

An Intimate Poetry of Pain and Laughter

Georges de la Tour (1593-1652), who is honored by an exhibition recently on view at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and scheduled to appear from Feb. 2 until May 11, 1997 at the Kimbell Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, is an artist very much in the process of being discovered. I saw the major La Tour retrospective in Paris in 1972, where the Seventeenth-century French master's current fame was aptly described as a triumph of traditional art history;

painstaking connoisseurship and archival work had revived knowledge and appreciation of La Tour beginning only in 1918, because the renown he had enjoyed during his own lifetime had vanished soon after his death in 1652. By the middle of the Seventeenth century, the dominant art world of France was swept up in the grandiose decorations designed to flatter the imperial ambitions of Louis XIV, the Sun King, and the Academy which flourished to create and implement a vast array of rules through which the principles of (largely Aristotelean) rhetoric could be applied to the visual arts. It was a style at the antipodes of La Tour's intimate poetry, and for the intervening centuries, many of La Tour's works came to be admired under the names of other Seventeenth-century artists, such as the Spaniard Velazquez or the Dutchman Hals.

The current show, entitled "Georges de la Tour and His World," manifests the "becoming" of the renewed image of La Tour in several ways. No fewer than six new works by the master have come to light since the Paris show, and they are all in this exhibition. Secondly, in



Georges de la Tour, "The Musicians Brawl," c.1625-1627.

Collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

keeping with a current fashion for involving the public in issues of attribution (once the exclusive domain of scholars), the question is raised concerning which paintings are by La Tour himself (including autograph replicas of his own compositions), which are copies, which may involve the hands of studio assistants or followers, and finally, which are originals in poor condition, where the hand of the master is masked by damage and restoration.

Link to Literary Genius

But perhaps the most exciting part of the rediscovery process, is that which links La Tour to a literary genius of his own time, the Spaniard Miguel de Cervantes. La Tour was born in 1593; Cervantes, born in 1547, published the first volume of his immortal *Don Quixote* in 1605, and the second in 1615, at a time when the young La Tour was undoubtedly reaching his first artistic maturity. Three years later, in 1618, the Thirty Years War, which was to devastate Central Europe, broke out. The Thirty Years War involved the entire population as no

war in Europe had done before, transforming peasants and villagers into camp followers and soldiers of fortune, decimating the population, and destroying peaceful pursuits to such an extent that it took literally centuries for the area to recover its former prosperity.

Visitors to the Washington exhibition who treated themselves to the recorded audio tour, would have heard the intriguing—and quite convincing—hypothesis, that the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art's painting of a Fortune Teller, in which a young dandy is having his fortune told (and his purse lifted) by a group of gypsies that include three lovely young girls and an old hag [SEE inside back cover, this issue], is none other than an illustration from one of Cervantes' most celebrated literary creations, "The Little Gypsy Girl" ("La Gitanilla"), which is featured as the first of the *Novelas Exemplarias*, or *Exemplary Stories*, published as a collection in 1613, and already available in French translation as early as 1615. The story was widely popular throughout northern Europe.

This link is of exceptional importance.

Although, since his own lifetime onward Cervantes—like his contemporary Shakespeare—has always been honored as a literary genius, there are nevertheless few illustrations of his work by competent artists, and almost none from the era in which he lived. The first serious attempt to illustrate *Don Quixote* occurred in Eighteenth-century France, when the meaning of the work had already undergone a major reinterpretation; and the well-known illustrations by Gustave Doré and Honore Daumier in the Nineteenth century, and Pablo Picasso in our own era, mirror the distortions of a Romantic world-outlook which is ultimately alien to Cervantes' unique ability to condense into a short paragraph the most intense, simultaneous imagery of pain and laughter. La Tour, an artist who raised the painful and humorous conditions of his contemporaries living in the cockpit of the Thirty Years War in the Lorraine region, situated between France, Germany, and The Netherlands, to untold heights of poetic contemplation, and who found beauty amid even the ridiculous and the morbid, possessed a soul capable of expressing something analogous to the spirit of Cervantes. This almost never happens in art—witness the failure of most composers to set the poetry of a Schiller or a Shakespeare in appropriate musical form.

In "The Little Gypsy Girl," Cervantes invented the story of a girl raised from infancy by an old gypsy woman whom she believed to be her grandmother, although "she gave every sign of having been born of better stock than gypsies, for she was extremely polite and could talk well." This is the fair-haired maiden who occupies the central position in the La Tour painting, looking off to one side as she deftly cuts the coins from the young dandy's belt.

Top right: *Caravaggio, "The Cardsharps," c.1594.*

Right: *Georges de La Tour, "The Cheat with the Ace of Clubs," c.1630-1634.*

Known as Preciosa, the fifteen-year-old girl sings and dances so beautifully, and expresses such devotion to the Virgin Mary and her mother St. Anne, that she causes a young noble to fall in love with her; and to prove his love, he agrees to leave his family behind and follow her, living as a gypsy named "Andres" for two years. Early in the story, Cervantes alludes to the picaresque world of Spain, so like that of the Lorraine which was depicted by La Tour only a few years later: ". . . There are poets who condescend to deal with gypsies and sell them their works, just as there are poets who write poems for the blind, and invent miracles for them to get a share of the profits. It takes all sorts to make a world, and hunger can drive clever people to do unheard of things."

