THE CRUCIFIXION
BY HENDRICK TERBRUGGHEN

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From a bombed church in the East End of London, through Sotheby’s auction rooms, where it caused excitement among museum directors from both sides of the ocean, a painting of unusual importance, hitherto unknown, has recently come to the Metropolitan Museum. It is the Crucifixion by the Dutch artist Hendrick Terbrugghen of Utrecht. Painted in the third decade of the seventeenth century, this picture illustrates an interesting and complex period of transition in Dutch art, when young Dutchmen brought home from their travels the self-conscious realism of the early Roman baroque. Among them Terbrugghen stands out as a painter of fascinating individuality, refinement, and sensitivity to color. His Crucifixion is a rare example of strictly religious, devotional painting in the days of ardent, iconoclastic Protestantism in the Netherlands.

One feels tempted to compare this new acquisition with the most famous Crucifixion in the Metropolitan Museum, Salvador Dali’s Corpus Hypercubus. In striking contrast to Dali’s mystical vision and sophisticated experiment in space, Terbrugghen, with inexorable directness, tells a human drama of moving simplicity.

We know very little about the man who painted this picture, Hendrick Terbrugghen. Even the few dates given by older writers differ. The German painter Sandrart, better known as chronicler,dedicates only a few skimpy lines to him in his Teutsche Academia, 1675: “Because his inclination led him, with deep though melancholy thoughts, to follow nature and her unfriendly shortcomings truly but unpleasantly, an adverse fate has hounded him unto the grave.” We might almost suspect a personal animosity toward Terbrugghen in this grim judgment. As Terbrugghen’s contemporary and as a pupil and friend of his Utrecht colleague Honthorst, having traveled in Terbrugghen’s footsteps practically all over Italy, Sandrart must have been well aware of his work and known many of his pictures. Although he probably was present when Terbrugghen received his greatest honor as an artist, he does not mention that the famous Rubens, on a visit to Utrecht in 1627, praised Terbrugghen as the only real painter he had found in the Netherlands. This omission especially enraged Terbrugghen’s son Richard to such a degree that he felt compelled to publish a “notification to all lovers of the art of painting” in which he claimed his father’s fame for posterity, making a special point of Rubens’ praise. No copy of this pamphlet has come down to us, but the text under an old portrait engraving of Terbrugghen by P. Bodart, also probably com-
missioned by the cranky old son to foster his
forgotten father’s fame, and Houbraken’s ac-
count in his Groot Schouburgh, 1718, seem to have
drawn information from it. They give 1588 as
Terbruggen’s birth date, but it is more prob-
able that he was born in 1587, as stated by
Sandart and by De Bie in 1661, which would
agree with Terbruggen’s age at his death in
1629, recorded by all writers as forty-two.

Gissen kan missen—guesses can be wrong. This
old Dutch proverb is quoted by Houbraken in
introducing his chapter on Terbruggen. About
Terbruggen’s birthplace we have again to
guess. Most probably it was Deventer in the
province of Overijssel, or in the neighborhood,
where the wealthy Terbruggen family owned
country houses. Not only is it stated under
Bodart’s portrait engraving that he was born in
Overijssel but Terbruggen’s loyal son, so con-
cerned about his father’s place in history, gave
four pictures of the Evangelists to the city of
Deventer in 1707, making it very clear in his
deed of gift that they were to be hung forever
in one of the main rooms of the town hall in lasting
memory of his father, who originally came from
this province. There the pictures can still be seen.

