

# WILLEM DE POORTER

(Haarlem 1608 - after 1648)

## *Croesus Shows Solon his Wealth*

oil on panel  
47.2 x 37.2 cm (18 $\frac{5}{8}$  x 14 $\frac{5}{8}$  in)

**Provenance:** D. Alazraki; New York, 2000;  
Maastricht. TEFAF, 2000

**Exhibited:** Athens, National Gallery, *Greek Gods and Heros in the Age of Rembrandt and Rubens*, 28 September, 2000 to 8 January, 2001, no. 59.

**Literature:** Paarlberg, S., *Greek Gods and Heros in the Age of Rembrandt and Rubens*, no. 59, with illustration.

*‘Croesus broke in angrily, “What, stranger of Athens, is my happiness, then, so utterly set at nought by thee, that thou dost not even put me on a level with private men?”*

*“Oh! Croesus,” replied the other, “thou askedst a question concerning the condition of man, of one who knows that the power above us is full of jealousy, and fond of troubling our lot. A long life gives one to witness much, and experience much oneself, that one would not choose...I see that thou art wonderfully rich, and art the lord of many nations; but with respect to that whereon thou questionest me, I have no answer to give, until I hear that thou hast closed thy life happily. For assuredly he who possesses great store of riches is no nearer happiness than he who has what suffices for his daily needs, unless it so hap that luck attend upon him, and so he continue in the enjoyment of all his good things to the end of life. For many of the wealthiest men have been unfavoured of fortune, and many whose means were moderate have had excellent luck.”<sup>1</sup>*

**T**HIS INTRICATE JEWEL-LIKE PAINTING BY WILLEM de Poorter illustrates a conversation between Croesus, King of Lydia, and the Athenian statesman Solon (638-558 BC), narrated by Herodotus. The fabulously wealthy Croesus, after inviting the visiting statesman to view his riches, asked Solon who he deemed to be the world’s happiest person. Instead of giving Croesus the answer he sought, Solon told him that happiness could only truly be judged at the end of a life and described three men, none of whom were kings, who he considered to have been the happiest. Tellus of Athens was the first, having led a full life and died in battle with honours. Cleobis and Bito came a close second, dying peacefully in their sleep as a result of their mother beseeching the goddess Juno to bestow on them the highest blessing attainable by mortals.

Croesus, left discontented after Solon’s departure, was afterwards punished by the gods for daring to presume himself the happiest of men. The price was his son’s accidental murder and his wife’s suicide at the fall of Sardis. Croesus’ empire was defeated by the Persians in c. 547 BC, and thus his story is presented as a moralistic exemplum of the fickleness of fate.

Illuminated by a horizontal beam of light from the left of the composition, the figure of Croesus in *Croesus Shows Solon his Wealth* is

regal in bearing and richly clad. He wears a gold robe that glints in the light and a red cloak slung over his shoulders. A fringed sash is knotted at his waist and a sword, with an ornately wrought handle, can be seen at his side. Adorning his head is a turban of red and white cloth, giving him an oriental, rather than Hellenic, air. Croesus gestures dramatically towards his riches, which sparkle with brilliance, and looks demandingly at Solon. Solon stands back in the shadows as he surveys the scene with a grave



Willem de Poorter, *Croesus Shows Solon his Wealth* (Detail)

<sup>1</sup> Herodotus, *The History of Herodotus*, George Rawlinson, tr., vol. 1, Book 1, New York, D. Appleton and Company, 1885.



expression on his face. His sombre clothing and bare head create a stark contrast to the attire of his host and indicate his wisdom and humility, qualities which, like happiness, cannot be acquired with wealth.

Between the king and sage, a third man can be seen straining his neck to glimpse the splendour on display. A variety of vessels and urns, all elaborately embellished and shining with gold, lie scattered on the floor and on a table covered in dark red velvet. The casual manner in which the items are assembled, many leaning on their side, suggest they were tossed there with little thought and comprise only a fraction of Croesus' wealth. A burnished urn and an open chest, from which jewels spill out, sit on the table, as well as a heap of colourful drapery and an ornately embroidered rug. Each luxurious item is surpassed by the next and at the base of the table a large pot overflows with gold coins. The immensity of the king's fortune and its conspicuous display is both alluring and repulsive, and reflects the ambivalent attitude towards wealth and consumption found in many of de Poorter's works. These same contradictions were generally present in seventeenth-century Dutch society, where the restraints of Calvinist inhibition were matched by unprecedented fortune, the availability of foreign goods and mass consumption. In *The Art of the Dutch Republic 1585-1718*, Mariët Westermann describes the Dutch mentality, 'which revelled in prosperity yet was anxious about the moral consequences of wealth; a constellation of beliefs that celebrated Dutch enterprise but obsessively acknowledged its dependence on God's benevolence'.<sup>2</sup>

De Poorter's painting of *The Idolatry of King Solomon* in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, see fig. 1, like *Croesus Shows Solon his Wealth*, illustrates a moralising story that was particularly popular in seventeenth-century Dutch society.<sup>3</sup> The downfall of Solomon, resulting from his



