An Unknown Painting by G. W. Horst
and its forerunners

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In response to Dr. A. Bredius’ appeal in his article on Gerrit Willemz Horst (Oud-Holland, 1933, Part I, p. 5), we purpose giving here a description and a reproduction of another unknown picture of G. Horst’s, now in the Moscow Museum of Fine Arts. When engaged in describing this work, we thought it might be of advantage were we to compare it with some other representations of the same subject which preceded it in point of time. The comparison also led to the discovery of its real subject, namely, “Abraham receiving God’s command to go into Canaan” (Gen. XII. verses 1—5), instead of its former vague designation as “A Bible Subject.”

Although this subject is not often met with in Dutch art of the 17th century, nevertheless the same traditional elements are found in it. Some of these elements, apparently, can be traced as far back as the 16th century to Jacopo Bassano’s painting of the “Partenza di Abramo”, two of which were included in the 17th century in the collection of Gerrit Reynst 1).

These paintings of Bassano show, in the middle, a woman on a white horse, in the background the head of a camel and, in the foreground, sheep, cows and goats. But, whereas Bassano depicts only the preparations for the departure and none of his figures appear to be conscious of God’s voice or of the ray of light from the sky, the Dutch painters represented Abraham and his family as listening to God’s command, while the other persons and animals are already moving on their way.

Of the Dutch representations of this nature, the earliest, signed “Paulus Potter, fecit anno 1642” (unlike the usual signature of this master), has nothing in common with Paulus Potter’s work. But whoever was the author of it — whether Pieter Symonz Potter or Gerrit Claes Blecker 2), to judge by its style, it was at any rate painted at a much earlier date than 1642.

On the left side of the picture (Fig. 1) we see Abraham who has fallen upon one knee; behind him are Lot and Sarah, the latter seated on a mule. All are bewildered with fear or amazement, motionless and stiff, as in a

1) W. Arslan: “J. Bassano”, pp. 160, 190, Fig. 32.
tableau vivant, with outspread hands and wide-stretched fingers. In spite of their gestures, however, these figures clearly do not approach in impressiveness the animals in the picture. Admirably true to life is the cow lying in the middle foreground, as also the other standing behind the first with the goat between. As true “protagonists” they occupy the foreground of the scene. The voice of God is symbolized in the rays of light falling from the clouds. The landscape is ideal. The contour of a high hill, crowned with a tower, slopes in an undulating line separating the sky from the earth. On the left the vigorous trunk of an oak-tree and two other dry and twisted trunks animate the background in the depth of the picture. There, too, are discernible the long, snake-like necks of some camels. On the right the scintillating foam of a small cascade catches the eye. This new and striking effect might definitively disturb the unity of this composition, were it not that the cow in the foreground dominates all the lesser details and triumphs over the disharmony between different parts of the picture.

The lack of unity, the immobile stupor of the figures, the hard outlines, even the nature of the lighting conduce to the view that this picture could hardly have been painted later than the third decade of the 17th century.

Lastman’s and Moeyaert’s paintings of the same subject are distinguished by greater unity and better and more highly developed characterization of the figures. Thus, in Lastman’s work 1), there is already a visible unity of movement, both of persons and animals. The rocks, the dark blotch of the parasol, the obelisk, and the hill with the ruin on the summit, stand forward, but at the same time frame the entire cavalcade. The grouping in Moeyaert’s work 2) (fig. 2) is even more circumscribed. Whereas Lastman accords as much space to the animals as to the people, Moeyaert, on the contrary, gives the preference to his human figures. The animals are presented in a separate group merely to convey the idea of a herd. We must not omit

1) K. Freise: “Pieter Lastman, sein Leben und seine Kunst”, 1911, fig. 29.
2) We are indebted to Messrs. Mensing & Son (Maison Fr. Muller et Cie) who kindly sent us the reproduction of this work of Moeyaert’s.