

ORAZIO GENTILESCHI JOSEPH AND POTIPHERS WIFE



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Charles I 's success in attracting Northern European painters like Rubens and Van Dyck was not matched in the field of Italian painting. The question of inviting an Italian painter was complicated primarily by the political circumstances and by religious principles. Efforts were made, for example, to attract Guercino and Albani to the English court, but the former declined on the basis that England was officially a Protestant country and that the climate was too inclement, and negotiations with the latter came to nothing. Indeed, a similar situation pertained during the reign of Charles II when the only Italian artist at court was Guercino 's nephew, Benedetto Gennari, an inferior painter who worked in England from 1674. Significantly, when Orazio Gentileschi came to England in 1626 his main employer seems to have been Charles I 's wife, Henrietta Maria, the daughter of Marie de' Medici, who continued to profess her Catholic faith after her marriage in 1625. For the queen Gentileschi painted the ceiling of the Great Hall in The Queen's House at Greenwich - Allegory of Peace and the Arts under the English Crown (now in Marlborough House, London) - and other important pictures by him are recorded at Greenwich such as The Finding of Moses (given by Charles I to Philip IV of Spain in 1633) and Joseph and Potiphar's Wife. This last, although sold after the king 's execution in 1649, was recovered for the Royal Collection at the time of the Restoration and sent to Henrietta Maria in exile in France at Colombes.

Gentileschi was born in Pisa, but early in life (1576-78) settled in Rome, where his style reflects the influence of a residual Mannerism that was soon to be swept away by the impact of Caravaggio. The artist left Rome for good at the beginning of the 1620 s and is then recorded in Genoa in 1623 before moving northwards to Paris in 1624 and finally to England, where at first he worked for the Duke of Buckingham. Following Buckingham 's assassination in 1628, Gentileschi became a fully - fledged court painter, indulging in diplomatic missions as well as painting. His presence in England was not widely welcomed and by 1633 he was trying to return to Florence, reminding the Grand Duke Ferdinand II in a letter that he had been out of Tuscany for fifty - five years. In spite of these efforts Gentileschi died in London.

The artist 's work has only recently become the subject of close study. To a certain extent his paintings are self - consciously grand and display poor draughtsmanship. Furthermore, the large scale that he so often favoured encouraged a rhetorical flourish that sometimes amounts to vacuousness. Yet many of his compositions are striking and linger in the memory - Young Woman Playing A Lute (Washington, National Gallery of Art), The Rest On The Flight Into Egypt (Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery), Lot And His Daughters (Berlin, Gemildegalerie) or The Annunciation (Turin, Galleria Sabauda). His style would seem to be based on a fusion between the realism of Caravaggio and the clarity of exposition demanded by the Counter-Reformation. It has also been argued that paintings like Joseph and Potiphar's Wife should be seen in the context of Caroline court art. The predilection for simplified, dramatic compositions and exaggerated gesture, together with the sharp contrast between exposed flesh and the texture of draperies, are paralleled in the plots of contemporary masques and poetry. Within court circles narrative pictures of this sort were possibly the province of Gentileschi, while Van Dyck concentrated at first on portraiture.

The story of Joseph and Potiphar 's wife, which was popular in Florentine art of the early seventeenth century, is recounted in Genesis 39: 7 - 20. Potiphar was an Egyptian official (' captain of the body - guard ') who bought Joseph from the Midianites. His wife found Joseph attractive, and after he was made comptroller of Potiphar 's household she attempted to compromise Joseph but without success. 'And she caught him by his garment, saying, Lie with me: and he left his garment in her hands, and fled, and got him out.' Joseph was falsely accused on the basis of the

garment and eventually imprisoned. The painting exhibits the strengths and weaknesses of Gentileschi's art in that the artist recognises the dramatic potential of the scene, but cannot quite sustain it on this large scale. Interestingly, a replica (New York, Paul Drey) which is smaller in size, is in the final analysis more compelling. On the other hand, the poses of the two figures, the handling of the draperies and the rich colours are memorable.

The painting is signed on the back of the original canvas: HORATIUS GENTILESCVs / FECIT. It was cleaned in 1978-80.

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