



Fig. 1. Nicolaes Maes, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, 1658, oil on panel, 59.4 x 87 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Warm Lights: An Analysis of Nicolaes Maes's *The Adoration of the Shepherds* (1658) in
Relation to Protestantism

Camille Devaux

The Adoration of the Shepherds (1658) (fig. 1) by Dutch artist Nicolaes Maes (1634–1693) is a nativity scene that has often been appreciated as a religious image. However, this essay analyzes the work as a secularized depiction of the Holy Family, focusing in particular on how Maes's genre scene was influenced by the Protestant Reformation and by the artist's training under Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606–1669), who encouraged his realist style.



Fig. 1. Nicolaes Maes, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, 1658, oil on panel, 59.4 x 87 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

In *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, the Virgin Mary is pulling back a white covering to reveal Jesus Christ, who is bathed in a spiritual light. The bearded man standing behind her is her husband, Joseph. Surrounding the infant Jesus are men of different ages—some with shepherd's staves—and an adoring woman. Maes's masterful rendering of light guides the viewer's gaze around the group of figures, while also emphasizing certain significant

elements of the scene. There are three sources of light, each of which creates a different effect that ultimately enhances the message of the painting. The most important source of light emanates from the Christ Child. The glowing lantern being carried by an older boy at the entrance of the barn illuminates the small group, the figures of which cast large shadows on the walls and floor. The bubble of warm, yellow light envelops the visitors and the Holy Family, creating a sense of intimacy among the figures. This intimacy is enhanced by the small, enclosed space, delimited by the wooden fence on the far left and the animals on the far right. The third projection of light is the moon in the sky, visible through the entranceway of the barn. The earth's satellite, a celestial witness to the unfolding events, represents the connection between the heavenly and earthly realms. Details of the barn such as the rough planks of the wooden walls, straw flooring and agricultural equipment on the bottom left of the painting emphasize the earthly setting. The farming implements and their allusion to physical labour enhance the realism of the scene.

The Adoration of the Shepherds is an early work of Maes's, painted only a few years after his apprenticeship (1646–1653) with Rembrandt, the most prominent Dutch painter of the Baroque era.¹ We can begin to understand his influence on Maes by studying his painting *The Holy Family* (1645) (fig. 2), which departs from traditional religious scenes by merging traditional Christian iconography with elements of genre art and evoking spirituality primarily through the rendering of light.



Fig. 2. Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, *The Holy Family*, 1645, oil on canvas, 195 x 132 cm, The State Hermitage Museum. <https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/asset-viewer/holy-family/pwHUt3tLKCq2w?projectId=art-project>.

In *The Holy Family*, Mary, kneeling by her son, interrupts her Bible reading to rock him as he sleeps in a cradle, while Joseph practices carpentry in the background. In incorporating contemporary clothing and objects into this image, Rembrandt links the Holy Family to the secular world of a Dutch family. His employment of religious iconography is restrained: aside from the group of angels in the top left corner of the work, no halo can be seen, nor is the scene set in a heavenly dimension. Instead, it is the light source from Christ that imbues the image with a spiritual aura. Similarly, in *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, Maes situates the Holy Family within a contemporary secular setting. However, he completely eschews religious iconography, relying solely on lighting to convey the spiritual nature of the scene.

Maes's painting also bears similarities to a work with the same title that was created in 1646 by another pupil of Rembrandt's (fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Pupil of Rembrandt, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, 1646, oil on canvas, 65.5 x 55 cm, The National Gallery. <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/pupil-of-rembrandt-the-adoration-of-the-shepherds>.

The latter is based on Rembrandt's painting *The Adoration of the Shepherds* (1646) (fig. 4), which belongs to a series of works devoted to the life of Christ that was commissioned by the Stadholder of the Dutch Republic, Prince Frederik Hendrik of Orange (1587–1647).² Such imitation was viewed positively at the time, and was commonly done for educational purposes.³ An artist copied a master's work to develop dexterity and skill.⁴



Fig. 4. Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, 1646, oil on canvas, 97 x 71.3 cm, Alte Pinakothek.
<http://www.rembrandtdatabase.org/Rembrandt/painting/51195/the-adoration-of-the-shepherds>.

Similarly, Maes's *The Adoration of the Shepherds* is a variation of Rembrandt's print *Adoration of the Shepherds, with Lamp* (1654) (fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, *Adoration of the Shepherds, with Lamp*, 1654, etching on paper, 13.5 x 11.1 cm, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.
https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/asset-viewer/adoration-of-the-shepherds-with-lamp/PgGZUy1VckR_Uw?projectId=art-project.