Sandart and De Bie, though, name Utrecht
as Terbruggen’s native city, while Houbraken
 informs us that Terbruggen’s father left De-
venter in 1581 because of unrest and persecu-
tion there and fled to Utrecht. In fact, one finds
recorded in Deventer archives of 1581 that on
February 20 fourteen citizens were expelled from
public office, as they favored the Spaniards and
the priests more than the Protestants. Among
them is listed a Henricus Terbruggen, but we
know that Terbruggen’s father, a lawyer, was
called Jan. Wurzbach in his Niederländisches
Künstler-Lexikon, 1910, reports that Jan Terbrug-
gen, as an ardent Protestant, left Deventer in
1587 when the English occupation treacherously
surrendered the city to the Spanish. However,
as Jan Terbruggen is mentioned as alderman
of the Deventer city council from 1587 to 1590,
like Henricus before him he must have favored
the Catholic priests and the Spaniards to keep
his position under the Spanish rule. We have
reason, therefore, to doubt Wurzbach’s account
and may instead assume that Jan Terbruggen
as ardent Catholic left Deventer in 1591 when
the Protestant forces of Prince Maurice drove
the Spaniards out again. Houbraken could have
erroneously written 1581 instead of 1591. In that
case we might surmise that while Terbruggen
was still an infant his Catholic and hispanophile
father left Deventer for Utrecht, where he was less
well known and hoped to find more tolerance.

After an early apprenticeship with Abraham
Bloemaert, the leading artist in Utrecht, Terbrug-
gen followed the route to Rome that had been
taken by many of his compatriots all through the
sixteenth century. There is documentary proof
that he was in Milan in 1614 on his way back
from Italy, where, according to Houbraken, he
had spent ten years. In that case it would have
been in 1604 that he went to Rome, but assum-
ing that he was at least nineteen when he left his
teacher, it was more probably in 1606. Of all the
pictures which he must have painted in those
Italian years we know none, and none is re-
corded. He is said to have painted an altarpiece
for the “Big Church” in Naples, but no proof of
this can be found, although Matthew Pilkington,
in 1824, informs us that it was a Descent from
the Cross.

In 1616 Terbruggen is mentioned as master
of the painters’ guild of Saint Luke in Utrecht.
About that time he married Jacoba Verbeek, by
whom he had three daughters and the loyal son,
Richard. But only from 1620 on do we know
signed and dated paintings. He died on Novem-
ber 1, 1629.

These meager dates are supplemented by Ter-
bruggen’s powerful paintings, still relatively
unknown. Our recently increasing interest in his
period and growing knowledge of his artistic in-
dividuality has led to a number of discoveries
and reattributions. A forthcoming publication
by Benedict Nicolson, the first monograph de-
 voted to the painter, will gather his presently
known works and probably bring us new in-
formation.

Terbruggen’s Crucifixion is a triad of monu-
mental simplicity. The symmetrical composition
is dictated by the cross. It is placed slightly off
center to the left, thus balancing Christ’s body,
which is bent to the right. The head, after the
agony of death, has sunk to the left, the lifeless
hands express the torture of his struggle. The pathetic body of bones and wrinkled, dead-gray skin is painted with cruel realism. Mary, a simple woman, wrings her hands piously, her eyes submissively and sadly searching Christ’s face. From her foot on the left the corded folds of her garment move up in slow curves. Heavy waves of folds lead to and circle around her hands. The hands and head correspond with two bends in Christ’s body; they also help to transcribe a central oval, which aligns Christ’s feet, the hands and head of Saint John, and Christ’s head. Saint John is lost in open-mouthed amazement over the death of his master, clasping his red-skinned, chubby fingers. Naïve adoration rather than grief is expressed in his stupid face. These saints are but unpretending Dutch peasants, not even disguised with halos (it is only around the head of Christ that a soft light glows). But they speak an extremely sensitive language of color.

The Virgin Mary is painted all in muted, cool colors. Her dress is pinkish mauve, a favorite color with Terbrugghen. The drapery over her arm is reseda green, in the shadow a broken brown, which probably once had a green glaze, creating an effect of iridescence now lost. Under her cream-colored kerchief she wears a thin scarf, gray in the light and steel blue in the shadows. A highlight picks up the white of her cuff. The pale face is modeled with masterly economy. Over the transparent brown underpaint, which is left exposed as deepest shadow, the artist put soft gray half shadows, building up to the waxen yellow of the cheek hit by the light and finished with glossy highlights. As in almost all of Terbrugghen’s pictures the light comes from the left. He loved to let it glide caressingly over shoulders and neck, picking up the high cheekbones of his people while leaving the profile of their faces in soft and luminous shadow.

The feet of Mary and John are also painted with effective economy, a solid flat brown in the shadows, sharply silhouetted against the lighter background and modeled in flesh colors only where the light hits the toes.

