



Fig. 1. Hendrick de Clerck, *Moses Striking the Rock*, ca. 1610, tempera on oil panel, 170 x 133 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Hendrick de Clerck's *Moses Striking the Rock*: Turning Religion into a Myth

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This analysis of Hendrick de Clerck's (ca. 1560–1630) *Moses Striking the Rock* (ca. 1610) (fig. 1) will focus on how classical subjects of Greco-Roman antiquity were used in religious paintings during the late Mannerist–early Baroque era in Catholic Flanders to create a biblical-mythological genre of art.

As a court painter for Archdukes Albert (1559–1621) and Isabella (1566–1633) in Brussels, De Clerck was expected to paint biblical subjects that reflected the new religious politics of the Counter-Reformation.¹ *Moses Striking the Rock* is a large canvas that represents Moses at Mount Horeb, striking the rock with his stick to provide water for the Hebrews (Exodus 17: 5–6).



Fig. 1. Hendrick de Clerck, *Moses Striking the Rock*, ca. 1610, tempera on oil panel, 170 x 133 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Moses Striking the Rock depicts a scene with various twisted, half-reclining young women and men. The major group, occupying almost half of the picture, is concentrated in the left foreground against a backdrop of rich Italian vegetation. Here men, women and children are gathered in a circle around a seated, lavishly dressed mother with small children at her side. Her outstretched arm is holding a conch shell to receive the water a man is pouring from a Roman metal vase. On the opposite side of her towards the bottom of the painting, a half-dressed man, also with an elegant metal vase in his hands, is watching a bare-breasted mother similarly surrounded by infants. She and other finely dressed women in the painting appear to be breastfeeding their babies. Behind these figures to the right, a woman, reminiscent of a full-length Roman statue, is surrounded by two young athletically built men as she carries a similar vase on her head.

In the distance, in an open space between the right and left groups of people, Moses is striking a rock. It is this minute scene that explains the key episode of the story—the moment preceding the water feast in the foreground when Moses, following God's order, strikes a rock to miraculously unleash water. Two diagonals radiate from the focal point where this major scene is situated. As a result of the diagonals that open this space to the viewer, as well as the limited number of characters in the centre of the composition, the scene with Moses attracts attention by pulling the viewer's gaze into the space of the image. The contrasts in scale and colour between the foreground and the background also draw the viewer into the picture.

The colours, tones and deep *chiaroscuro*—typical of this period—create a vivid and dramatic image. In accordance with the painterly tradition, De Clerck allocates a specific colour to each depicted element, applying various tones to heighten the three-dimensionality of the

figures and their garments. The artist uses the combination of emerald and light green, red and pink, yellow and orange to emphasize the variety and richness of textiles. His characters are dressed in taffeta, brocade and velvet gowns with gold trim. De Clerck carefully shapes the forms of the rounded faces and of the unclothed parts of bodies using soft tonal gradation.

The figures' postures and dress are inspired by Greco-Roman art. However, although the men and women are wearing costumes with Greek and Roman characteristics, their hairstyles reflect the tastes of the early-seventeenth-century elite. Despite the fact that biblical narratives are more ancient than Roman antiquity, the latter was the source of inspiration for imagining a semi-mythical pagan reality. Other motifs in *Moses Striking the Rock*, to be discussed later, borrow from classical imagery.

This painting is a variation of an earlier work completed by De Clerck in 1590 (fig. 2). His first interpretation is smaller and octagonal-shaped, but it has much in common with the later rendition: The image is also dominated by figures placed in an imaginary bucolic setting. The same motifs of breastfeeding, matronly looking yet opulently dressed mothers and half-naked men are present here, although the men are gathering water in golden vessels instead of silver ones. De Clerck uses bright colours in both paintings, although the distemper used in the later painting accounts for its richer hues. Moreover, the second work, with its synthesizing ochre, appears more naturalistic.



Fig. 2. Hendrick de Clerck, *Moses Striking the Rock*, ca. 1590, oil on wood, 86.4 x 86.4 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

To add to the sense of exoticism De Clerck also includes some camels, which are absent in the later painting. As well, the division of the foreground and background in the latter work is much less evident here. Moses, who appears solemn as he stands next to Aaron, the first High Priest of Israel, is much closer to the frontal plane, and unlike in the later work, his toga is brightly coloured in red and blue like the dress of the woman occupying the right foreground of the painting. Thus, the image of Moses striking the rock is pronounced, as is Aaron's presence, with his gold mantel and crown echoed by the yellow-gold drapery, vases and bowls.

