A Newly Discovered La Tour: The Fortune Teller

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Never has a picture of comparable importance passed from obscurity to fame as suddenly as The Fortune Teller (Figure 1), the major painting by Georges de La Tour that The Metropolitan Museum of Art recently acquired. In number of figures, profusion of details, and refinement of technique it is exceptional among La Tour’s works.

La Tour was born in 1593 at Vic-sur-Seille in Lorraine, at that time an independent duchy outside the dominion of the French crown. As a young man he probably traveled in Italy like so many of his countrymen; he is said to have studied with Guido Reni. About 1616 or 1617, however, La Tour came back to Lorraine and settled down in Lunéville, a town near Nancy, the capital of the duchy. There he opened a studio, took on apprentices, and prospered. He must have come into contact with artists like Jacques Callot, Jean Leclerc, and Claude Deruet, who also had returned from Italy around 1620 and were living in Nancy. With the occupation of the duchy by the French in 1633, Lorraine was almost completely destroyed in the course of the fighting, and La Tour left the city in 1638, only to return three years later. He rallied to the support of the French conquerors, who gave him commissions for paintings. The artist, by this time known as a “peintre fameux,” Painter to the King, furnished pictures for such dignitaries as the aldermen of Lunéville and the governor of Nancy; he died in 1652.

The Fortune Teller is probably a very early La Tour. The inscription, his longest, lends support to this assumption. It reads: “G. de La Tour Fecit Luneuilla Lothar.” (G. de La Tour painted this, Lunéville, Lorraine). An aspiring artist would hardly have chosen the years after 1633, when Lorraine was under French domination, to proclaim so emphatically his allegiance to a vanquished province. The logical time for such a statement would have been while the duchy was independent, and so one may infer that the picture was painted before 1633.

La Tour is best known today for his religious night scenes. Four of these “nocturnes” are in the exhibition The Splendid Century—French Art: 1600-1715, at the Metropolitan Museum from March 8 through April 30. In pictures such as Saint Irene with the Wounded Saint Sebastian, The Young Jesus and Saint Joseph in the Carpenter’s Shop, Saint Joseph and the Angel, and The Ecstasy of Saint Francis, torches or candles shed light on saints clad like peasants, in an atmosphere of compassion and reserve. But another, purely secular, current—harsh, even coarse—runs through his art, and to this vein of plebeian verve belong the fifth La Tour in the exhibition, A Woman with a Flea (Figure 2), and the new Fortune Teller. The latter shows a daytime scene, like several other secular pictures La Tour painted, such as The Cardsharp in the Landry Collection, The Brawl, only known from the studio replica in the museum at Chambéry, and The Hurdy-Gurdy Player (also
a copy) in the museum at Nantes. Some of the religious scenes are also set in daytime, for example the two paintings of the Penitent Saint Jerome in Grenoble and Stockholm, and the Saint Jerome in His Cell in the Louvre. These other works by La Tour provide a background against which The Fortune Teller can be appreciated.

At first sight The Fortune Teller is Caravaggesque, in the eccentric details of costume and behavior and in the juxtaposition of the young man with people from the fringes of society, the courtesan and the gypsies. It is our aim here to show how La Tour worked and how his oeuvre belonged to his own environment.

In the very archaic composition that La Tour frequently used, with its frieze of figures in two planes, another influence is apparent: that of paintings or prints of about 1560 to 1610, many of them French, showing comic scenes. The figures are grouped in an oval that frames the young man as it passes from the girl at the left around to the old woman on the right. The composition is similar in The Brawl (Figure 3) with the two blind old men in the center, in The Adoration at the Louvre where the crèche is surrounded by worshipers, and in The Cardsharp (Figure 4) with the people around the gaming table. There are even more striking analogies of composition between The Cardsharp and The Fortune Teller: the servant girl is looking at the victim of the cardsharp just as the young man looks at the old woman, and the courtesans in both pictures are glancing at their

Fig. 1. The Fortune Teller, by Georges de La Tour (1593-1652), French. Oil on canvas. 40\(\frac{3}{8}\) x 48\(\frac{3}{8}\) inches Rogers Fund, 1960
confederates in the same way.