Against the whiteness of his loincloth the flesh tones of Christ’s body appear all the more macabre, ranging from a silver or yellowish gray to almost greenish shadows, closely related to the gloomy colors of the background, which melt from grayish yellow into olive brown. In striking contrast Saint John shows full-blooded colors, a bottle-green robe and drapery of rich, resplendent red with shadows of crimson. His face is a bravura piece of brushwork as free and firm as Manet’s, while his hands are painted with a robust vitality recalling Jordans.

Older writers already have commented on Terbrugghen’s “stout” and “flowing” brushwork. The brushwork in the draperies and background is slower flowing, the quality of the paint thicker, more indolent, almost an expression of the artist’s melancholia which Sandrart implied. There is very little detail in the picture, and the restraint concentrates the attention on the few accents. Faces and hands carry the strong but suppressed emotion. The skull and bones, designating Golgotha, form a gruesome and impressive still life, aggressive almost in its frontal symmetry. The splintered wedges and the arid twigs add a sad and pathetic note to this symbol of human vanity. Antithetically, the scroll above Christ stands out like a promise of heaven.

Wrapped in their woolly cloaks, contained in a closed contour, the saints are united with Christ more through their facial expressions than through their movements. Sharply silhouetted against the flat background, they stand isolated like sculpture on a narrow platform, comparable to the carved figures of a medieval Calvary group.

Terbrugghen is generally classified as a follower of Caravaggio. This term places him in the history of art and, in an oversimplified manner, “explains” his style. But it has never been found quite satisfactory. Searching for the answer to some of the idiosyncrasies of his style, scholars have suggested the influence of artists as various as Saraceni, Serodine, Borgianni, and Gentileschi. They have also considered the possibility of a second journey to Italy during the undocumented years between 1616 and 1620, but without convincing evidence. What Terbrugghen encountered between the Rome of Caravaggio and Utrecht, possibly in northern Italy, remains still to be named.

When Terbrugghen arrived in Rome on his traditional pilgrimage Caravaggio was already a figure of great repute, however controversial,
With the outer realism he expressed a singular inner reality, showing great compassion for human suffering and aspiration. His concept of space was close and compact. His use of strong side light, boldly exploited by his imitators, gave unity and force to his scenes.

Our Crucifixion could not have been painted without knowledge of Caravaggio’s work. Where Caravaggio had chosen Roman street urchins and working people for his models Terbrughgen used heavy-boned Dutch peasants. Like Caravaggio he often employed the same models for several pictures. The almost offensive vulgarity of the types is balanced by the unsentimental and therefore touching sincerity of expression.

Caravaggio could be looked upon as basically a still-life painter. In other words, starting out as a painter of still life, then adding half-figures, and only later developing his monumental, religious, full-figure style, he saw forms in their own, separate value and combined them only haltingly, never achieving a fluid, full-baroque movement. We have commented on the independent, still-life quality of the skull in Terbrughgen’s Crucifixion. He also composed his pictures with single entities. Only in some of his last works was he able to melt them into a soft unity.

One often forgets that differences of style go hand in hand with differences of working method. A novelty of Caravaggio’s approach, commented on by his fellow painters, was his complete neglect of established studio methods. Dispensing with preparatory studies, he seems to have developed his paintings directly on the canvas. This often resulted in considerable alteration. X-rays of his Martyrdom of Saint Matthew in San Luigi dei Francesci in Rome reveal a completely different original conception under the finished painting. While other artists of the period prepared their paintings with innumerable sketches and studies—to mention only the masses of drawings of the Bolognese school that have come down to us—we do not know of any drawings surely by Caravaggio’s hand. Of course it is possible that they were all lost, the more so if one considers Caravaggio’s vagrant life. Most great painters are also prolific draftsmen. And yet it is probable, although it would be extremely unusual, that none ever existed, at any rate no con-

*The Crucifixion, by a Utrecht master, called the Calvary of Hendrick van Rijn, once in St. John’s Church, Utrecht. Dated 1563. Royal Museum, Antwerp*
considerable number. In fact, very few drawings are known by any of the followers of Caravaggio. One might conjecture from this lack of drawings, even taking into account the possibility of greater than usual loss, that studies were not a requisite of method or a means of expression in the Caravaggio school. No studies by Terbruggen have yet come to light. We might add that no drawings by Vermeer are known with certainty either, another aspect of the inner relationship between the three mysterious artists Caravaggio, Terbruggen, Vermeer.

