

# . AGNEWS .

EST. 1817

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**Hendrick Bloemaert** (1602 – 1672)

*Democritus*

Oil on canvas

37.6 x 29.1 inches (95.5 x 73.9 cm)



## Provenance

With Charles Brunner, Paris, by 1919 (as by Hendrick Ter Brugghen)

Private collection, United Kingdom

Anonymous sale, London, Sotheby's, 6 December 1989, lot 241 (as by Jan van Bijlert), for  
£38,000 to Corsini

With Pietro Corsini inc., New York, 1990

With Galleria Caretto, Turin, 2006; acquired by a private collector

Anon. sale, Sotheby's London: December 3, 2008, lot 27

## Exhibition

London, Robilant and Voena, *French, Dutch and Flemish Caravaggesque Paintings from the  
Koelliker Collection*, 2007, no. 4.

## Literature

B. Nicolson, *Hendrick Terbrugghen*, London 1958, p. 46, under nos. A3 and A4 (as Anonymous)

G.J. Hoogewerff, "Jan van Bijlert, schilder van Utrecht", in *Oud Holland*, vol. 80, no. 1, 1965, p.  
27, no. 44 (as Jan van Bijlert)

A. Blankert, "Heraclitus en Democritus in het bijzonder in de Nederlandse kunst van de 17de

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eeuw" in *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek*, vol. 18, 1967, p. 97, no. 30, reproduced p.62, fig.

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B. Nicolson (rev. L. Vertova), *Caravaggism in Europe*, vol. I, Turin 1989, p. 156, reproduced vol. III, plate 1355 (as Petrus Portengen)

C, Wright in *French, Dutch and Flemish Caravaggesque Paintings from the Koelliker Collection*, London 2007, pp. 18--19, reproduced (as Hendrick Bloemaert).

This painting by Henrick Bloemaert, oldest son of Abraham Bloemaert, one of the most important members of the Utrecht school of *Caravaggisti*, depicts Democritus (460 BCE 370 BCE), the ancient Greek philosopher best known as the "Laughing Philosopher".

Democritus was a popular subject for painters in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, featuring among the series of philosophers of Velázquez (Fig 1), and Ribera and Rubens. Dutch examples were particularly expressive and a good opportunity for artists to experiment with effects of character and attitude. This can be seen in Hendrick ter Brugghen's *Democritus* (Fig 2) at the Rijksmuseum, and Johannes Moreelse's *Democritus* and *Heracitus* pair in the Centraal Museum, Utrecht (Fig 3 & 4).

This nickname is said to derive from his theory that man's highest ethical goal is 'cheerfulness', which for him sometimes took the form of hedonism, and his ability to laugh at the follies of the world. A less flattering explanation, expressed by the Roman philosopher Seneca (4BC - 65AD), is that Democritus was prone to displaying his cynical contempt of human absurdity by laughing at his fellow-citizens, who in turn, called him 'the mocker'. Democritus was also known for his influence on modern science more than any other pre-Socratic philosopher, inventing the concept of atoms.

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Fig 1: Diego Rodriguez de Silva y Velázquez, 1628-29, *Musée des Beaux-Arts et de la Céramique*, Rouen



Fig 2: Henrick ter Brugghen, *Democritus*, 1628, *Rijksmuseum*.



Fig 3: Johannes Moreelse, *Democritus*, 1630, *Centraal Museum*, Utrecht.



Fig 4: Johannes Moreelse, *Heraclitus*, 1630, *Centraal Museum*, Utrecht.

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The Greek philosophers Democritus and Heraclitus, the 'Weeping Philosopher', were considered to be polar opposites and representative of the two outlooks of the world. They have sometimes been considered an invitation to meditate on two opposing attitudes to the mediocrity of this world or to convey a moralising message that whether you laugh or cry, the world remains incurably foolish. Democritus always appears as a laughing hedonist, pointing to the distance or the globe, where the folly of mankind is to be found.

Our painting has confounded scholars throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. When in the Jules Porgès collection, Paris, it was considered to be by Jan van Bijlert and was later published as such by G.J. Hoogewerff in 1965 (see Literature). Prior to that it had been with Charles Brunner as either Hendrick Terbrugghen (according to Hoogewerff, 1965) or Bernardo Strozzi (according to Nicolson, 1989). Nicolson refuted the attribution to Terbrugghen in his 1958 monograph on the painter, later publishing it as a work by Petrus Portengen. More recently Christopher Wright has published it as by Hendrick Bloemaert, an attribution that has been fully endorsed by Dr. Albert Blankert and tentatively supported by Prof. Marcel Roethlisberger on the basis of photographs.