
cat. no. 1

Jacob Backer

Harlingen 1608/09 – 1651 Amsterdam

Democritus

Oil on panel
60 x 46.5 cm.

Provenance:

Stockholm, Art Gallery Stopalo
Sweden, private collection, since c. 1970

Literature:

P. van den Brink, 'Tussen Rubens en Rembrandt : Jacob Adriaensz. Backer als portret- en historieschilder in Amsterdam', in: *Kroniek van het Rembrandthuis* (2016), pp. 4-39, pp. 16-17, fig. 11

Jacob Backer

Jacob Backer was born in 1608 into a Mennonite family in Harlingen, a university town in Friesland.¹ Shortly after Jacob's birth his mother Hilcke Volckertsdre died, and when in 1611 his father Adriaen Tjercksz, a baker (hence the name Backer, which the siblings later adopted), re-married Else Roelofs from Amsterdam, the family moved there. Else, a well-to-do widow, owned a thriving bakery at the Nieuwendijk (currently house number 6) where many Mennonites lived, and when she died in 1614, Adriaen inherited both the house and a considerable sum of money. Backer thus grew up in a comfortable middle class environment. It is not known to whom he was first apprenticed, yet it has been suggested, with good reason, that it might have been the painter Jan Pynas (1581-1631), who co-owned a house down the street and taught Backer's documented friend and peer Steven van Goor (1608-c. 1660).² We are sure, however, that Backer moved back to Leeuwarden, Friesland in the latter half of the 1620s. It was there that he joined the workshop of the Mennonite teacher, painter, art dealer and entrepreneur Lambert Jacobsz (c. 1593/94-1636), whose family maintained close relations with the Backer/Roelofs family and who, like Backer, grew up at the Amsterdam Nieuwendijk before settling in the north in 1621. In around 1628, Jacobsz decided upon an ambitious business expansion, which probably explains why he was able to attract capable assistants: Backer

and the young Govert Flinck (1615-1660). In addition to producing smaller paintings in the style of the so-called 'Pre-Rembrandtists', or the School of Amsterdam History Painters (Jacobsz might have studied with Jan Pynas as well), he then embarked on a second line of large-figure history works, inspired by the work of Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640), Jan Lievens (1607-1674) and the Utrecht *Caravaggisti*.³ Whereas young Flinck must have been a true apprentice, Backer's role was that of chief assistant, who was allowed a great deal of freedom in the studio, including making pictures of his own. Backer and Flinck remained with Jacobsz until 1632/33. At that point, as Arnold Houbraken states, both 'were so advanced that they could spread their wings [...] and move to Amsterdam'.⁴ Whereas Flinck succeeded Rembrandt (1606-1669) in time as *chef d'atelier* of Hendrick Uylenburgh's studio, Backer achieved fame among the Amsterdam élite as a painter of fashionable large-scale histories, elegant portraits, bust-size 'ironies' and genre works such as the present painting.⁵ Accordingly, he received important commissions for large group portraits, such as *The Governesses of the Burgerweeshuis* (1634), *The Civic Guard company of Captain Cornelis de Graeff and Lieutenant Hendrick Lauwrensz* (1642) and *The Regents of the Nieuwezijds huiszitten- and aalmoezeniershuis* (1650/51).⁶ Backer remained a bachelor all his life. In August 1651, just months after converting to the Remonstrant faith, he died in Amsterdam and was buried in the Noorderkerk.



‘Geschwindigkeit’

