On a Collaboration between Jacob Duck and Abraham van Cuylenborch

The Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest owns a painting of a *Couple in a Grotto* signed by the seventeenth-century Dutch painter Jacob Duck (1600-1667) (fig. 1). Duck specialised in genre scenes of interiors with elegant soldiers making merry with courtesans. A good example of his work is *The Wine Cellar* in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam (fig. 2), which also features a couple in the centre very similar to the one in the Budapest grotto. To those familiar with the work of Jacob Duck, the Budapest painting makes an odd impression. It seems inconceivable that he painted both the figures and the landscape. This type of 'landscape', grottos with classical ruins, was popularised in seventeenth-century Holland (and Utrecht in particular) by a group of painters specialising in this subject. Since Jacob Duck apparently never painted landscapes, one can only assume that he collaborated with another master on this painting: Duck would have been responsible for the figures, his colleague for the grotto. So far the only grotto painter ever mentioned in the same breath as Jacob Duck, is Abraham van Cuylenborch. This article aims to demonstrate that Abraham van Cuylenborch, in fact, worked with Jacob Duck on the painting in Budapest and moreover that it was not an isolated incident.

The painting in Budapest presents a couple standing in the middle of a grotto. The outfit of the man, who carries a sword and wears a gorget over a sashed leather jerkin and a wide-brimmed hat with a feather, identifies him as an officer. He holds his companion with one hand while pointing to the right with the other. The woman wears a lavish silk dress which she holds delicately. Her hair is adorned with a string of pearls and pearl earrings dangle from her ears. She looks up at a statue of a woman standing in a niche framed by two pilasters supporting an entablature decorated with a large cartouche. This monument hovers over a sarcophagus with figures in relief and with a putto sleeping on top of it. A bone has fallen through a crack in the dilapidated sarcophagus and another sarcophagus and classical pilasters are visible in the background. Additional figures are seen against the light coming through an opening in the left background.

The couple standing in the middle of *The Wine Cellar* (fig. 2) is almost identical in pose to that in the Budapest painting, although not as the focus of attention. Instead, this is the man in the foreground inspecting a glass of wine. This company is thus presented as a group of wine connoisseurs. Typical of Duck is the emphasis on the still life objects scattered throughout the cellar, an aspect not found in the grotto. The wine cellar is strangely supported by massive classical columns topped with pseudo-Gothic capitals, one of which closes off the right edge of the painting. A *Guardroom* by Jacob Duck in the State Pushkin Museum of Art in Moscow (fig. 3) has a similar massive column dominating the right side of the composition. The guardroom includes an officer standing on a stone platform addressing a lady kneeling before him in supplication. This woman appears to have been taken prisoner by
Jacob Duck and Abraham van Cuylenborch, *A Couple in a Grotto*, signed, oil on panel, 44.5 x 65.4 cm, Budapest, Museum of Fine Arts.

The soldiers, and all her belongings — confiscated as booty — are spread out in the foreground. A soldier rests his foot on a large chest and pulls out a necklace, while a black page standing behind the officer holds up a pearl necklace. The large churchlike interior is occupied by other soldiers, and in the far background a kneeling man beseeching another officer. A strange architectural construction can be observed in the right foreground of this interior: on top of a pedestal is an altar with two small columns crowned with a lunette and a cartouche above it. The altar is framed by another pair of columns against which rests a large flag. This guardroom, with its scene of violence and its vast interior with bizarre architectural elements, is far removed, both in surroundings and atmosphere, from the grotto painting (fig. 1).