Two or three drawings of single half-figures which we can hesitantly attribute to Terbruggen have not at all the character of preparatory studies. They repeat his popular genre pictures, and the plausible suggestion has been made that they served as finished works in lieu of the much demanded paintings. Apparently Terbruggen also learned Caravaggio’s working method while in Rome. The frequent occurrence of pentimenti, often clearly visible, gives proof that he developed his compositions to some degree directly in oils. For example, in the picture of Lazarus in Utrecht one can clearly discern that the dominating figure of Lazarus was originally posed much more to the left. Few of Terbruggen’s paintings have so far been x-rayed. That this could show astounding results is illustrated by x-rays of Terbruggen’s Boy Violinist in a Viennese private collection. Underneath appears not only the figure of the Bagpipe Player in the Wallraf-Richartz Museum in Cologne but still another sketch reminiscent of the Bagpipe Player in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, both abandoned for reasons impossible to guess. Hopes of finding earlier compositions or major changes revealed by x-raying our Crucifixion were abandoned when the Museum’s Technical Laboratory found that the paint of the background contains white lead, which with its density obscures all nuances and lets only the thick parts of the finished painting appear in the shadowgraph. Still, there are indications that something else is underneath and that the composition was changed in the process of painting—too faint, however, to allow any conclusions. Pentimenti are visible wherever thinning of the paint has occurred. Terbruggen made small corrections in Christ’s left arm and hand, also in Mary’s hands and her right foot, which previously was placed slightly more to the left. The brushwork along the left contour of the figure of Mary also indicates some correction there. It can only be assumed that the thick, opaque quality of the paint elsewhere covers and hides other pentimenti.

Most telling for Terbruggen’s indebtedness to Caravaggio are the direct derivations from the latter’s works. These went further than the adaptation of themes and compositions, for example, in Terbruggen’s Calling of Saint Matthew in Le Havre, an almost exact copy in reverse of Caravaggio’s painting of the same title in San Luigi dei Francesi. However, Caravaggio is not known to have painted a Crucifixion of Christ. His painting of the Crucifixion of Saint Andrew got lost in Spain, but an old copy in Toledo shows that apart from the general stylistic connections which have been pointed out above it bears no direct relationship to Terbruggen’s Crucifixion.

The Crucifixion, by Guido Reni (1575-1642), painted in the third decade of the xvii century. In the collection of the Duke of Northumberland, Alnwick Castle
Christian art in its beginnings was very hesitant to depict the crucified Christ. Later, as we know, this subject became one of its main themes. In the course of centuries it lost its originally abstract and symbolical character and was treated more and more historically. The Northern painters of the later fifteenth century took special delight in enlarging and enriching the theme. We hardly notice Christ among a crowd of people, horsemen and spectators, while the Virgin is shown fainting in the arms of the two other Marys, the thieves struggle on their crosses, and the soldiers throw dice for Christ's coat. The worldly and mannerist later sixteenth century, with no particular feeling for the subject, had nothing to add except complicated compositions and daring foreshortenings. But with the seventeenth century the old theme was recreated in the baroque spirit. A new vision originated, probably in the Carracci school, of Christ alone in a dark landscape, or accompanied by the heavily draped figures of the Virgin Mary and Saint John, and sometimes Mary Magdalen. A vision of intense pathos, more devotional than historical in character, it was adopted and beautifully expressed by some of the greatest masters of the first half of the seventeenth century, Velazquez, Rubens, Van Dyck, Guido Reni. A Crucifixion by Guido Reni, painted in the third decade of the seventeenth century and until the nineteenth century in a Roman church, might serve as an example of this type. Comparison with Terbrugghen's picture shows many similarities in the composition, the sentimental abandon of Mary and Saint John with their voluminous draperies, the motive of the contraposed feet. But these are general and superficial, and the comparison, inviting at first, helps to point out strongly not only the basic differences between the Italian and the Northern painter but again the compelling, unparalleled directness of Terbrugghen's picture. The ideal beauty of Reni’s Christ, his head turned in sad appeal to heaven, the elegant theatrical poses of the saints, all united in a swinging, upward movement, stand in striking contrast to the humble sadness, the
ugly realism, and the touching humanity of Terbrugghen’s picture.

