



Saint Sebastian Tended By Irene, 1625

Hendrick ter Brugghen (Dutch, 1588-1629)

Oil on canvas | 58 15/16 x 47 1/4 in. (149.5 x 120 cm)

- Who are the most important people in this painting? Does the artist make any visual connections between them?

VISUAL ANALYSIS

Hendrick ter Brugghen's renowned *Saint Sebastian Tended By Irene* depicts a scene of intense emotional power, combining a clear, naturalistic style with a heightened moral and religious message. In it, a near-nude man slumps over, bleeding from arrow wounds, his right arm bound above him to a tree branch. A calm, serene woman in a head

wrap and softly draping robes cleans his wounds and prepares his body for burial, while another woman works to untie him. The man's body is thin and haggard, tinged a grey-green color, implying his suffering and near-death state.

Ter Brugghen has paid particular attention to the anatomy of Saint Sebastian, using heavy shadows to emphasize details like his ribs, musculature, and gaunt cheeks. He slumps over with clear weight, yet Saint Irene seems to keep him upright effortlessly. Her delicate touch holds the dead saint, and gently begins to remove an arrow from his side.

The artist also visually connects Sebastian and Irene, by unifying their skin tone. Irene's empathy seems so intense that she adopts the pallor of Sebastian. This unified skin tone also serves to focus the narrative—the central figures in the story stand out, while the remaining figure fades into the background.

FUNCTION/FORM & STYLE

The arrangement of the figures is the central theme of the composition. The work is united by the strong diagonal movement from the man's outstretched arm down to his head, past his half-closed eyes, to his lower left foot. This line is paralleled in the diagonal of the two women's heads above his own. The viewer's low, close-up perspective contributes to the emotion and immediacy. The strong contrast between light and dark (*tenebroso*) is dramatic and luminous, underscoring the influence of the **Baroque** Italian master, Caravaggio.

There are many contrasts in imagery evident in the painting that highlight the struggle of life and death. The greenish skin of the dying man is juxtaposed against the rich red and gold cloth on the left side of the canvas, and

- » Is the sun in the background rising or setting? How would the answer effect the meaning of the work?
- » Painters often used compositional triangles to tie the most important parts of a work together visually. What are the points of the triangle in Ter Brugghen's work?

the pinks and purples of the women's clothing. The two strong hands of the woman furthest back contrast with Sebastian's pale, lifeless hand. This struggle would have been immediately relatable to the contemporary viewer, as there were sporadic outbreaks of the Plague, or Black Death, sweeping across Europe in waves and killing tens of thousands. In that context, the caring and merciful figure of Saint Irene was especially well received.

Saint Sebastian was a fairly popular subject in Utrecht at the time of this painting. Though rarely depicted in the Netherlands before 1600, he gained popularity in this Catholic city as part of an attempt during the Counter-Reformation to portray the Church as caring, compassionate, and socially responsible. The church most likely would have approved of this depiction of Saint Sebastian at the moment of his salvation at the hands of Saint Irene.

CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE

The scene illustrated is in fact a depiction of the early Christian martyr

Sebastian being saved by Irene. As the story goes, Sebastian was a pious Christian from Milan who enlisted in the Roman army and helped convert many people to Christianity. Persecution of Christians intensified during this period, and after several of Sebastian's converts were put to death, it was ordered that he be tied to a tree and shot to death with arrows. Left for dead, Sebastian was discovered by Irene, a widow of one of the converts, who untied him and nursed him back to health with the help of her servant. Once healthy, Sebastian denounced cruelty against Christians, until the emperor had him seized and killed. Saint Irene became the patron saint of nurses as a result of her role in the story of Saint Sebastian.

The story itself may largely be a fable, but a martyr named Sebastian most likely did exist and is buried near the **Basilica** of Saint Sebastian. He was commonly invoked as protection against the Plague, and is the patron saint of archers and soldiers. During the Renaissance, he was nearly always painted in association with arrows or surrounded by archers.

VOCABULARY

Baroque: Of, relating to, or characteristic of a style in art and architecture developed in Europe from the early 17th to mid-18th century, emphasizing dramatic, often strained effect and typified by bold, curving forms, elaborate ornamentation, and overall balance of disparate parts.

