Art Collectors and Painters V: Jean le Bleu, François Venant and Rembrandt’s “Feast of Belshazzar”

Jean le Bleu, born in the town of Wesel about 1580, began buying at Orphan Chamber auctions in 1611, four years after his marriage to Hester Verspreet. He bought moderately priced paintings in 1611, 1612 and 1614. After a hiatus of 23 years, he resumed buying – but only prints – in 1637 (see the Appendix below). For unknown reasons, the inventory of his movable goods was taken on 28 April 1635. It contained only 16 works of art, with no indication of their value or even of the rooms in which they had been found. One of the paintings was entitled “Een stuck daer inne mene, mene, tekel” (a painting wherein [the Hebrew words] “counted, weighed, and divided”). This was the inscription inscribed on the palace wall that King Belshazzar read, to his fear and astonishment. The painting may have been Rembrandt’s “Belshazzar’s Feast” or “Belshazzar Sees the Writing on the Wall” in London’s National Gallery (Ill. no. 8), which is generally thought to have been painted about 1635, or a copy thereof. This likelihood will be discussed below following a brief biography of Jean le Bleu, the owner of the painting.

Jean le Bleu was of solidly middle class status, although he cannot by any measure be counted among Amsterdam’s richest citizens. He paid a tax on his properties of 125 f in 1631, in addition to 35 f for his inheritance from his father-in-law, the merchant Hans Verspreet. When both taxes are combined, the sum corresponds to a wealth estimated at 32,000 f, which puts him in the top 15 percent of the distribution of taxpayers who paid a minimum tax of 5 f.

How did this moderately wealthy man come to buy a painting that, if it was the original version of Rembrandt’s painting, must have been quite costly? Whether the painting was an original or copy, if it originated with Rembrandt or his workshop, Le Bleu’s connection with Rembrandt is likely to have run through his cousin, the “pre-Rembrandist” painter François Venant (II), with whom he seems to have been intimately connected. Le Bleu’s mother, Lenora Venant, was the sister of François Venant I, the father of the painter. François Venant II was cited as the guardian of Jean le Bleu’s brother Jacobus, student in medicine, when Jean assisted Jacobus on the occasion of his marriage with Joffr. Ermgaard Muys van Holy in Leiden in 1616. Venant was eleven years older than Jean le Bleu. It is very likely that he also became Jean’s guardian after his father’s death. In 1628, François Venant I ceded
to his son the painter François Venant II various items of furniture, silverware and paintings, including four pictures by Frans Floris, as security against 500 f that his son had lent him and against 600 f that Jean le Bleu had also lent him with the same son’s guarantee. (The goods in the inventory actually stayed in the house of François Venant senior.) Thus, the painter François Venant was jointly responsible for a loan from Jean le Bleu to his own father, who was of course Le Bleu’s uncle.

It is highly probable that both Jean le Bleu and François Venant II were Remonstrants. While Le Bleu did not sign the Remonstrant petition of 1628, his second wife, Cornelia van Mesen, whom he married in that year did, in the very year of their marriage. The older Venant signed the petition of 1611 requesting tolerance for partisans of Arminius’s doctrines; the younger Venant signed the Remonstrant petition of 1628. As we shall see presently, this religious adherence may have been a decisive factor in the acquisition of the painting “Mene, mene, tekel”.

There is some ground for the conjecture that the painter François Venant must have known Rembrandt. In April 1625, when he was already 34 years old, he was betrothed to Agnieta Pieters, who was Pieter Lastman’s sister. He was then living in the...
Breestraat, probably very close to Pieter Lastman, with whom Rembrandt had studied around 1623.\textsuperscript{731} Mariët Westerman in a very recent essay argues that Venant, along with other pre-Rembrandists, including Adriaen van Nieulandt, Claes Cornelisz. Moeyaert, and Jan and Jacob Pynas, “would have encountered Rembrandt” in those early years.\textsuperscript{732} This is all the more likely in the 1630s when both Venant and Rembrandt lived in the Breestraat (Rembrandt lived there from 1631 to 1635 and again from 1639 on). In 1632, moreover, Venant was active in the affairs of the Guild of St. Luke, of which he was a headman (\textit{overman}) in 1632.\textsuperscript{733} Rembrandt joined the Guild in 1634.\textsuperscript{734} Venant and Rembrandt must have met at guild functions, which were held in the St. Anthonispoort, next door to the Breestraat, or elsewhere.