To find the same silent mood and Northern restraint we must go far back to a work from Terbrugghen’s own region, a Crucifixion by an Utrecht master of 1363, named after the donor represented, the Calvary of Hendrick van Rijn. This panel, which adorned the altar of the church of Saint John in Utrecht and is now in the Antwerp Museum, seems strangely related in its expression of quiet grief. Christ is dead, his head sunk on his chest, bleeding from his cruel wounds. Isolated and sculptural, the saints stand silhouetted against the immaterial flat background on a low, narrow platform. The draperies speak a similar linear language.

Still another comparison may be made with Gerard David’s Crucifixion in Genoa. Besides the static symmetry the closed contour of the sculpture-like saints, their emotional unity, and other similarities which are obvious after what has been said above, we find here anticipated the beautiful motive of the morning light rising from the unusually low horizon against the dark sky of a long night. Similar to Terbrugghen’s Crucifixion in its fundamentally Northern character, David’s Crucifixion also serves to hint at the ambiguity of Terbrugghen’s position between North and South. For among David’s works this Crucifixion stands out in its surprising monumentality, its empty simplicity and almost classical grandeur. This and his dramatizing use of sharply contrasting light and shade find their explanation only in Italian influence and support the hypothesis that David also went to Italy, around 1512, and painted this picture there or shortly after his return.

While there is no particular reason to believe that Terbrugghen had seen any of the above-mentioned works he might have known a woodcut or an engraving of the Crucifixion by Dürer. Around 1600 Dürer’s fame had spread all over Europe. Never was he copied more than at this time, reprints of his woodcuts and engravings were never more frequent. A posthumous Dürer school was at work with Hans Hofmann at the
court of Rudolf II in Prague and Johan Georg Fischer at the court of Maximilian of Bavaria, busy producing copies and outright fakes compiled from Dürer’s work at the demand of their Dürer-loving patrons. Terbruggen, quite obviously, used Dürer’s woodcut of the Execution of Saint John the Baptist for his painting of the same subject in Edinburgh, one of the earliest of his known works. The Saint John of the Crucifixion is closely reminiscent of the Saint John in Dürer’s engraving of 1511, especially in his pose, under the left arm, and hanging down in a big lappet. But we find more of the tense sorrow, the intimate relationship between the dramatis personae, the close spatial compactness of Terbruggen’s painting in Dürer’s woodcut of 1510. The Christ in his broken appearance is also more akin in spirit.

Terbruggen’s presentation of the tortured, emaciated Christ calls to mind Grünewald’s expressive Crucifixions. The retrospective interest of artists and collectors in the golden age of German art around 1500 was not limited to Dürer alone but included the art of Cranach and Grünewald as well, even though many of Grünewald’s works were mistakenly admired as by the famous Dürer. The Frankfurt painter Philipp Uffenbach painted until his death in 1636 à la Grünewald for an appreciative clientele, exploiting his own large collection of Grünewald drawings. It is not necessary to assume that Terbruggen, returning from Italy via the Brenner Pass and down the Rhine valley, saw Grünewald’s monumental altarpiece in the little village of Isenheim. Another Crucifixion by Grünewald, the Haarlem Crucifixion, now in the Kress collection in Washington, was engraved in 1605 by the Flemish artist Raphael Sadeler while it was in the collection of Duke William V of Bavaria. The engraving Terbruggen could well have known. However far-fetched the comparison and coincidental the similarities, there is an undeniable relationship between the intensity of Grünewald’s expressive exaggerations and Terbruggen’s heartfelt realism. It is at least noteworthy that Grünewald’s painting, which has suffered a lot, originally showed a transition from daylight in the foreground and lower part to dark blue night in the upper part, studded around the cross with ten stars. Tiny gold stars can also be seen in the darker upper part of Terbruggen’s Crucifixion. They are so unusual that one might suspect them as additions of nineteenth-century taste, but when the painting was freed from dirt and discolored varnish here at the Museum, the stars turned out to be original, painted in a half tone similar to the background, the touches of gold perhaps added later.