Willem de Poorter, *The Idolatry of Solomon*, c.1630-1648, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (Figure 1)



Willem de Poorter, *An Allegorical Subject (The Just Ruler)*, c.1636, The National Gallery, London (Figure 2)

worship of idols is not dissimilar to Croesus' decline after daring to believe his riches would make him the happiest man in the world. In *The Idolatry of King Solomon*, the king, in an opulent green and gold robe, kneels before an altar covered in flames. His exotically dressed foreign wife stands at his side encouraging him to worship her pagan deities, represented by the statue of Venus above. Idolatry, like gold and riches, is portrayed as a seducer of men, and reflects the Protestant disapproval of the Catholic Church's use of religious imagery at this time.

In both images de Poorter masterfully expresses drama and narrative through lighting effects. He uses spot lighting, in the manner of Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669), to draw attention to his subjects and also reveals the influence of Leonard Bramer (1596-1674) in his theatrical highlighting of key features of the painting. De Poorter's use of *impasto* in white and pale yellow to define and enhance the surfaces of the gold vessels and Croesus' garments give the present work added texture and differentiation. Croesus in the present painting is bathed in light, as is Solomon in *The Idolatry of Solomon*, who is illuminated by a shaft of light coming from an upper window. This same style of lighting is evident in *An Allegorical Subject (The Just Ruler)* in the National Gallery, London (fig. 2). The figure in the painting, who may be Merit in the guise of the just ruler, stands directly in the path of a beam of light, which glances off his armour. The contrast between light and dark is at its strongest here,

<sup>2</sup> Mariët Westermann, *The Art of the Dutch Republic 1585-1718*, The Orion Publishing Group, London, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> A painting by Jacob Willemszoon de Wet I of the same subject is also illustrated in this catalogue, see cat. no. 41.



Willem de Poorter, *The Healing of the Blind Tobit*, Private Collection (Figure 3)

with the majority of the picture opaque and shadowy while the figure stands out. The actual source of illumination, hinted at in these paintings is revealed in another work by de Poorter, *The Healing of the Blind Tobit* (fig. 3). Here the light issues from an open window and sweeps over the figures grouped around Tobit and past them to the still life of bowls and jugs in the far right of the composition.

In addition to bathing his paintings in dramatic Rembrandtesque illumination, de Poorter also delighted in representing the subtle play



Willem de Poorter, *Vanitas Still Life*, 1636, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig (Figure 4)



Willem de Poorter, *Croesus Shows Solon his Wealth* (Detail)

of light on different objects and substances. In *Croesus Shows Solon his Wealth*, he expertly depicts reflections on a variety of surfaces, from the smooth roundness of the urn sitting on the table, to the matte roll of paper lying on the ground and to the richly textured garments worn by Croesus.

De Poorter achieved similar effects with his depictions of burnished armour, which he often incorporated into narrative and allegorical scenes, as in *An Allegorical Subject (The Just Ruler)*, or his still lifes. *Vanitas Still Life* in the Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig, is made up of pieces of armour assembled on a stone ledge with drapery and a skull (fig. 4). The pile of armour echoes the mass of gold and riches in *Croesus Shows Solon his Wealth* and the combination of diagonally jutting objects and curving forms captures the powerful impact of light. The orange, white and blue of the fabrics may represent a flag or banner and allude to political affairs at the time of painting, as de Poorter executed several similar still lifes with armour during the mid 1630s, at the height of the Eighty Years War. The skull is symbolic of the mortality of man and the vanity, or futility, of earthly goods and pursuits, a theme that could be applied equally to the king's accumulation of fortune in *Croesus Shows Solon his Wealth*.

De Poorter's first works were recorded in Haarlem in 1631. In 1634, he was registered as a master painter and in the following year, Pieter Casteleijn was named as his pupil. Pieter Abrams Poorter and Claes Coenraets were also apprenticed under de Poorter later on in his career. The archives of the Haarlem Guild of St. Luke mention de Poorter for the last time in 1645, the year that he moved to Wijk bij Heusden. It is thought that he may have studied under Rembrandt, along with his fellow townsman Jacob de Wet (see cat. no. 41). De Poorter's small scale biblical and historical compositions are so markedly similar to Rembrandt's paintings of the same subjects from c.1630 that the hands of the two artists are often confused. De Poorter did on occasion copy paintings by Rembrandt, such as his *Presentation in the Temple* of 1631. If he were a pupil of Rembrandt, it seems likely that he received his training in the master's Leiden workshop, as Rembrandt's move to Amsterdam in 1631 coincided with de Poorter's first known work painted in Haarlem. In Leiden, he would have come into contact with Gerrit Dou (1613-1675) who worked there from 1628, and who reasserted the traditional Netherlandish concern for meticulous craftsmanship by establishing a school for fine painters. Fine painting, as well as dramatic lighting and a preference for still lifes, whether as the subject of a composition or incorporated into a historical narrative, characterise de Poorter's work.