In his *Teutsche Academie*, the German painter and artist biographer Joachim von Sandrart (1606-1688) remembers Backer – whom he knew personally during his own Amsterdam period (1637-1645) – as ‘excellent and artful’, painting ‘great modern paintings especially after life’. Sandrart then goes on to praise the speed (‘Geschwindigkeit’) with which Backer painted, and to support his words he recalls an incident in which Backer had introduced him to a woman ‘who had arrived [in Amsterdam] from Haarlem to have herself portrayed, and who travelled back home the same day, whom he had painted in such a short time, complete with face, collar, fur, skirt and other clothes and both hands, in half-figure, life-size, distinguished and well done.’⁷ In praising Backer’s speed, Sandrart touched upon a well-known *topos*, an artistic commonplace. The anecdote might well have really taken place, and Backer no doubt painted fast, but in deliberately praising this speed Sandrart above all was paying tribute to the swiftness that Backer’s painting style conveyed. Backer’s ‘Geschwindigkeit’ was reflected in his artistic style, which expressed a swift and spontaneous quality, associated with ‘*sprezzatura*’, and liveliness. If anything, the old man in the Lilian picture – Democritus, the laughing philosopher, who will be discussed below in further detail – is rendered with exactly this marvelous spontaneity, matching his cheerful character. Clearly, this is due to Backer’s admirable economy of technique, the broad and bold brushstrokes, and the daring contrast between impasto paint and left-open areas. Backer’s inspiration for this kind of painting seems to have come from the Antwerp painters – specifically Rubens and Anthony van Dyck (1599-1641). The latter’s series of bust-length portraits of the twelve apostles, datable to around 1680-1620, must have impressed the young Backer. Did he travel to Antwerp, or did he see such paintings in the North? There is good reason to presume a journey to Antwerp in 1638⁸, but Backer might well have visited the city before. His master Lambert Jacobsz was active in the art trade. In Leeuwarden he ran a franchise of the dealership that the Mennonite art dealer Hendrick Uylenburgh (1587-1661) had set up in Amsterdam (in fact, Uylenburgh had, in 1620, possessed a complete series of Van Dyck’s apostles, which he sold to the Polish king⁹). Given this situation, a surprisingly broad choice of modern art was available in Leeuwarden (to which Backer obviously had direct access), yet his dealership also involved Lambert travelling on a regular basis (which he also did in his capacity as Mennonite teacher, which is how he recruited Flinck in Kleves), and that on occasion he might have been joined by his chief assistant Backer. This is, of course, all hypothetical. Moreover, by the time Backer painted the present work – in around 1635 – he had



Fig. 1 Anthony van Dyck, *St Matthew*, c. 1618/20, oil on panel, 2.5 x 50 cm., Brussels, King Baudouin Foundation, on loan to the Rubenshuis, Antwerp



Fig. 2 Peter Paul Rubens, *St Thomas*, c. 1610/12, oil on panel, 108 x 83 cm., Madrid, Museo del Prado

been back in Amsterdam for at least two years, where he could also have seen works by the Antwerp masters. Whether this is the case or not, the present *Democritus* could have hardly been painted without the example of works such as *St Matthew* (fig. 1), in which Van Dyck makes clever use of the priming to suggest creases, shadows and three-dimensionality in the apostle’s heavy cloak. In Backer’s *Democritus*, too, the blue-grey folds create a form of itself and, uniting with the dark ground layer, create the volume that supports the gesturing right hand, which is painted with astonishing ease. As for Democritus’ face, Backer renders this with thick shapes of pink paint, boldly set against dark layers, alternating with areas where the blank panel is still visible, especially around the eyes. Notably, Backer barely indicated the head’s connection to the bust, strongly recalling paintings such as Rubens’ *St Thomas*, now in the Prado (fig. 2), where one observes the same daring looseness.

Democritus

From his humorous expression and specific hand gesture, the laughing greybeard in the present picture can be identified as the Greek philosopher Democritus of Abdera (460-370 BC), also known as the laughing philosopher. As such, he was paired with his counterpart Heraclitus of Ephesus (535-475 BC), the so-called weeping philosopher.¹⁰ Although they never lived at the same time, they were nonetheless



Fig. 3 Jacob Locher (?), *Diogenes and Democritus*, woodcut, in: Sebastian Brant, *Das Narrenschiff*, Basel 1494 (ed. 1498)

staged as physical counterparts by classical authors such as Sotion (first century BC), Seneca (4 BC-65 AD) and Juvenal (c. 60-140 AD). Whereas Heraclitus – best known for his alleged phrase ‘panta rhei’ (‘everything flows’) – was a true pessimist (his epithet being ‘ὁ σκοτεινός’, meaning ‘the dark’ or ‘the obscure’), Democritus was of a different complexion altogether. His interest was universal, as he is said to have written on subjects as diverse as mathematics, physics, the cosmos, music and civilisation. Best remembered for his further formulation of his teacher Leucippus’s (fifth century BC) atom theory, he is often considered the father of modern science. According to Diogenes of Laërtius (180-240) he was an industrious and humble man: ‘The chief good he asserts to be cheerfulness’ by which he [Democritus] understood ‘a condition according to which the soul lives calmly and steadily, being disturbed by no fear, or superstition, or other passion. He calls this state *euthymia*.’ Whereas, in contrast, Heraclitus regarded the world and the human condition with abhorrence, Democritus considered its folly with a pinch of salt.