Basilica: A large Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox church. A basilica is built with several parallel aisles separated by rows of columns, ending in a semicircular structure, the apse. For example, the seat of the Vatican in Rome is Saint Peter's Basilica.

Copernican: Of or relating to the theory of Copernicus that Earth rotates daily on its axis and, with the other planets in the solar system, revolves around the sun.

Mannerism: A style in the fine arts developed principally in Europe during the 16th century, chiefly characterized by a complex perspectival system, elongation of forms, strained gestures or poses of figures, and intense, often strident color.

OHIO ACADEMIC CONTENT STANDARDS

Study of this work and its related classroom activities meets some or all of the following K-12 benchmarks:

- **Language Arts:** Acquisition of Vocabulary; Communications: Oral and Visual; Concept of Print, Comprehension Strategies and Self-Monitoring Strategies; Information, Technical, and Persuasive Text; Research
- **Mathematics:** Geometry and Spatial Sense; Mathematical Processes; Measurement
- **Sciences:** Science and Technology
- **Social Studies:** Economics; Geography; History; People in Societies; Skills and Methods
- **Visual Arts:** Analyzing and Responding; Connections, Relationships, and Applications; Creative Expression and Communication; Historical, Cultural, and Social Contexts; Valuing the Arts/Aesthetic Reflection

Ter Brugghen was an artist of the early *Baroque* period, characterized by artists like Caravaggio, who he admired greatly. Baroque art often directly appealed to the senses and the emotions rather than reason—the immediacy of this painting fits solidly into that category. He was also influenced by *Mannerism*, a phase of art between the High Renaissance and the Baroque, as his teacher in Utrecht was a Mannerist painter. At a time rife with cultural turmoil and change, from Martin Luther's Protestant Reformation, the exploration of the New World, to the *Copernican* solar system, Mannerist artists moved away from the harmony and balance of Renaissance art. Painters strove for a greater sense of movement in their work, a stronger appeal to emotion, as well as an exaggerated sense of figuration.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Hendrick ter Brugghen was born in 1588, probably in The Hague, though

he was raised in Utrecht and lived most of his life there until his death in 1629. He was one of the founding members of the Utrecht *Caravaggisti*, a group of Dutch painters who were greatly influenced by Caravaggio.

As a boy in Utrecht, Ter Brugghen studied art with the master Abraham Bloemaert. Around age 16, he traveled to Italy, staying chiefly in Rome for almost ten years. This migration to Italy gave him the opportunity to study in detail the work of Caravaggio, and incorporate some of these ideas, as well as themes and techniques of Northern Italian followers of Caravaggio, into his own work.

Throughout his life, Ter Brugghen experimented with different themes and subject matter. In accordance with Northern Renaissance and Dutch tradition, he painted *genre* scenes, or scenes of everyday life (figures playing musical instruments, drinking,

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

LANGUAGE ARTS: Saint Sebastian is only one of the many different saints represented in Renaissance painting. Using a source like *The Golden Legend*, research the stories of other saints or martyrs. Write a report summarizing the information available. Be sure to note the manner of their martyrdom, if they are based on an historical person, and whether they are still considered saints by the Catholic Church (for instance, Veronica is no longer recognized as a saint). (*High School*)

SOCIAL STUDIES: What was the Counter Reformation? Find other works of art that illustrate the ideas of the Counter Reformation. How do these paintings illuminate these ideas? How were paintings used to spread the ideas of the Counter Reformation? (*Middle and High School*)

VISUAL ARTS: Artists often copy works by earlier masters to improve their own skills. Study Ter Brugghen's *Saint Sebastian* closely, and then sketch the work. First, draw the line separating Saint Sebastian from the background, then draw geometric shapes to represent body parts and other important objects in the foreground (triangles for knees, ovals for legs, circles for heads, etc.). Sketch the work in layers, and go back to add ever greater amounts of detail, shading, etc. (*Elementary School*)

etc.). In his later years, his style and compositions became more mature, as he illustrated on a grand scale moral and religious scenes that had become popular during the Counter-Reformation.

Hendrick ter Brugghen continued to paint until his premature death in 1629, which, according to some scholars, “may have cut short the most innovative stage of his artistic development.”