

# A Holland-America Line

THE NATIONAL GALLERY'S ACQUISITION OF A MAJOR TER BRUGGHEN OPENS A WINDOW ON THE HISTORY OF TASTE. BY JONATHAN LOPEZ



Hendrick ter Brugghen,  
*Bagpipe Player in Profile*,  
1624, oil on canvas.

ON FEB. 6 the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., announced that it had acquired *Bagpipe Player in Profile*, by the 17th-century Dutch artist Hendrick ter Brugghen. A sophisticated image, it depicts a rustic musician in antique costume, seated, the brawny mass of his exposed right arm offering a poignant contrast to the delicate finger positions required to manipulate his instrument. The exact purchase price was not disclosed, but it is generally believed to have been in the range of \$11 million.

Contemplating the luminous surface of this picture, the sensuous rhythm of its design, the subtlety of its technique and handling, such a sum does not seem unwarranted. But the price does appear remarkable when viewed from a historical perspective. Seventy-five years ago, very few American museums or collectors would have expressed any interest in this picture at all, at any price.

The late Oxford University professor Francis Haskell wrote that the history of taste “can tell us something of great importance about which we would otherwise lack any information.” It provides, in Haskell’s phrase, a record of “the knocking down and putting up” of reputations, the ongoing process whereby artists and styles of the past are reevaluated, sometimes radically, in the light of present-day likes and dislikes.

Ter Brugghen’s work provides a prime example of what Haskell would have called a “rediscovery in art.” Very poorly represented in American collections of the Gilded Age and Roaring Twenties, the artist became highly prized in the U.S. only after World War II. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York acquired its Ter Brugghen, *The Crucifixion With the Virgin and St. John*, in 1956; the Allen Memorial Art Museum in Oberlin, Ohio, purchased what is often considered the artist’s masterpiece, *St. Sebastian Tended by Irene*, in 1953; and the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles bought *Allegory of the Senses* in 1984. Now Washington’s turn has come.

“I’ve been waiting a long time for this,” says Arthur Wheelock Jr., the National Gallery’s curator of northern Baroque painting. He explains that the basic character of the gallery’s Dutch collection had been established by its early donors, particularly Andrew Mellon and the Widener family of Philadelphia—avid admirers of Dutch art who possessed superb examples of Rembrandt, Vermeer, Frans Hals and other masters. But Mellon and the Widen-

ers did have certain blind spots. As Wheelock puts it, “They expected their Dutch pictures to look Dutch.”

Working in an Italianate style, heavily influenced by Caravaggio, Ter Brugghen might well seem difficult to place within the native Dutch traditions that produced the winter skating scenes of Hendrick Avercamp, the tidy middle-class interiors of Pieter de Hooch and the precisely rendered cityscapes of Jan van der Heyden. But in the strongly Catholic city of Utrecht, the Caravaggesque manner gained wide favor from the 1620s onward, beginning with the work of Ter Brugghen’s associate Gerrit van Honthorst, who had traveled and worked in Italy. In *Bagpipe Player in Profile*, Caravaggio’s influence can be seen not only in the earthy physical type of the model but also in the juxtapositions of light and dark passages that set off the sitter’s cap and tunic.

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The broad style and bold imagery of the Utrecht Caravaggisti exerted a lasting influence on Dutch artists including Jan Lievens, Rembrandt and Vermeer. Moreover, a closer look at the subject will confirm that various kinds of Italianate styles flourished in the Netherlands throughout the 17th century. In addition to the Caravaggisti, there were the so-called Bamboccianti, who painted outdoor scenes populated with a stock cast of Italian low-genre characters. Italian influence is also palpable in the lush, sun-filled Arcadian landscapes of Nicholaes Berchem and Karel du Jardin.

But when art history first emerged as a rigorous academic discipline in the 19th century, periods and schools were defined

in terms of national styles, and artists who had imported trends from one country to another were often overlooked. In part, Ter Brugghen’s reputation, and those of the other Caravaggisti, languished because of this trend. American collectors’ view of the Netherlands had been formed by the potent mythology of books such as John Lothrop Motley’s extremely popular *Rise of the Dutch Republic* (1855), which posited that the United Provinces, a self-governing society of middle-class Protestant merchants, could be seen as the spiritual forebear of the United States. For them, the very concept of Italian trends in Dutch Golden Age art would likely have been both difficult to comprehend and fundamentally unwelcome.

According to Ter Brugghen specialist Wayne Franits—author, with the late Leonard Slatkes, of the most up-to-date and comprehensive scholarly catalogue of Ter Brugghen’s paintings—the artist’s eventual reemergence in the world outside the Netherlands owed much to the pioneering work of German art historians such as Arthur von Schneider and especially to *Burlington Magazine* editor Benedict Nicolson, whose decades of work on Ter Brugghen culminated in the first catalogue raisonné of the artist in 1958. “The appearance of the Nicolson catalogue led to a surge of interest,” says Franits. “It cemented Ter Brugghen’s reputation.”

*Bagpipe Player in Profile* hung for some 70 years in the Wallraf-Richartz Museum in Cologne, Germany, until it was recently restituted to the heirs of Herbert von Klemperer, a German industrialist who had been forced to sell the painting by the Nazi regime in 1938. The National Gallery purchased it (with the aid of donors Greg and Candy Fazakerley) from a consortium of dealers—Johnny Van Haeften of London, Otto Naumann of New York and Konrad Bernheimer of London and Munich—who had acquired it from the heirs at Sotheby’s New York on Jan. 29 for \$10.2 million.

On view in Washington, *Bagpipe Player in Profile* will certainly be among the finest Ter Brugghens in any American collection. 