

JACOB WILLEMSZ. DE WET I

(Haarlem c. 1610 - Haarlem c. 1675)

The Idolatry of Solomon

signed with monogram 'J.D.W.' (lower right edge)
oil on panel
54 x 73.5 cm (21¼ x 29 in)

SUMPTUOUS IN ITS DETAIL AND DRAMATIC IN ITS lighting effects, *The Idolatry of Solomon* by Jacob Willemsz. de Wet the Elder, illustrates the splendour of King Solomon's court and the ostentatiousness of his pagan worship. The drama of the scene is heightened by the grandiose architecture and swathes of drapery in the background, and the emotive gestures of Solomon and his retinue. The altar, made entirely of gold, and the excesses of wealth on display, speak of the king's prosperity but also the depravity that would be his ruin. Solomon's idolatry was the subject of frequent depiction in seventeenth-century northern European artwork, as to the Protestant eye it was regarded as having parallels with the Catholic Church's use of religious imagery.

The Old Testament relates that Solomon, son of David and King of Israel, prayed to God and was granted wisdom and the ability to judge good from evil. The fame of Solomon's wealth, intelligence and piety travelled far, even enticing the Queen of Sheba to visit him with gifts and praise for his deity. During his reign, Solomon expanded the kingdom, built the Temple in Jerusalem and constructed his own large palace, Fort Millo. His habit of taking multiple foreign wives, seven hundred in total, as well as three hundred

concubines, led to his eventual fall from grace. His wives encouraged him to worship their pagan gods, and he built temples and offered sacrifices in their honour, acts that incensed God's wrath and led to the destruction of his kingdom.

In de Wet's composition, Solomon, wearing a cloak lined in ermine and embroidered with gold, is depicted in a trance-like state as he rocks back on his knees and looks up to a statue of a seated pagan deity. Behind him stands a richly dressed woman with an exotic feathered headdress, presumably one of Solomon's wives instructing him in the worship of idols. An elderly, heavily bearded priest wearing a wreath on his head stands between Solomon and a large text that is propped up on the altar. Surrounding them are participants and on-lookers, one dressed as the goddess Diana with a crescent moon in her headdress. Another holds a sculpture, perhaps an offering to be placed with the plates and urns assembled at the foot of the altar. In the background, a group of musicians raise their horns and trumpets, and one can imagine that the combination of music, flickering candle light and the heady smell of burning incense would have created quite a spectacle.

The subject of idolatry is returned to in de Wet's painting *Paul and Barnabas at Lystra*, in the Ashmolean, Oxford (fig. 1). The painting illustrates the biblical account of the people of Lystra mistaking Paul and Barnabas for gods after Paul healed a cripple. They offer adulation in a grand and extravagant style, wreathing an altar and adorning it with numerous offerings. Many of the iconographical elements of the present painting are repeated here: the altar topped with a statue of a deity, the prayer book leaned up against it, the musicians gathered in the background and the priest clothed in a white robe with a wreath around his head. *Paul and Barnabas at Lystra*, perhaps because of its outdoors setting and relative lightness in palette, has a more innocent and light-hearted tone than *The Idolatry of Solomon*, which is darkly provocative.

De Wet's *oeuvre* was primarily devoted to biblical and mythological subjects. His early work has parallels with the work of Jan Pynas (1581/2-1631) and Pieter Lastman (1583-1633), whereas his paintings from the 1630s suggest the influence of Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669). The emotional content and *chiaroscuro* in his compositions may indicate that he studied or had contact with Rembrandt. De Wet's later work shifts emphasis from the figures to the landscape and tends to resemble that of Benjamin Gerritsz Cuyp (1612-1652) (see Inventory). De Wet was a prolific draughtsman and many of his sketchbooks exist, some of which list the name of his pupils, including Paulus Potter and his own son, Jacob de Wet the Younger.



Jacob Willemsz. de Wet the Elder, *Paul and Barnabas at Lystra*,
The Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, Oxford (Figure 1)

