

Jan Van Bijlert

'St. Matthew and the Angel'

(late 1620s)

Oil on canvas

Purchased, Ulster Museum, 1969

Presentation
by
Melissa McKee



The Artist- Jan Van Bijlert

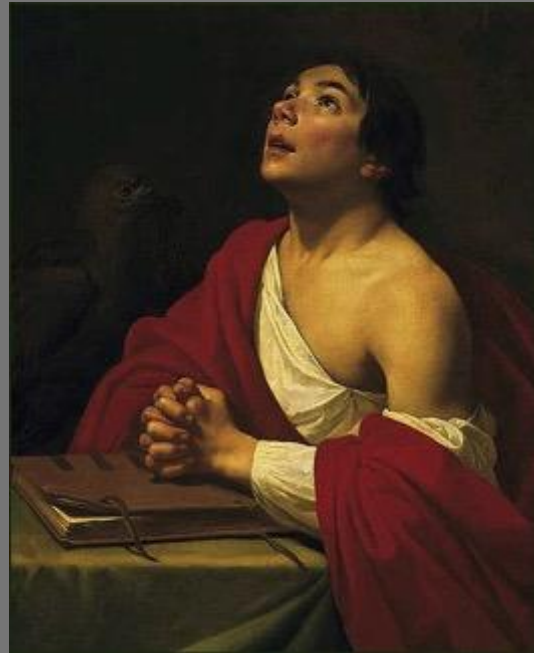
- ▶ Born in Utrecht in the early 1600's
- ▶ Travelled to Rome, Italy and became affiliated with the Utrecht Caravaggisti- a group of fellow Dutch artists influenced by Caravaggio and his painting style, amalgamating intense realism with traditional religious subjects.
- ▶ Echoes of the Caravaggesque style are revealed through van Bijlert's use of strong chiaroscuro (the use of strong contrasts between light and dark); also in the delicate attention to bodily textures and in the intimacy of the intergenerational relationship depicted between St. Matthew and the Angel.
- ▶ Active painter during the baroque movement- characterised by self-confidence, dynamism and a realistic approach to depiction.



Other Works by Jan Van Bijlert



‘St. Mark, the Evangelist’
Oil on canvas



‘St John, the Evangelist’
Oil on canvas



‘St Luke, the Evangelist’
Oil on canvas

‘St Matthew, the Evangelist’ is one of van Bijlert’s collection of 4 evangelist paintings.

Each evangelist is depicted alongside the associated symbol derived from biblical reference, e.g. Matthew’s symbol was known to be a “winged man”, hence the angel (Gospel of Matthew deals with the genealogy of Christ; the winged man refers to human ancestors).

Having never observed a real lion, the creature in van Bijlert’s depiction of St. Mark has a more dog-like impression.

Background/context- The City of Utrecht, religion and the legacy of the Caravaggisti

The city of Utrecht, Netherlands

- ▶ Utrecht's distinctive imagery (dramatic religious subjects and vivid colour), its independent identity as part of the province of Utrecht and its geographic distance from the artistic centres e.g. Amsterdam were contributing factors
- ▶ A former bishopric, the city maintained a significant Catholic population in comparison to the rest of the Protestant-dominated Northern Netherlands.
- ▶ Politico-religious turmoil/Dutch Revolt- In the late 1500s and early 1600s, the predominantly Protestant Northern Netherlands grew restless under the rule of Catholic Philip II of Spain. A rebellion resulted in a division of Northern and Southern provinces and the establishment of the self-ruling Dutch Republic while the South remained under Spanish control (1579 Union of Utrecht, 1581 Act of Abjuration). In Utrecht, populated with both Protestants and Catholics, Calvinists were in the position of power (1586) but Utrecht remained the most Catholic of the United Provinces (approx. 40% in the mid 17th century)- this helps us to understand the strong presence of religious imagery in the works of artists from Utrecht despite this being an uncommon occurrence in Dutch painting (the reformed church rejected religious imagery/iconoclasm).
- ▶ Meanwhile, art in Utrecht thrived in part because artists of different religious and political convictions focused on unity, asserting their solidarity by setting up an independent guild in 1611, the Guild of Saint Luke- artists placed their professional identity ahead of their religious and political- working together, sometimes, even at the expense of individual recognition or traditional hierarchies.

The legacy of the Caravaggisti

- ▶ Having travelled to Rome and been inspired by the artistry of Caravaggio at the beginning of the 17th century, painters from Utrecht (inc. van Bijlert) returned home, developing these new artistic ideas into a style known as Utrecht Caravaggism. Its prevalence spanned only a decade (from 1620 to 1630) however, their legacy lives on.
- ▶ The Caravaggesque nature of Gerrit Dou's "niche paintings" and Rembrandt's use of chiaroscuro reveals how the Caravaggisti lingered and had a lasting impact on art history.



Echoes of van Bijlert's work in Rembrandt's depiction of the evangelist, 'Saint Matthew and The Angel' (1661)

Intergenerational dimension / depictions of old age

In van Bijlert's painting, a relationship is presented between the elderly evangelist, St. Matthew and the young angel, one of warmth and amiability. The angel's affection and aid is given in a respectful and reverential manner, giving a dignified and almost father-like presence to the older evangelist.



- ▶ Old age adage - “respect your elders”- deep admiration, elicited by their abilities, qualities, achievements...age should be honoured
- ▶ With age comes experience, knowledge and a greater understanding of the World.
- ▶ Youth was intertwined with inherent naivety, age with wisdom and closeness to God
- ▶ As a child, from your first breath- it is your mother/father/someone older than you who fulfils the role of your provider, care-giver, protector- deserving of respect and one should seek to emulate and return this kindness and duty towards their elders
- ▶ Angel- role of a “guardian angel” (in tradition every Saint had one personal guardian angel)- protect, watch over. (“protect you in all you do”- Psalm 91v11)

The Symbolism of Angels

- ▶ In the Bible, angels can be seen as God's messengers, sent to minister, inform, warn, convey divine messages.
- ▶ Angels were believed to have immeasurable rank, the privilege to be in the immediate presence of God, direct access to him (mutual respect between St. Matthew and The Angel)
- ▶ The angel being painted as a child plays on our assumptions and stereotypes of angels. There are connotations of childhood, with the innocence, purity, often refer to as "angelic". Angels are unlike humans, they are spiritual creatures with more power and wisdom than man and created in a state of perfect holiness (without sin)
- ▶ However, unlike man, they are not made in God's image and do not share in man's destiny of redemption in Christ.
- ▶ Angel's are referenced 294-305 times in scripture. This highlights their importance and significance in religious art

(“wisdom is with the aged”-Job 12v12)

(“Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father”- 1st Timothy 5v1)

(“grey hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life”- Proverbs 16v31)

OLD AGE
religious/biblical
perspective

(“let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in preaching and teaching”- 2nd Timothy 5v17-) (as an Evangelist Matthew was a teacher and preacher of the gospel)

(“honour your mother and father”- Exodus 20v12)

Workshop Activity - Your 'Guardian Angel'?

- ▶ Is there someone in your life who is like a guardian angel?
- ▶ Someone who protects, cares for and watches over you?
- ▶ Who would you trust most to give you advice or assistance if you were in need?
- ▶ Mother/father/grandparent/aunt/uncle/cousin/friend etc??

Workshop ideas/activities

Create a panel (fabric/canvas paper/paper) using your 'guardian angel' as inspiration (think about why you have chosen this person, or memories you associate with them, and show this in your artwork) -the individual panels could then be stitched/joined together to create a mural (possibly in the shape of angel wings??)