I now return to the possible identity of the painting “Mene, mene, tekel” owned by Le Bleu with Rembrandt’s painting of “Belshazzar’s Feast” or with a copy thereof. One argument in favor of this hypothesis is that, according to Reiner Hausherr, who wrote the basic article on the interpretation of the painting, prior representations of the subject omitted the inscription in Hebrew or Aramaic letters.\textsuperscript{735} Some, like Pieter de Grebber’s rendering, for example, showed only God’s pointing hand.\textsuperscript{736} But there is at least one representation of the subject that includes the writing in the wall in Latin transcription. This is Jan Muller’s engraving of ca. 1598, on which can be read the words on the wall “Mane, thecel, phares”, which correspond exactly to the words in the Vulgate Bible.\textsuperscript{737} They do differ, though, from the words in the Calvinist Bible, which read “Mene mene tekel, upharsin” (Daniel, verse 25) and, in the next verse, “Mene mene tekel, peres”, with a note explaining the word “upharsin”.\textsuperscript{738} We, of course, do not know whether the inscription read by the notary or his clerk on Le Bleu’s painting was written in Latin or Hebrew script. All we can conclude so far is that if the words on the painting were written in Latin script, they were drawn from the Protestant and not the Catholic version of the Bible.

I will now consider the basis for the argument that Rembrandt’s painting may have been commissioned by a Remonstrant patron, as Le Bleu almost certainly was.

Since 1963, when Hausherr published his interpretation of the painting,\textsuperscript{739} it has been known that Rembrandt’s inscription assumed the exact same (vertical) form as in Menasseh ben Israel’s \textit{De Termino Vitae} of 1639.\textsuperscript{740} The vertical form of the inscription explains the puzzlement of the Babylonians who could not read the inscription until the Prophet Daniel revealed its baleful message predicting the death of Belshazzar and the breakup of his empire. This has led some scholars to argue that Menasseh must have provided a manuscript text in Hebrew letters to help Rembrandt. The argument is strengthened by the well-known collaboration of Rembrandt and Menasseh 20 years later in the production of Menasseh’s book \textit{Piedra Gloriosa} for which Rembrandt produced the etchings.

According to Orthodox Calvinist doctrine, the Babylonians could not read the words written on the wall because they were blinded by God. Menasseh, however, argued that “God’s prophecies are deliberately veiled and that their outcome depends upon the exercise of human reason” (in this case, on Daniel’s ingenuity). Thus,
Menasseh “reconciles his humanistic belief in free-will and the human inclination to virtue with a predetermined divine plan for the world”. This was compatible with the Remonstrant view of predestination, but it was in direct contradiction with strict Calvinist doctrine. It is not surprising, therefore, that Menasseh’s writings found support among Remonstrant intellectuals (Hugo de Groot, Gerard Vossius, Caspar Barlaeus, Simon Episcopi, Johannes Beverovicius), with whom he engaged in a lively and sympathetic correspondence. Indeed, it was Beverovicius who prompted Menasseh to write De termino vitae, published in 1639. Rembrandt was in direct contact with another of these Remonstrants, Caspar Barlaeus (van Baerle), who wrote the Latin verses accompanying Rembrandt’s posthumous etching of the predikant Jan Cornelis Sylvius.

Whether Jean le Bleu acquired his painting of “Mene, mene, tekel” from Rembrandt himself (possibly via Venant) or from some totally different source, the interest in the subject on the part of a man who was most probably a Remonstrant, in the very year when Rembrandt apparently produced his painting, deserves to be recorded.

Appendix to chapter 20

Table 20.1
Jean le Bleu’s Purchases at Orphan Chamber Auctions
Barcman Claesz. sale, 15 March 1611

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Painting Description</th>
<th>Price</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 painting</td>
<td>£1:10:--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 painting</td>
<td>£13:5:--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 painting</td>
<td>£11:</td>
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Crispiaen Colijn sale, 20 March 1612

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Painting Description</th>
<th>Price</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 painting, on canvas, of the lineage (geslacht) of St. Ann</td>
<td>£6:--:--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A number of prints</td>
<td>£--:12:--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A number of prints</td>
<td>£--:14:--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Works of Art in Jean le Bleu’s Inventory of 28 April 1635

- a painting, plundering of a peasant’s house
- a painting, the bringing of gifts of the three kings (gift gevinge der drij coningen)
- a painting, Charity
- one where the eyes of Argus are plucked out (?) (daer de oogen van Archus verquekt (?) sijn)
- one wherein mene mene tekel
- a painting of the prodigal son (verlooren soon)
- a painting of the Neu of Utrecht (probably the dismissal of the Waargelders by Prince Maurits in Utrecht)
- a painting of the winter and summer market (winter en somer marct)
- a painting where the cripples are healed (daer de creupels genesen werden)
a painting of the night when Christ was arrested (*nacht Cristus gevangen*)
a portrait of the [owner?] of the house
a portrait of one having a ring collar (*ring craegen*)
a painting of the abduction of women (*spoeleringh van vrouwen*, probably the Sabines)
a little winter
*a roemer* with flowers
a Jong Tobias