In each of the aforementioned examples of this popular subject, warm lighting conjures a feeling of intimate celebration, and the figures' poses are rendered naturalistically. In Rembrandt's etching, the group of adorers on the left eagerly lean towards the Christ Child, heightening the intimacy of the scene. This crowd of figures creates an imbalanced composition, which makes the subject more approachable in comparison to traditional renditions of the Adoration of the Shepherds.

The realism of Maes's painting may be compared to more explicitly religious interpretations of this theme, such as Luca Giordano's (1634–1705) *Adoration of the Shepherds* (ca. 1688) (fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Luca Giordano, *Adoration of the Shepherds*, ca. 1688, oil on canvas, 115 x 136 cm, Louvre Museum. <http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/adoration-shepherds-0>.

The presence of *putti* in this painting is in accordance with Luke 2:13, which describes an angel instructing the shepherds to travel to Bethlehem to see Christ, their saviour: “Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared [to the shepherds] with the angel...” In

Giordano's painting, the company of angels appears in the upper right portion of the image, hovering over Mary as she holds her child. However, in Maes's work there are no angels, and the figures are fully rooted in earthly reality. Whereas the pose and gaze of each figure is intended to guide the viewer's eye toward Christ in Giordano's picture, the subjects in Maes's painting behave in a more naturalistic manner. A shepherd is adjusting his glasses to get a better view of the Christ Child, while Joseph looks entertained by the man beside him, who is beaming with pride as he makes a dramatic gesture with his hands.

In addition, the function and meaning of light differ in the two paintings. In Giordano's work, the beam of light illuminating the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child may signify the light of faith.⁵ This light, stronger than that of the sun, illuminates the pagan world which hungers for it. By contrast, in Maes's painting, light serves to emphasize the earthly setting. The moon acts as a signifier of the pagan world, in which light comes from celestial bodies in the sky rather than from God Himself.

The departure of Maes's *The Adoration of the Shepherds* from traditional interpretations was influenced not only by Rembrandt, but more broadly by Dutch Protestantism in the seventeenth century. The Protestant disapproval of holy images gave rise to a new type of religious genre painting, of which Maes's work is an example. Although it is similar in some ways to the interpretations of Rembrandt and the pupil of Rembrandt, it goes much further in embedding a biblical narrative within a rural genre scene.

Light remains a subtle, yet crucial remnant of traditional religious imagery in Maes's painting. A distinctive aspect of this work is the boy standing on the far right looking at the animals. He is the furthest figure from the Christ Child, and seems to be detached from the

rest of the group as he turns to face the animals on his left. The boy and his disinterest in Baby Jesus are particularly noteworthy because there is no equivalent figure in either the etching by Rembrandt or in the painting by the pupil of Rembrandt. The boy is bathed in the light of a nearby lantern, a symbol of Christ's light. Christ illuminates those in the dark to give them faith.⁶ Nevertheless, the boy remains disinterested in the miracle of Christ's birth, raising the question of why he is not an active participant in the adoration of Christ. His fascination with the animals instead of the Christ Child enhances the realism of the scene by demonstrating the naiveté characteristic of young children.

Maes's *The Adoration of the Shepherds* reflects the transition during the Protestant Reformation from iconic images of Christ to genre scenes based on biblical narratives. These latter images place a greater emphasis on the earthly realm and the presence of distinctive, naturalistic figures. Light also plays a significant role in these genre works, replacing more explicit religious iconography as a symbol of faith, spirituality and the light of Christ. By presenting the birth of Jesus in a contemporary setting, Maes's painting enabled seventeenth-century viewers not only to more strongly connect with the narrative, but also to visualize the presence of Christ in their everyday lives.

NOTES

¹ Albert Blankert, Ben Broos, and Ernst van de Wetering, *Rembrandt: A Genius and His Impact* (Melbourne; Sydney; Zwolle: W Books, 2006), 299.

² "The Adoration of the Shepherds," The National Gallery, accessed December 21, 2015, <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/pupil-of-rembrandt-the-adoration-of-the-shepherds>.

³ Bernadette Van Haute, "Imitation and Collaboration in Seventeenth-Century Flemish Genre Painting: Deconstructing 'Originality'" (presentation at Making Art, Making Meaning: The Thirteenth Annual Conference of the South African Association of Art Historians, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa, September 11–13, 1997), 125, <http://uir.unisa.ac.za/handle/10500/5069>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Francis, *Lumen Fidei* [Encyclical on The Light of Faith], Vatican Website, June 29, 2013, nn. 1–4, accessed January 10, 2016,

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20130629_enciclica-lumen-fidei.html.

⁶ “And as the lantern of Christ hath been made light, bright and clear, enlightened by the light of the knowledge of God, its brightness and light shineth out into the distance to give light to others still walking in darkness.” See Benedict Groeschel, *I Am with You Always: A Study of the History and Meaning of Personal Devotion to Jesus Christ for Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christians* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 144.

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