.
24. See, for example, Nicola Spinosa, *Ribera. L'opera completa*, 2nd edition, Naples, 2006, pp. 273, 287–8, cats A46, A71, A72.
25. See Marina Mojana, *Valentin de Boulogne*, Milan, 1989, pp. 182–3, cat. 65. Although the Frenchman is only documented in Rome for the first time in 1620, he must have arrived years earlier.
26. My thanks to Otto Naumann for calling attention to this statue in relation to Stomer's picture.
27. For two of Rubens's drawings of this statue, see Anne-Marie Logan and Michiel Plomp, *Peter Paul Rubens: The Drawings*, exh. cat., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2005, pp. 112–15, cats 22–23. The statue was also the model for the artist's painting of the *Death of Seneca* of c.1612–13 (Alte Pinakothek, Munich). Today the so-called *Borghese Fisherman* is in the collections of the Musée du Louvre, Paris.
28. See Willibald Sauerländer, *The Catholic Rubens: Saints and Martyrs*, trans. D. Dollenmayer, Los Angeles, 2014, pp. 28–9.