In the unfolding of the plot, the nobleman is framed up as a thief, and is about to lose his life, when the old gypsy woman appears, to reveal that Preciosa is really the long-lost daughter of the magistrate before whom her lover stands accused. The story concludes: "In the happiness which followed the finding of the betrothed couple, vengeance was buried and

mercy revived"—a line which might well apply to the stories narrated by La Tour.

Daylight and Lamplight

La Tour's "diurnes," or paintings of daylight scenes, are filled with "clever people who do unheard of things," like those spoken of by Cervantes. They manifest his highly original contribution to a genre that was born out of a European-wide movement of the early Seventeenth century, somewhat misnamed "Caravaggism" after the rogue artist of Rome who painted some of the first and most shocking images of this kind, in which ordinary people of the time, including the numerous social outcasts, prostitutes, assassins, and cheats of all descriptions, are incorporated into "high" art, and even into religious paintings, as a way of



Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas



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carrying out the mandate of the Catholic Reform to make religious painting more emotionally accessible, by relating its contents to the everyday lives of the people. The “Musicians’ Brawl,” for example, portrays several layers of deceit (or truth), as is frequently the case with La Tour, because the “blind” musician, a favorite subject of La Tour’s paintings, is here exposed as being sighted at least in one eye, when he winces at the lemon juice squirted into it by his rival.

Two paintings in the retrospective are variants by La Tour, of a theme first popularized by Caravaggio, whose own “Cardsharps” is featured in the show as part of the “world” of La Tour advertised in the exhibition title. Caravaggio’s cheat, with the fingers of his gloves cut away in an allusion to the custom of cutting away the outer skin in order to feel tiny alterations in the surface of marked cards, is a figure drawn from the exaggerated traditions of the *Commedia dell’Arte*. In the two La Tour versions, it is, characteristically, a team of cheats at work, all apparently orchestrated by the woman who sits at the center of the table, described in the catalogue essay by Gail Feigenbaum as “one of the most unforgettable figures in the history of art.” It is startling to recognize, in one of La Tour’s numerous versions of the Penitent Magdalene, a repentant courtesan, which has been lost but is known through an old copy, this very same face. The coincidence is easily ascribed to the use of the same studio model, and yet we have perhaps here a clue to how La Tour thought that his picaresque characters could be transformed into saints. [SEE a candlelit version, “The Magdalene at the Mirror,” inside back cover, this issue.]

One of the most moving of La Tour’s religious pictures, the “St. Peter Repentant,” which belongs to the Cleveland Museum of Art, illustrates this thematic relationship. It is a nocturnal scene. The apostle Peter sits

in a gloomy corner with a rooster perched on a table next to him, and a lantern at his feet. A different light from above, outside the picture, and presumably of Divine origin, falls strongly on his grizzled face and hands, revealing an expression of surprise and remorse. The man who was chosen by Christ to lead the Church, is here revealed in all his human weakness and in the strength of his atonement. The lantern conveys a sense of “hidden light” within the heart of the saint, evoking the lines from the Epistle of St. Peter, referring to prophecy, “whereunto ye do well that take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts.” (II Peter 1:19).

Atonement and Optimism

Perhaps the most beloved of Georges de la Tour’s pictures, is the “Newborn” from the Rennes Museum in Brittany, France, which is featured in the current show. There is still some debate about the subject of the painting, because no halos or other attributes exist to identify

it positively as a Nativity of Christ. La Tour is often deliberately ambiguous about the lines that might divide the sacred and secular worlds, because, as we have seen, the notion of atonement bridges those worlds. Here again, the writing of Cervantes comes to mind, in the poem to St. Anne, recited by Preciosa in the opening pages of “The Little Gypsy Girl,” which ends:

Holy Anne, with
her to share
pain and suffering
humans bear.

La Tour had a supreme talent for fashioning beauty out of hardship. We see this in the condensed drama of the “Job,” and Job’s counterpart, the penitent St. Jerome; in the harsh scenes of the Tax Collector and the Denial of St. Peter; in his early series of bust-length apostles, many bearing the instruments of their own martyrdom; in the numerous versions of the blind musicians and the repentant Magdalene; in the puzzling “Flea Catcher,” where the humble ritual seems to have some tran-

scendent significance; and in the Ecstasy of St. Francis, in which the saint’s death agony is alleviated by a private vision of celestial music. For La Tour, as later for Leibniz, optimism is not a matter of denying the reality of evil, or even of maintaining that all evils inevitably lead to consequences of greater good. Rather, these evils exist in the best of all possible worlds, created by God, in which man can exercise the freedom of atoning and changing his ways to achieve a greater good even out of tragedy.

Today, in a world in which “hunger can drive even clever people to do unheard of things,” and powerful oligarchies openly conspire to unleash “Thirty Years War” conflicts on whole sections of the world, it is a positive good that Georges de la Tour can bring his message to so large a public.

—Nora Hamerman



Georges de la Tour, “Saint Peter Repentant,” 1645.

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