Despite their formal differences, both works illustrate the nourishment and well-being provided by God. The subject of *Moses Striking the Rock* is commonly understood to be an Old Testament prototype for salvation through baptism. By being baptized one becomes part

of the Catholic family. Moreover, through baptism one's body becomes sacred, and all five human senses participate in the sacraments. Fulton Sheen, a Catholic theorist and bishop, notes, "[B]ecause the body is to become by Baptism the temple of God, because God dwells in it, it is fitting that it have an important role in the sacrament. Each of the senses are spiritualized in the sacraments: hearing, taste, touch, smell, and sight."² In *Moses Striking the Rock*, the figures' sense of taste is spiritualized as they consume the water that Moses has released from the rock. This point is underscored by the intended display of this painting in the dining room of a home, where it encouraged family and guests to give thanks to God for their meals.³

The religious nature of this message seems to contradict the secular appearance of De Clerck's paintings. Why does the artist incorporate so many pagan elements into these images, and what is the meaning behind the display of sensual pleasures and worldly possessions such as expensive fabrics, jewellery, vessels and other articles of luxury?⁴

To be sure, classical iconography, subject matter and style strongly influenced Mannerist and Baroque art,⁵ although much less consistently than during the Renaissance. In the course of the transformation of the arts during De Clerck's era, ancient imagery became a means of intellectually engaging with the viewer, directly addressing their curiosity and proposing the entertaining game of decrypting the multiple layers of meaning in a painting. Different interpretations of Hebrew mythology became a common source of interest for determining parallels between Old and New Testament narratives during the Counter-Reformation. With this in mind, De Clerck imaginatively turns a dogmatic theme into a pictorial ballad dedicated to fertility, as suggested by the recurring motif of voluptuous breast-feeding mothers and cupid-like babies.

The woman with two infants at her sides in the left centre of the later rendition of *Moses Striking the Rock* resembles Archduchess Isabella Clara Eugenia (fig. 3), the sovereign ruler of the Spanish Netherlands, at the court of whom De Clerck was a painter.



Fig. 3. Frans Pourbus the Younger, *Portrait of Isabella Clara Eugenia of Spain, Archduchess of Austria*, 17th c., oil on panel, 60 x 42 cm, Groeningemuseum.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Isabella_Clara_Eugenia_of_Spain_-_Frans_Pourbus_II.jpg.

Despite grand expectations to have an heir, Isabella and her husband, Albert, remained childless. The painting may thus be an allegorical portrait representing Isabella as a caring mother not only to her future children, but also to the citizens of her kingdom.

This maternal figure also recalls the depiction of Tellus on the *Ara Pacis Augustae* (13–9 BCE), an altar in Rome dedicated to Pax, the Roman goddess of Peace (fig. 4).



Fig. 4. *Ara Pacis Augustae*, east view, panel with the representation of Tellus, 13–9 BCE, Museo dell'Ara Pacis. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ara_Pacis#/media/File:Arapacis.jpg.

Tellus is surrounded by young women who are holding the ends of their billowing capes. The gorgeous garments and sensuous bodies in De Clerck's painting echo the sense of plenitude suggested by Tellus and her female attendants. De Clerck's figures look like goddesses, while the lustful men admiring them resemble classical mythological satyrs, companions to Pan, a fertility god, and Dionysus, god of wine and ecstasy. This jubilant scene in no way reflects the struggles of the Israelites in the desert and their constant complaining to Moses (Exodus 16: 1–4). On the contrary, the smiles on these noble faces suggest a wealthy, peaceful and enjoyable life.

De Clerck's *Moses Striking the Rock* is considered to be a late Mannerist painting. It represents a stylistic transition from classicized Renaissance to Baroque aesthetic taste. De Clerck was an adherent of works with a classicized compositional balance and a restricted number of figures. The later artists of the Baroque era were more interested in a dynamic articulation of subject matter. The compositional complexity of *Moses Striking the Rock*

bears some characteristics of Baroque art in its tendency to dramatize emotions through exaggerated poses and strong colour contrasts. Both late Mannerist and Baroque, Clerck's painting situates its classically rendered figures in a relaxed yet exuberant atmosphere.

The merging of the religious and mythological as well as of the classical and Baroque were not new in Mannerist painting: some twenty years before Clerck conceived his later version of *Moses Striking the Rock*, the same subject was painted by Abraham Bloemaert (1566–1651), an artist from the neighbouring Netherlands.⁶ A Haarlem Mannerist and a follower of the Italian artist Caravaggio (who almost single-handedly created the Baroque style), Bloemaert also painted this subject with references to classical iconography. A richly-coloured painting, his *Moses Striking the Rock* (1596) (fig. 5) includes the figure of an upright woman with a vase; she stands like a soaring pillar, acting as the visual centre of the composition. Nonetheless, she is a mere vision, detached from the suffering crowd.



Fig. 5. Abraham Bloemaert, *Moses Striking the Rock*, 1596, oil on canvas, 79.7 x 108 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art. <https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1972.171>.