The lighting of The Fortune Teller is peculiarly La Tour's. Here the problem is not the illumination of darkness but the rendering of daylight. The figures are treated as if each had posed separately under the light that enters the picture at the upper left: a beam hits the sleeve of the girl on the left but scarcely touches her cap; another falls on the face of the youth, softens on his tunic, but brightens again on his outstretched hand; still another shines on the girl at the right and loses itself as it descends; and a last ray falls with full force on the crone's face. This handling of light, realistic yet illogical, is typical. A sudden flood of light like that on the old woman's face occurs in The Cardsharp, in Saint Jerome in His Cell, and in the two Penitent Saint Jeromes. The local shadows, the highlights in dark patches, and the precise lighting of individual areas reappear in the two latter pictures and in The Cardsharp. In the nocturnal scenes such contrasts are less obvious, and in La Tour's later paintings forms become less precise altogether and are submerged in a tinted aura.

Especially striking in The Fortune Teller are the reds that pass to pink, lilac, and orange, the shades of yellow, brown, and black, and the accentuated white areas. No other painting by La Tour has so many reds and whites. The symphony of violent reds here is in contrast to the delicate reddish modulations of the night scenes; but there is an undeniable similarity of the warm colors of The Fortune Teller to the pinks and reds of the nocturnal subjects and to the pink chair that the woman crushing a flea is sitting by. Vermilion gives warmth to the mauve-brown background and there is even a dash of red in the lighted, yellowish areas—just as in the night scenes and in the pictures of the penitent saints. The Cardsharp, on the other hand, has only a few tinges of red in its background, which is brown and ocher with a greenish cast, probably to harmonize with the willow-green tones of the rest of the painting. It would be reasonable to assume that La Tour was painting night scenes at about the same time he worked on The Fortune Teller.

The scene might be titled "Beware of Women." The stolid young cavalier, the calmest of the group, is elaborately dressed. The leather tunic resembles the one worn by the cardsharp, but here it is bound by a pleated red sash with gold ends. His sleeves, the most brilliant part of his costume, are of a satin that passes from deep pink to violet in the light; his white collar is bordered in rose and gold and tied with gold tassels, and a long gold chain is slung over one shoulder. Men in other paintings by La Tour wear similar clothes, but the materials are always coarser, the colors more subdued. La Tour's development as an artist is shown in this progressive simplification of costume: the sharp, detailed observation in his early works gradually gives way to simplicity and stylization.

The meticulous definition of the young man's features shows La Tour's characteristic attention to detail. The auburn hair with its strands indicated almost calligraphically, the long, unlined face, very fresh and pink, the precision of
the eyelids and lashes and the rosy lips: everything suggests a portrait in the French tradition. There is nothing in common either with the sickly, withered faces of Terbrugghen, spotted with fugitive shadows, or with the simpler and more spirited ones done by Italian artists of the period. It is a strong portrait and not without psychological penetration. The young nobleman's cocky stance with hand on hip, hard gaze, lighted black beads, exactly like the bracelets of the woman with a flea—the two pictures were probably painted at about the same time.

In the beauty and purity of her face, in its technical refinement, La Tour equals Vermeer. The peace that fills Vermeer's pictures, however, finds no counterpart here. This girl's face, with its defiant eyes, commanding gaze, and tight-lipped mouth, is astonishing in its mixture of intelligence, willfulness, and youth. La Tour certainly must have known the print called the Jardinière (see Figure 5) by Bellange, the mannerist from Lorraine; he remembered that comely, cynical face circled by a kerchief, and even if he was using a model while painting this girl, he saw her through Bellange's eyes. The courtesan resembles the one in The Cardsharp as a younger sister resembles a woman in full bloom; they have the same place in the composition, the same rigid attitude, even the same sidelong glance.

The composure of the young woman's face and scornful lips show him insolent and assured; but the too-strong chin and the fixity of his look also give an impression of boyishness, indeed of weakness.

He is surrounded by intrigue. The young courtesan beside him is all the more dangerous for her seeming modesty. She is clad rather simply in peasant costume—a dark dress with an orange-yellow stripe, and white sleeves embroidered with a green and red design. Her white bodice, shot with gold and silver threads, reveals her bosom instead of covering it. Her necklace and bracelets are of brilliantly high-

*Fig. 3. The Brawl, a studio replica of a painting by Georges de La Tour*  
Musée de Chambéry

201
contrasts with the byplay of her hands, almost hidden in the shadow. Her guile becomes apparent when one notices that she is deftly snipping the chain the young man wears, to detach his heavy gold medal, on which there seems to be the figure of a nude man.