This life outlook is also reflected in Democritus’ hand gesture, the pointed finger. The gesture was already associated with Democritus by Juvenal, who interpreted it as ‘a mockery of looming fate’ and connected it with ‘laughing about the sorrows and tears, as well as the joys of the people.’¹¹ In pictorial tradition, the pointed finger became Democritus’ signature gesture, one of the earliest examples being an illustration in Sebastian Brant’s famous *Narrenschiff* of 1494 (fig. 3), in which Democritus exchanges gestures with his laughing *alter ego* jester (standing behind Diogenes, who for once takes the place of Heraclitus). During the seventeenth century, too, the pointed finger featured in Democritus’ standard iconography (see cat. no. 4, figs. 2, 5), pointed at either the sorrowful Heraclitus or the world itself, or as a gesture on its own. Heraclitus, on the other hand, was mostly depicted wringing his hands (see cat. no. 4, figs. 1, 6, 7). That Backer took an interest in the opposing duo is underlined by the mention of a now lost ‘Heraclitus and Democritus at the world’s globe, painted fiercely, by J. Backer’, auctioned in 1803 in The Hague, which apparently showed the philosophers together in one painting.¹² Backer may have originally also paired the present *Democritus* with a *Heraclitus* as its counterpart, yet no pendant is known today. The only possible candidate that comes to mind, Backer’s *Scholar at His Desk* in a private collection in the United States (fig. 4), of approximately similar size and depicting a greybeard wringing his hands, fails to convince as the present painting’s pendant, despite the



Fig. 4 Jacob Backer, *Scholar at His Desk*, c. 1632/33, oil on panel, 66.6 x 50.8 cm., United States, private collection

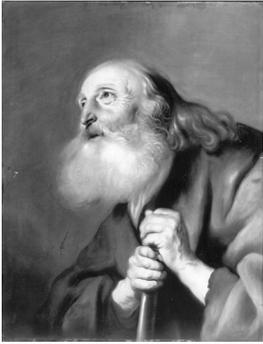


Fig. 5 After Jacob Backer, *Bearded Old Man with a Cane*, oil on panel, 71 x 54.5 cm., present location unknown



Fig. 6 After Jacob Backer, *The Continnence of Scipio*, oil on canvas, 70 x 94 cm., sale Paris, Tajan, 20 December 2002, lot 40 (as attributed to Gerbrand van den Eeckhout)

characteristic hand gesture and the pondering expression on the man's face.¹³ Not only was the *Scholar* probably painted about two to three years earlier, its composition and iconography – including a table, books and writing gear – do not match the present work very well.

The model

As Sandrart remarked, Backer drew and painted after life, using life models.¹⁴ The model he chose here, with his unique, hooked nose, his sparkling eyes and huge white beard, was exceptionally popular. Here he makes for a fantastic Greek philosopher, yet Backer painted him in other guises as well. He is, for instance, the bearded old man with a cane in a painting known nowadays through a copy (fig. 5). In the exact same pose we come across him as a bystander in a *Continnence of Scipio*, probably one of Backer's most impressive large history works, mentioned in an Amsterdam inventory in 1682, but again known only through a (rather crude) copy (fig. 6).¹⁵ We also recognize him as the *Man Holding a Coin*



Fig. 7 Jacob Backer, *Old man with a Coin*, oil on canvas, 75.5 x 63.5 cm., Mainz, Mittelrheinisches Landesmuseum



Fig. 8 Abraham Blooteling after Jacob Backer, *Old Man with a Coin (a.k.a. Staverinus, an Old Jew, Holding a Medal)*, mezzotint, 27.2 x 22.7 cm., Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum

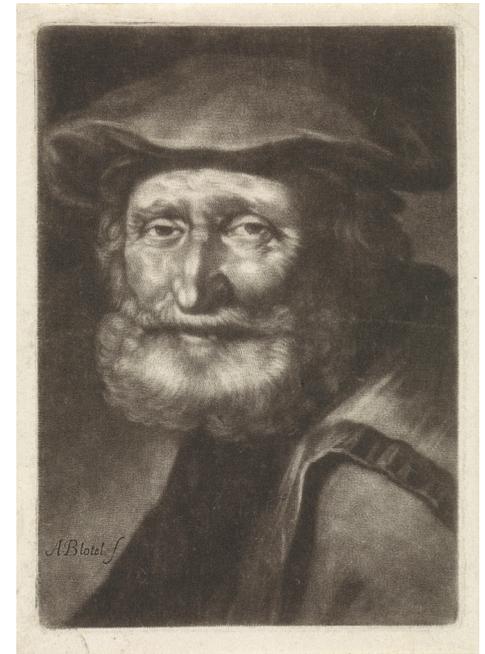


Fig. 9 Abraham Blooteling after Jacob Backer, *Old Laughing Man*, mezzotint, 14.3 x 10 cm., Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum

in the Landesmuseum, Mainz (fig. 7). In this painting, also known as *Allegory of Avarice*, he takes on the role of a smirking old miser. Again he stares out at the beholder as he points his finger, this time at a coin, thereby expressing his predilection for money.¹⁶ Two mezzotints after the Mainz work – one presenting the whole painting, the other singling out the face – by the Amsterdam engraver Abraham Blooteling (1640-1690) further cemented the model's place in our shared memory (figs. 8, 9).