By contrast, the woman carrying a jug in the right middle ground of De Clerck's work is fully integrated into her surroundings. Despite the similarities in style and shared classical allusions, Bloemaert's painting shows the idealizing tendencies of De Clerck's representation to be outmoded. Already by the late sixteenth century there was a greater focus on a stronger emotional tension—a central feature of Baroque art—and consistency with the original biblical source, as shown in Bloemaert's emphasis on the Israelites' anguish. This characteristic would later be developed by seventeenth-century artists, in particular Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665), a major artist of the French Baroque style who was not so much interested in stimulating religious piety as in showing his knowledge of biblical accuracy.

The same motifs that appear in De Clerck's and Bloemaert's interpretations are also present in Poussin's *Moses Striking the Rock* (1635) (fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Nicolas Poussin, *Moses Striking the Rock*, 1633–35, oil on canvas, 97 x 133 cm, Scottish National Gallery.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nicolas_Poussin_068.jpg.

For example, the image of Tellus on the *Ara Pacis* is echoed in the figure of the woman

accompanied by two infants in the right foreground. However, Poussin's painting is much more oriented towards the actual drama of the subject, showing the physical and mental agony of the thirsty Israelites. Unlike the works by De Clerck and Bloemaert, this image does not neglect the presence of older people in the narrative.

Despite the differences among the aforementioned variations of *Moses Striking the Rock*, these works all represent the concept of family. The diverse group of Israelites, varying in age and gender, are unified by their shared fate. Intended for display in the dining room of a private house, De Clerck's *Moses Striking the Rock* encouraged piety among the members of a family. This biblical scene thus turns into an instructive narrative reminding people of familial ties that extend beyond blood relatives. At first glance, the discussed works suggest a secularization of the arts. Notably, interest in Greco-Roman art during the Renaissance and the Baroque period was endorsed by the Catholic Church as a means of exhibiting the triumph of the Church over pagan culture.⁷ This message was of paramount importance as the Catholic Church fought to reverse its weakening authority following the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. Moreover, with the advent of the Enlightenment in the seventeenth century, artists began to show a more rational interest in history and pay greater attention to historical accuracy. It is this characteristic that distinguishes Poussin from De Clerck and Bloemaert.⁸ At the same time as Poussin mythologized biblical events, he was, according to some sources, striving for the reconciliation of Jews, Christians and the so-called pagans of different ethnic identities.⁹

The works examined in this essay demonstrate how De Clerck, Bloemaert and Poussin, whose intentions varied from elaborating a new language of symbolic representation to historical accuracy, transformed biblical stories into mythological tales and then into a

historical-mythological genre. Both of De Clerck's *Moses Striking the Rock* reflect the transition of religious artworks from being displayed in a church environment to within the domestic space of a dining room, where it reminded a family to be grateful to God for physical nourishment and spiritual sustenance. In evoking the spiritualization of the sense of taste, *Moses Striking the Rock* also brings to mind the sacrament of the Eucharist, which brings Catholics together as a family to eat the body and drink the blood of Christ.

NOTES

¹ Hans Vlieghe, *Flemish Art and Architecture, 1585-1700* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 15.

² Fulton J. Sheen, *These Are the Sacraments* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1962), <https://www.ewtn.com/library/DOCTRINE/SACRAMEN.TXT>.

³ “Hendrick de Clerck: Moïse frappant le rocher (1979.8),” Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal, accessed November 13, 2015, <https://www.mbam.qc.ca/collections/?t=de%20Clerck#detail-8718>.

⁴ For a discussion of depictions of pagan luxury in High Renaissance art, see Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 612; “Pagan Artifacts in Christian Art,” Italian Renaissance Learning Resources, accessed November 13, 2015, <http://italianrenaissanceresources.com/units/unit-7/essays/pagan-artifacts-in-christian-art/>.

⁵ Baroque art and architecture refers to “the visual arts and building design and construction produced during the era in the history of Western art that roughly coincides with the 17th century.” See *Encyclopedia Britannica*, “Baroque period,” accessed November 13, 2015, <http://www.britannica.com/art/Baroque-period>.

⁶ “Abraham Bloemaert: Moses Striking the Rock (1972.171),” in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000), last modified September 2014, accessed November 13, 2015, <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1972.171>.

⁷ Lyombe Eko, *The Regulation of Sex-Themed Visual Imagery: From Clay Tablets to Tablet Computers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 213.

⁸ “In his numerous representations of the life of Moses, the multiple archaeological layers of Judeo-Christian and pagan antiquity were represented by the sculptural remains of the Roman imperial past.” See Todd Olson, *Poussin and France: Painting, Humanism, and the Politics of Style* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2002), 63.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

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