Her stealthy action is echoed by the other two girls. One gently tugs the purse from the cavalier’s pocket while the other, standing quietly in the background, holds her hand ready to receive it. The tension of this scene is built up by the activity of the hands even more than by the interplay of the gazes. Such use of gesture to unify a painting and to add a feeling of depth is characteristic of La Tour. He gives a sense of life to these hands with shadows or little touches of light; he also adds tiny brownish or blackish lines to indicate the creases of the fingers. Here the procedure is most striking in the hands of the old woman; it also appears in works of La Tour’s maturity like the penitent saints.

The two girls on the left, probably sisters, are gypsies. Feared and distrusted for their thefts and trickery, these nomads wandered Europe, attracting attention by their unusual appearance, odd costumes, and the age-old customs they brought from Egypt or the Orient. It was in Italy that the artists of Lorraine discovered their picturesque qualities. Callot, for example, engraved a series of four plates in 1621 or 1622 that were listed in the inventory of his belongings after his death as “La Vie des Égyptiens”; these inspired Baudelaire’s poem “Les Bohémiens en Voyage,” in which he described “Le tribu prophétique aux prunelles ardentes.” We find the characteristics sketched by Callot in La Tour’s painting: thin bodies hidden beneath shawls, long locks, small heads, and bony noses.
The first girl wears the cap of a native of Lorraine, shaped like that worn by Saint Anne in The Nativity at Rennes, but in The Fortune Teller it is made of silk brocaded in orange and gold—an Italian material or one made in Lorraine by an Italian craftsman. The richness of the rest of her costume is apparent even though it is in shadow. Over her dark skirt fall two panels of rich, heavy, reddish-brown brocade fastened at the shoulder. Her sleeve, perhaps the brightest section of the whole painting, is of white muslin embroidered with red vines and red stars with gilded cabochon centers.

The other gypsy’s angular, swarthy face is almost an ethnographic document. Her profile must have served as prototype for the whole series of La Tour’s pictures of the repentant Mary Magdalen. The Magdalen was the gypsies’ patron saint, and we have long known that La Tour gave his Magdalen’s a gypsy cast of countenance. The one engraved by Leclerc before 1633 after a lost original by La Tour (Figure 6) and a half-length Magdalen in the collection of André Fabius are both very close to the profile in The Fortune Teller; the last of this series, the full-length Magdalen in the Louvre (see Figure 7), is the furthest from the gypsy here, for the proportions have changed, and her whole aspect suggests ecstasy and meditation. Our second gypsy wears a tunic and shawl in shades of brown, yellow ocher, and red, and her sleeve ends in a gold band that shines softly like that of the angel speaking to Saint Joseph, though here it is treated with more precision. The girl’s scarf, on which the light is concentrated, is an example of La Tour’s virtuosity. The white strands look as if they had been drawn with a feather; bits of gilded glass are interspersed on the lace, and a wide border made of gold threads runs into the shadow. Near the darkest section of this band the artist’s brush has freely touched in dots of gold.

The cavalier’s attention is focused on the old woman, who, ironically, is doing him less harm than any of the others. There is no parallel in any of La Tour’s works for this figure, but her face, masklike in its exaggerated realism and dusky tint, was certainly inspired by an engraving by J. de Isaac (itself copying an Italian one) showing Helen of Troy, Cleopatra, and Lucretia hideously aged (Figure 8). The crone’s face in The Fortune Teller was adapted from Lucretia’s; the wrinkles of the forehead, the sunken eyes, the buttonlike nose, and the sharp upper lip and swollen lower one all coincide with those in the print. La Tour has painted three birthmarks—one brown and two flesh-colored—and has added a wart above, replacing the two warts that appear in the print. The colors and the light technique add to the originality of the old woman’s face in the painting; La Tour has...
darkened the hue of her skin since gypsies sometimes daubed themselves with nut juices.

The fortuneteller’s outlandishness is emphasized by her clothes. The fabric fastened at her shoulder, heavy and sumptuous, is divided into several brilliantly colored zones having Eastern motifs; the hares flanking the Tree of Life are reminiscent of Persian or Sassanid or Balkanic examples of about the fifth century. In spite of its verism, such cloth never existed—La Tour was simply trying to achieve an exotic effect. The hag’s cap is another piece of bravura: its shape stems from Lorraine, but the brocaded silk with the gold border is obviously of foreign origin. The veiling over the cap was also worn at the time in Lorraine, although La Tour added several complicated folds of his own invention in the back. This gypsy was, we can see, put together in bits and pieces: she is as artificial as a scarecrow in a garden. La Tour was interested in giving an illusion of reality, not in transcribing what he saw.

