

The Fortune-Teller

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Georges de La Tour French (probably 1630s)

Darting eyes and busy hands create a captivating narrative between otherwise staid figures, each of which is richly clothed in meticulously painted combinations of color and texture. La Tour took on a theme popularized in Northern Europe by prints and in Rome by Caravaggio: an old Roma (formerly identified with the derisive term "Gypsy") woman reads the young man's fortune as her beautiful companions take the opportunity to rob him. This celebrated painting, which was only discovered in the mid-twentieth century, is inscribed with the name of the town where the artist lived in northeastern France, supporting the possibility that he developed such works independent of Caravaggio's precedent.

Overview

Title: The Fortune-Teller

Artist: Georges de La Tour (French, Vic-sur-Seille 1593 – 1652 Lunéville)

Date: probably 1630s

Medium: Oil on canvas

Dimensions: 40 1/8 x 48 5/8 in. (101.9 x 123.5 cm)

Classification: Paintings

Credit Line: Rogers Fund, 1960

Object Number: 60.30

Catalog Entry

Georges de La Tour's *Fortune Teller* is one of the painter's early masterpieces. It has been variously dated between 1620 and 1639, and it is most likely from the 1630s. The canvas is signed at top right: G. de La Tour Fecit Luneuilla Lothar:, identifying La Tour as working in Lunéville in Lorraine, where he died in 1653. The painting is first recorded in 1650, in the posthumous inventory of Jean-Baptiste de Bretagne in Paris, where it appears as no. 14: "grand tableau peint sur thuille avecq la platte bande dorée représentant des diseuses de bonneaventure, original de La Tour," and was valued at the very high sum of 30 livres. In 1879 it is recorded again in the posthumous inventory of Édouard Lemonnier de Lorière, who had died that year, at the château de Moulin Vieux, Asnières sur Vègre, Sarthe. The Lemonnier de Lorière family had acquired the château de Moulin Vieux "fully furnished" from the last marquis de Scépeaux, and it is possible that the canvas by La Tour was already in the château by the time it passed to them. The painting subsequently belonged to Édouard Lemonnier de Lorière's daughter, Mme Léonce de Gastines at château de la Denisière near Coulans, Sarthe, until 1921, and then to her son, Général Jacques de Gastines, at La Vagotière, Degré, Sarthe. After his death in 1948, his heirs sold the picture to Wildenstein, from whom it was acquired in 1960 by The Met.

The painting has a later addition at the top, just above the signature, and has also been cut down to the left, and it is likely that its format was originally closer to other works by La Tour. It has in fact been suggested that the *Fortune Teller* may have been a pendant to the *Cheat with the Ace of Diamonds* at the Louvre, or the *Cheat with the Ace of Clubs* at the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas.

La Tour represents five three-quarter length figures dressed elaborately through a bravura display of paint handling that captures an incredible array of textures, patterns, and color juxtapositions. A well-off, ostensibly naïve young man, is surrounded by four women who use the ruse of telling his fortune in order to steal from him. *The Fortune Teller* (or the plural, "des diseuses de bonneaventure") was the title used for this painting during La Tour's lifetime, and the subject was common in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Caravaggio in particular popularized it in the format seen here. It often played into negative stereotypes and a kind of internal European ethnography that othered populations seen as not essentially French or Italian—in this case, presumably depicting the Roma people, often referred to in the early modern period derisively as "gypsies" (a word that historically appeared in the title for this work and in much of the literature on it). Much like the young man, the viewer was intended to be simultaneously attracted (the sumptuous clothing, the beauty of the young women, the possibility of seeing the future through the fortune) and repelled (the craggy features of the old woman, their duplicity in stealing from him). Caravaggio painted two canvases with this subject, now in the Pinacoteca Capitolina in Rome and the Musée du Louvre in Paris; for La Tour, however, his composition has derived from prints, including a number of Northern examples. The woman on the right is similar to an etching by Jacques de Bellange, and the old woman may derive from an engraving by Jasper de Isaac (Pariset 1961). It is also possible that the subject may derive from contemporary theatrical scenes, and may even be related to the biblical subject of the Prodigal Son.

Xavier F. Salomon 2012; revised David Pullins 2023