Backer and Blooteling were not the only artists who recognized the appeal of the model with the hooked nose. During the later 1630s we come across him as an old man in various poses – arms crossed, supporting his head, with clasped hands – or dressed up as an oriental scholar reading a book in works by the Amsterdam painter Simon Kick (1603-1652) (figs. 10a-d). Salomon Koninck (1609-1656), also from Amsterdam, depicted him as a hermit with a book in his painting dated

1643 now in Dresden (fig. 10e). As a collector of old coins we see him again in a painting now in Indianapolis, by the Amsterdam born painter Hendrick Pot (1580-1657) who, however, lived in Haarlem for most of his life (fig. 10f). Might we therefore assume that our old man with the crooked nose also modeled in Haarlem? This seems to be the case, as he was also portrayed – again type-cast as a hermit reading a book – by Adriaen van Ostade (1610-1685) (fig. 10g). Finally, we encounter him in two works of the late 1630s by Thomas de Keyser (1596-1667) from Amsterdam, one depicting him as old Simeon holding the Christ child while singing his song of praise (fig. 10h), the other in the guise of St Paul with his sword (fig. 10i).¹⁷ Who this striking greybeard was, or why he posed for all these painters – was it an extra income, or was there more to it? – we will probably never know. At least we still have the pictures.

JH



Fig. 10a-i
The present model in paintings (left to right, top to bottom) by Simon Kick (10a-d), Salomon Koninck (10e), Hendrick Pot (10f), Adriaen van Ostade (detail) (10g) and Thomas de Keyser (10h-i)