The strongly religious character of Terbruggen’s Crucifixion makes it almost certain that it was commissioned for a church or private chapel. It gains in stature when seen from below, with the low horizon at eye level, and probably was meant to hang high above an altar. Was it painted for Catholic or Protestant worshipers?—a question of vital difference in those days.

Utrecht, which could claim one of the oldest seats of a Roman Catholic bishop in the North, became a bulwark of the Reformation in the Netherlands. The preacher Hubrecht Duifhuis and the ardent Calvinist Petrus Dathenus had planted the seed here earlier in the sixteenth century. The Union of Utrecht, between the seven northern provinces, signed in 1579, stated as one of its main objectives common defense against a foreign oppressor and any attempt to restore the Roman Catholic religion. The English governor Leicester, sent by Queen Elizabeth in 1585 to help the anti-Catholic cause, made Utrecht his headquarters, relying heavily on the support of Calvinist preachers and the newly elected stadholder, the ultra-Calvinistic Count Adolf of Nuenar. If Terbruggen’s father really left Deventer in 1591 for religious reasons, he would have chosen Utrecht nevertheless as a refuge because of the greater religious freedom there.

Must we believe, then, that Terbruggen also adhered to the Roman Catholic religion? Or was he, like so many others, converted to the Reformed Church? Most of the Utrecht artists who went to Rome and painted religious pictures in the style of the Caravaggesque baroque were probably Catholic, as Honthorst is known to have been. During their stay in Rome they were registered in the lists of Roman parishes. But Terbruggen’s name does not appear there, which would in-
dicate that he was Protestant. Other indications would be that his children were baptized in Protestant churches in Utrecht, as the registers show, and also, that he was buried in the Buierkirk, then a Protestant church. Yet even this is not necessarily proof, for there was no choice left at a time when the Catholic church did not officially exist.

Terbrugghen’s paintings also are subject to contradictory interpretations. The theory of Vermeer’s Catholicism has been supported by his so-called Allegory of the New Testament in the Metropolitan Museum which actually represents an allegory of the Catholic faith. In his Saint Sebastian in Oberlin Terbrugghen depicted the martyrdom of a Catholic saint, but a Protestant painter could have painted a Catholic picture just as Catholic architects (like Hendrick de Keyser) built Protestant churches. The Crucifixion is not necessarily a Catholic subject; in fact, our picture seems to suggest Protestant somberness and individuality rather than Catholic fervor and aplomb. While the question of Terbrugghen’s faith must remain undecided here, all this serves to point out the complexity of the religious situation in the first half of the seventeenth century in Holland.

General belief has it that the Holland of the seventeenth century was a strictly Calvinist country and stresses a sociological relationship between its Protestantism and the unparalleled blossoming of profane, bourgeois painting. True as this may be to a great extent, one forgets that at the beginning of the seventeenth century the dominating Calvinists were still in the minority, while those adhering to the centuries-old Roman Catholic tradition had to “go underground” and worship in secrecy. The split between the northern and southern Netherlands was brought forth not so much because of deep religious divergence as for economical, geographical, and political reasons. Only later did it result in the complete Protestantizing of the North.