The old woman is less disquieting, actually, in her ugliness or her tinsel than in her activity. She is not like the Caravaggesque gypsies, reciting the usual happy fortune or reading the future in the lines of the young man’s hand. She holds a silver medal—not money but an amulet—tightly clenched between thumb and forefinger, and as if the silver itself had brought on inspiration, she has fallen into a state of trance. She is a sorceress. La Tour’s era was well aware that gypsies might be healers, magicians, or sorceresses: in fact sorcery had its headquarters in Lorraine around 1600. In spite of persecutions it continued to flourish there. No one—in the country, the city, or even the court—questioned its existence. The patron of the painter Bellange was burned as a sorcerer, and a little later the favorite of Duke Henry II was also condemned. La Tour must have known these famous trials and he must have seen country-women with the gift of healing convicted of witchcraft and led to the stake. To his contemporaries, therefore, a sorceress like this one would have been perfectly probable; she would not have had the air of masquerade that she has for us.

La Tour’s old woman is reciting an incantation that by preventing or encouraging certain events might determine the future. The moment we see her, of course, we know that the trance is feigned, the woman is lying, that the whole rigmarole is meant to distract the young man’s attention from her thieving accomplices. Even so we must understand that this picture that seems to depict the simple Caravagesque theme of fortunetelling has in reality overtones peculiar to La Tour’s own epoch and province.

The fate of the young man points out the necessity of prudence: it cautions against a too-trusting approach to the world. One should go further and call to mind the heavy atmosphere...
that the Counter Reformation brought to bear on Lorraine. The dogma of original sin had replaced the optimism of the humanists; Callot gathers together in a single engraving all possible punishments, for “supplicium sceleri frenum”—torture curbs crime. Man is born bad, and punishment, which alone conquers evil, is a necessity of divine law. This moral looms in the background of two of La Tour’s paintings, The Fortune Teller and The Cardsharp. Those who trick other people are corrupt and will be punished, but their victims are not worthy of our pity: they deserve their misfortune because of the stupidity or the pretension that reveals their corruption.

Italian or northern influences that appear in other works play little part in The Fortune Teller. Aside from the traces of Caravaggism that we have discussed, however, we find suggestions of theatrical tableaux in this painting, reminiscences of French portraits and even of still life. The picture is a mosaic of notations, each treated separately as an entity with lively colors and little shadows. In this it corresponds to northern still-life painting of about 1600-1620: there is the same descriptive tendency, the same manner of setting objects apart from their surroundings in order to analyze them individually. La Tour, in fact, must have painted still lifes rather like the one attributed to Van Es at the museum at Nancy; later his art corresponds to that of Sébastien Stoskopff—the still life in the Splendid Century exhibition, for example—in the sensitive lighting, lucid atmosphere, and refined austerity. The Fortune Teller is made up of still lifes, and one might even say that the beings La Tour creates participate in the ideal of absolute silence which is the very principle of the still life.

There are many indications, as we have seen, that The Fortune Teller was painted at the beginning of La Tour’s career. The picture is probably quite close in date to The Cardsharp, another early work, but the composition of the Metropolitan’s painting, the stiffness of the figures, the awkwardness in the treatment of the fingers, the brightness and variety of colors lead us to believe it is even earlier. The light brushwork, the wrinkles, and the little brown lines resemble those in the two Penitent Saint Jeromes. In these works, however, details of an astounding realism lead the eye to inert blank zones that are unknown in The Fortune Teller: in this painting La Tour demonstrates infinite patience with all his meticulous descriptions. The characters that he painted in the years of his maturity, too, have a simplicity and an ease that are absent here. Their faces, grave, tormented, or calm, reflect an interior life that La Tour fully penetrated, while those of the cavalier and the women in The Fortune Teller are very much of this world and caught up in the fleeting moment.

This painting, then, is almost certainly an early work by La Tour, perhaps one painted by the artist as a sort of advertisement right after he opened his studio in Lunéville. Eventually the richness that marks The Fortune Teller will be refined and analyzed into the discreet melody of his later works, whose rigor separates them from the baroque and lends them that almost indefinable French classicism that is La Tour’s especial secret.

![Fig. 8. Les Trois Belles, engraving by Jaspar de Isaac (active 1613-1654), Dutch](image-url)