Notes

- 1 For an extensive biography on Backer, see J. van der Veen, 'Jacob Backer, een schets van zijn leven', in: P. van den Brink, J. van der Veen, *Jacob Backer (1608/9-1651)*, exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum het Rembrandthuis, Aachen, Suermond-Ludwig-Museum 2008-2009, pp. 10-25. For an analysis of Backer's artistic production, see P. van den Brink, 'Uitmuntend schilder in het groot : De schilder en tekenaar Jacob Adriaensz Backer', in: Amsterdam/Aachen 2008-2009, pp. 26-84. See also E.J. Sluijter, *Rembrandt's Rivals : History Painting in Amsterdam 1630-1650*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia 2015, pp. 110-127; Van den Brink 2016.
- 2 Van der Veen, op. cit., pp. 14-15.
- 3 On Lambert Jacobsz' studio and the different kinds of production practiced there, see J. Hillegers, 'Lambert Jacobsz (c. 1598-1636) en zijn werkplaats. Atelierpraktijk in Leeuwarden omstreeks 1630', in: *Jaarboek De Vrije Fries* 89 (2009), pp. 67-92 (available online: <http://www.friesgenootschap.nl/index.php/nl/online-artikelen/>); J. Hillegers, 'The Lambert years: Govert Flinck in Leeuwarden, ca. 1629 – ca. 1633', in: S. Dickey (ed.), *Ferdinand Bol and Govert Flinck : New Research*, Amsterdam 2017, pp. 45-65.
- 4 A. Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen*, 3 vols., Amsterdam 1718-1721, 2 (1719), p. 20: 'Te Lewaarden gekomen vond hy Jakob Backer een geschick en yverig Jongman tot zyn byslaap en gezelschap in de Konst, die met hem (na dat zy nu zoo veer gevordert waren dat zy op eigen wieken konden vliegen) naar Amsterdam vertrok [...]'.
5 See E. Kok, *Culturele ondernemers in de Gouden Eeuw : De artistieke en sociaal-economische strategieën van Jacob Backer, Govert Flinck, Ferdinand Bol en Joachim von Sandrart*, PhD diss. University of Amsterdam 2013.
- 6 P. van den Brink, *Oeuvrecatalogus van de schilderijen van Jacob Backer*, in: Amsterdam/Aachen 2008-2009, pp. 204-249 (also consultable on DVD including B-E categories: *Jacob Adriaensz Backer – Complete overview of his paintings*), cat. nos. A21, 92, 132.
- 7 J. von Sandrart, *L'Academia Todesca della Architectura Scultura e Pittura oder Teutsche Academie der Edlen Bau-, Bild- und Mahlerey-Künste*, 3 vols., Nuremberg/Frankfurt 1675-1680, 2 (1679), p. 307.
- 8 A drawn *Self Portrait* in the Albertina, Vienna, inscribed 'Jacob ABacker / fecit 1638 / In Vlissingen' was possibly done during a journey to or from Antwerp. See Van der Veen, op. cit., p. 21; Th. Döring, in: Amsterdam/Aachen 2008-2009, cat. no. 41.
- 9 See J. van der Veen, 'Hendrick Uylenburgh, Factor van de Poolse koning en kunsthandelara te Amsterdam', in: J. van der Veen, F. Lammertse, *Uylenburgh en zoon : kunst en commercie van Rembrandt tot De Lairese 1625-1675*, exh. cat. Dulwich, Dulwich Picture Gallery, Amsterdam, Museum het Rembrandthuis 2006, pp. 12-59, pp. 32-33.
- 10 For an overview of the history and pictorial tradition surrounding Democritus and Heraclitus, see the still indispensable A. Blankert, 'Heraclitus en Democritus : in het bijzonder in de Nederlandse kunst van de 17de eeuw', in: *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 18 (1967), pp. 31-124.
- 11 Blankert 1967, pp. 55-58, 80.
- 12 Sale The Hague, Bosboom (collection C.G. Blanken), 4 June 1803 (Lugt no. 6097), lot 4 (fl. 3,16 to Hardenberg): 'Heraclit en Democriet by de waerelds Globe, kloek geschilderd, door J. J. Backer, op paneel, hoog 34,25 breed 38,5 duim'. See K. Bauch, *Jacob Adriaensz Backer : Ein Rembrandtschüler aus Friesland*, Berlin 1926, p. 81, no. 58 (Van den Brink, *Complete overview*, E62). A similar painting, but on canvas, was auctioned with the same auction house in 1805 (sale The Hague, Bosboom, 9 October 1805 (Lugt no. 7000), lot 1 (Van den Brink, *Complete overview*, E63).
- 13 Van den Brink, *Complete overview*, A7. Remarkably, the model was used as Democritus in Backer's *Hippocrates visiting Democritus in Abdera* in the Bader Collection (Van den Brink, *Complete overview*, A8).
- 14 Not much has been published on working with (individual) models or their identities. In relation to Rembrandt depicting his supposed family, see C. Vogelaaar, G. Korevaar, *Rembrandt's mother : myth and reality*, exh. cat. Leiden, Stedelijk Museum de Lakenhal 2005-2006. See also J. Noortman, D. De Witt (eds.), *Rembrandt's naked truth : drawing nude models in the Golden Age*, exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum het Rembrandthuis 2015, which deals with nude modelling in Amsterdam. See for the Antwerp model Abraham Grapheus: J. de Smet, B. Fornari, *Abraham Grapheus, model van Jacob Jordaens*, exh. cat. Caen, Musée de Beaux Arts, Gent, Museum voor Schone Kunsten 2012.
- 15 Van den Brink, *Complete overview*, B3 (*Bearded Old Man with a Cane*), C17 (*Continnence of Scipio*). The latter is probably a copy after 'a large piece of Scipio by the old Backer' (' Een groot stuck van Scipio door d'oude Backer') in the 1682 Amsterdam inventory of Jan de Wijs (Van den Brink, *Complete overview*, E52).
- 16 The same finger pointing gesture is made by an old woman counting money in an *Avaritia* print by Hendrick Bloemaert. See, also on the topic of old people and avarice, A. Janssen, *Grijsaards in zwart-wit*, Zutphen 2006, ch. 5, 'Gierigheid en hebzucht', pp. 221-245, p. 235, fig. 144.
- 17 10a) Simon Kick, *Portrait of an Old Man*, 1639, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum; 10b) Simon Kick, *Tronie of an Old Man*, England, private collection; 10c) Simon Kick, *Bearded Old Man*, St Gallen, Museum 10d) Simon Kick, *Reading Oriental Scholar*, 1637, sale New York. Christie's, 24 January 2003, lot 53; 10e) Salomon Koninck, *The Hermit*, Dresden, 1643, Gemäldegalerie alte Meister; 10f) Hendrick Pot, *The Coin Collector*, Indianapolis, Indianapolis Museum of Art; 10g) Adriaen van Ostade, *The Hermit*, Vienna/Vaduz, Liechtenstein, The Princely Collections (detail); 10h) Thomas de Keyser, *Simeon and the Christ Child*, 1639, Chicago, Loyola University Museum of Art; 10i) Thomas de Keyser, *St Paul*, formerly Amsterdam, Salomon Lilian. Many thanks to Stephanie Dickey, who focused my attention to the works by Pot and De Keyser (*Simeon*).



Detail of cat. no. 1