The Dutch painter Pieter Saenredam, famous for his accurate renderings of church interiors, who came to Utrecht in 1636 to visit his friend Bloemaert, shows us in his paintings and drawings what Utrecht churches looked like in those days. The Calvinist word had triumphed over the Catholic image, and we find the walls bare save for some inscriptions, heraldic tablets, and other personal monuments. It seems likely, therefore, that Terbrugghen’s Crucifixion was commissioned for a private Catholic chapel rather than for a Protestant church. In this connection a smaller version of our Crucifixion becomes interesting as it shows added donors. This picture, presently on the Dutch art market, repeats the main figures of our Crucifixion, fairly accurately but without the density of the original composition and the refinement of detail. The kneeling donor, his wife, son, and three daughters, in costumes of the earlier sixteenth century, are placed under the cross without any spatial feeling and identified by a large scroll with coats of arms and a lengthy inscription as the family of Adriaen Willem Ploos. Investigations of this family and its relationship to Terbrugghen’s Crucifixion might throw some light on the early history of our picture. A painting of “Christ on the Cross by van der Brugge” is listed in the inventory of Johannes de Renialme, the most prominent art dealer of the seventeenth century, drawn up after his death in Amsterdam in 1657. It is valued at 150 florins, as high as a portrait by Ferdinand Bol, but we cannot know for sure whether this was our Crucifixion.

The painting is quite clearly signed with Terbrugghen’s initials on the cross above the skull, followed by “fecit.” Beneath the initials the date was written. Visible to the eye now are only “16 . . ,” but before cleaning one could still read a following “2” while the last digit, as happens so often with Terbrugghen’s dates, was impossible to make out. On a detail photograph made at the time of the London sale one might construe the date as 1626, but this, again, is mainly guesswork.

The chronology of Terbrugghen’s work, at present consisting of about sixty-five paintings crowded into a span of ten years, is naturally interesting to the art historian but full of pitfalls. About half of the pictures are dated, the others undated or with the last digit illegible. His many genre pictures with half-figures of men or women playing the lute, the violin, or the bagpipe, drinking, singing, or writing, were probably in great popular demand and repeated over the
years, while his multi-figure compositions and full-length religious subjects are all of a continually surprising and unconventional otherness. Following the dated pictures, we can construct a development on general lines which leads from stiffness and hesitation to more smoothly flowing movements, from exaggerations and sharp contrasts to balance and soft tonality. Our picture stands midway and would fit well in the year 1626, even if we did not suspect this to be its actual date. It comes closest to one of Terbrugghen’s finest works, the Saint Sebastian in the Oberlin museum, dated 1625. This picture shows a more densely knit surface, a more compact and diagonal composition; our painting is more static in its formal balance. But the relationship of parts to the whole, the colors, the luminosity of shadows, the voluminous draperies which fall in heavy lappets, the thick folds and the rhythm of the curving seams are very similar. The model for Saint Sebastian must have been the same boy as for our Saint John, hardly a day younger or older, with the same stringy hair, heavy eyelids, and soft mouth. The dead bodies of Christ and Saint Sebastian show the same greenish color, the same knotty rendering of anatomy, the same lifeless, leathery hands. The mauve of Mary’s dress we find in the dress of Saint Irene’s servant, and Saint John’s glistening fingers have their counterpart in Saint Irene’s right hand. The only painting by Terbrugghen clearly dated 1626 is that of a boy violinist, recently on the art market. The boy is closely related to the Saint John, perhaps the same model. Many other similarities of style are characteristic of Terbrugghen’s work in general. As a genre painting of the often repeated type it neither supports nor contradicts our dating.

Terbrugghen was the first of the Dutch Caravaggio followers and the first of Bloemaert’s pupils to go to Italy, and he was the first to return to Utrecht. With the subsequent return of Gerard van Honthorst, Dirck van Baburen, and Jan van Bijlert, Utrecht became the leading center of Caravaggesque art in Holland. The old Bloemaert now learned from his pupils. His Crucifixion of 1629 in Haarlem does not tell us whether he knew Terbrugghen’s Crucifixion. There is similarity in the symmetrically balanced composition of massive figures in voluminous draperies, their halting connection and their language of gestures, and also in the Caravaggesque side light and naturalistic details. But Bloemaert never painted with the intense realism of Terbrugghen, and although he did not go to Italy his Crucifixion shows more of the grand manner of the Italian baroque.

By the time of Terbrugghen’s death the period of transition had come to an end. He had experienced during his lifetime the fundamental change from the mannerist art of the sixteenth century to the baroque art of the seventeenth century in Europe.

He always remained an outsider between countries, an individualist between styles. His influence on the following generation of Dutch painters was minor, but his understanding of humanity and his feeling for light and color made him a forerunner of two of the greatest, Rembrandt and Vermeer.