Pictorial sources for Rembrandt's Denial of St. Peter

RECENTLY, this writer has had the good fortune of seeing a drawing by Jan Pynas of the Denial of St. Peter in the Private Collection of P. and N. de Boer in Amsterdam (fig. 1). This sheet is not only important as a new addition to the relatively small oeuvre of an artist closely connected with the young Rembrandt but is also of extreme interest for the development of the representation of this subject in the seventeenth century. The drawing, executed in pen and wash and measuring 205 × 325 mm., bears the inscription in the lower left-hand corner, "1629 Jan Pynas fec". The authenticity of the inscription is easily verified by comparing this sheet with the universally accepted signed and dated Pynas of 1630 representing Christ on the Mount of Olives, Print Room, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (fig. 2). Peter's drapery is treated in very much the same manner as that of Christ with the dark washed in shadows which are occasionally intensified with strong pen-strokes superimposed upon the wash. Each drawing exhibits a peculiar technical device characteristic of Pynas who used quickly drawn black dots to realize his description of form. They take the shape of pin pricks, marks often found when a drawing has been made into a print. These small black dots are much harder in the earlier sheet, while in the 1630 drawing Pynas softens them and gives them a more painterly character. This tendency toward a greater softness can even be seen in the background of the earlier drawing. The figure of Christ has much the same free and loose form, created by using narrow areas of wash in contrast with the white paper, while in the shaded parts Pynas uses a predominantly wash technique with pen to enliven the drapery. The type of Christ with long curly hair, which is found in the 1630 figure, seems to derive from a type used by Pynas' contemporary and companion in Italy, Pieter Lastman.

2. The author knows of no painting of this subject by Jan Pynas, but a Peter by Pynas ("Een Petrus van Pinas . . .") worth f 2:10 was cited in a tax list of the widow of J. Meurs, Amsterdam, 1678 (see A. Bredius, Künstler-Inventare tv, The Hague, 1917, p. 1249).
4. A. Houbraken, op. cit., p. 214, tells us that Pieter Lastman and Jan Pynas were together in Italy in 1605 and that (ibid., p. 132) they also were companions of Adam Elsheimer during their Roman days. It seems that Pynas' figure of Christ in the 1630 Christ on the Mount of Olives goes back to Lastman's (fig. 3) in the 1608 engraving by Nicolas Lastman after Pieter Lastman's design for Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane (for the connection between Lastman and the romantic chiaroscuro paintings of Elsheimer see K. Freise, Pieter Lastman, sein Leben und seine Kunst, Leipzig, 1911, pp. 63, 106f., fig. 3.). Pynas' kneeling Christ has many details similar to that of Lastman: the drapery falls over the left shoulder, large areas of drapery are brightly lit by the miraculous light, the hands are clasped and placed just to the left of the face, and the curling hair falls loosely over the shoulders and enfames a dramatic facial expression. However, Pynas concentrates upon Christ and His emotions in eliminating the vision; therefore the dramatic form of rock and foliage which hides the vision balances the composition. This rock formation, with wild growing plant life, is somewhat akin to the curved cliff with foliage which echoes the sway of Christ's body in Lastman's composition. In the case of Pynas, this curved line of rock appears twice, once in the left foreground and once directly behind Christ; he uses this circular form not only as a frame,
The de Boer drawing, certainly an authentic work by Jan Pynas, becomes a significant document when one studies the various compositional types employed in the representation of the Denial of St. Peter during the seventeenth century. The depiction of this subject has a long tradition beginning in early Christian times and runs continuously through the history of art. By the seventeenth century the pictorial imagery used for this theme had developed into two basic compositional types. One based on a form evolved by the early sixteenth century in which full-length figures were placed in a large architectural setting containing the Denial of St. Peter in the foreground and in a separate room or on a raised loggia in the background Christ before Caiaphas. This type with its stress on a more detailed and elaborate architectural setting, including piers and columns, had reached a fully developed stage by the first half of the sixteenth century in a work such as Simon Bening's Denial of St. Peter, (Prayer Book of the Schönbrunn House, present whereabouts unknown) and the architectural and artificial light effects used by Bening became even more fanciful by the end of the century in the drawing by Aert Mytens now in the Albertina Collection, Vienna. Mytens' emphasis upon the pictorial use of artificial light, particularly that of the blazing fire to illuminate the foreground figures, is placed in a more readable, unmannered composition by Pieter Molijn in his design of 1626 preserved in an engraving by W. Aersloot and by Rembrandt in his ca. 1655 drawing in the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Paris. Molijn reduces the numbers making the Denial more readily visible as well as the actions of the individuals. He also introduces a gaming element into the scene which leads us to the second manner of representing this theme in the seventeenth century, that used by Caravaggio and his circle. This type, based on Italy,