



From Darkness into Light: Rediscovering Georges de La Tour

By Helen Dudar, *Smithsonian*, December, 1996

Long forgotten after his death in 1652, he is now embraced by the French as an icon; an exhibition touring this country shows why.

It is one of the gnawing anomalies of art scholarship that Georges de La Tour was "lost" for nearly three centuries and yet with us all the time. Year after year, his luminous paintings could be seen in public and private spaces in France and England, wearing labels identifying them as the work of Murillo. Or Ribera. Or Velazquez. Or Rembrandt, the Le Nain brothers and, inevitably, Caravaggio.

La Tour died in 1652 and, in no time at all, so did his reputation. Although he had spent most of his working life in France's northeast province of Lorraine, his art had found favor with such imposing figures as Louis XIII and Cardinal Richelieu. The king had honored him, and the records of his hometown had identified him as a "famous painter." Still, fashion in art can be as fickle as a king's preference in courtiers. There was no room for La Tour's austere, intense imagery in an age that festooned France with the undemanding charm of Versailles rococo. The name, the fame, vanished into a nearly total, extremely long eclipse.

It would not end until well into our age, when the scholarly brotherhood began to look hard at some questionable attributions and to burrow through the rich archives of La Tour's home province. By 1934, enough La Tours had been identified—actually a meager dozen—for the work to be shown in a group exhibition of "Reality Painters" in Paris. The event was electrifying—an offering of mysterious, beautifully wrought, hypnotically still pictures that hardly resembled the erroneous labels they had once worn.

The public was introduced to blind hurdy-gurdy players, beggars, flaunting all the miseries of street life but somehow touchingly dignified; to groups of figures looming so large over the foreground that, to our modernist age, the arrangements appeared geometric, a 17th-century forecast of Cubism to come; to scenes aglow in the light of a single candle and deeply spiritual, while the expected symbols of veneration—halos, wings, a cross—are oddly lacking. Nearly 40 years would go by before the first major one-man La Tour show in history arrived in Paris in 1972. By then, there were 32 identified pictures, and enough of them were displayed to provide a memorable sampling of the range of a dazzling talent.

Freshly certified La Tours, sometimes even showing a signature under the surface grime of decades, continue to turn up every few years. The most recent, *Saint John the Baptist in the Wilderness*, was spotted at a Paris auction house in 1993 and eventually acquired by France.

There are now a little more than 40 works unquestionably from his hand; another 40 or so are known from copies or archival mentions. The American exhibition has 27 authenticated La Tours along with 5 others that could be his or may be contemporary copies. The gallery also shows 3 engravings that appear to be versions of La Tour oils. In addition, there is useful context: 10 paintings by contemporaries or immediate predecessors who worked in styles and chose subjects resembling some of his.



Details, such as paper stuffed under the strings, bring to life a blind hurdy-gurdy player from 1628.

Some four years ago, when Philip Conisbee, curator of French paintings at the National Gallery, began thinking about a La Tour exhibition, his aim was to bring together the dozen or so works now housed in American museums. But the tall, calm, British-born Conisbee has an abiding interest in "autograph versions," an artist's variations on a single subject. So he set out to borrow from French museums. This was not easy. Having forgotten La Tour for 270 years, his countrymen now regard him with a possessive fervor. "In France," Conisbee says, "La Tour is a national icon. I have to say that French colleagues have been very generous, but it was very hard to get them to lend."



Nevertheless, the Louvre sent its version of what are familiarly known as "the cardsharp pictures" to provide the public with a fascinating look at two similar performances on canvas. It appears to have been a favorite moral subject of La Tour's: a handsome, richly dressed, smug-looking young innocent who has fallen into the power of some wily grifters. While the victim studiously concentrates on his hand, a pair of conniving beauties create a diversion and another player slips a winning ace out of the back of his sash.

In *The Cheat with the Ace of Clubs*, the fellow at the right is out of his league with this slick crowd.

The Louvre picture is *The Cheat with the Ace of Diamonds*. The Kimbell Museum version

substitutes an ace of clubs but uses the same cast with some variations in colors and costumes (above). Both pictures are quintessentially early La Tour: there is no window to the outside world, no decorative foreground or background detail, no embellishment beyond expensive garments and jewelry and coins on the table. La Tour insists on focusing all the attention on the moral lesson of the hazard of trusting untrustworthy strangers.

The pictures have one other wholly conjectural interest. The young prey and the two women seem to be idealized images, imagined faces you do not expect to pass in the street. The "cheat," on the other hand, appears to be less an invention than a real person; a slender, good-looking man, he is clean-shaven in the *Ace of Diamonds*, and wears a mustache and wispy beard in the Kimbell version. In a 1976 study of La Tour, Benedict Nicolson, the British art historian, suggested that the figure could well be a self-portrait. Now, if La Tour did any portraits at all, none survive, but the conjecture is seductive, and Conisbee finds it hard to resist. "It has the kind of dashing, rascally look that I imagine La Tour had," he says.

"Rascally" is a fond contrast to the rather unpleasant person we encounter in the records of La Tour's late years, but then official archives are more likely to remember transgressions than exemplary behavior. The son of a prosperous baker, he was born in Vic-sur-Seille, a small market town in Lorraine close to the frontier between France and Germany. There is no record of him between his baptism on March 14, 1593, and his appearance as a godfather of a friend's daughter in 1616. That 23-year gap drives students of his work crazy.

No definitive clue exists to the vexing question of how or where, during that time, he was taught the fundamentals of art. In place of facts, we have a fretful industry of speculation. One view is held by the Caravaggists, who argue that, like many aspiring painters of that age, La Tour surely traveled to Italy to learn from that towering master of the baroque or from any of a large crowd of Italian followers. The National Gallery show includes a Caravaggio entitled *The Cardsharps*,



In *The Fortune-Teller* (detail), a young gypsy woman looks innocent as she snips the dupe's gold chain. (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rennes)

which could well have inspired La Tour's cheats and which certainly set a fashion for genre pictures with a moralizing bent.

The art world celebrates Caravaggio for his dramatic contrasts of light and shade, elements that La Tour, in his middle years, explored with breathtaking virtuosity. But when Caravaggio died in 1610 after a short, careless, tumultuous life, he left a small army of followers across Western Europe. So we also have a school that argues that La Tour did not have to travel farther than Utrecht to take lessons from any of the Dutch painters--Dirck van Baburen, Hendrick Terbrugghen, Gerrit van Honthorst--who came back from Italy marked by encounters with Caravaggio's visions of the play of light. Yet another group, Philip Conisbee among them, argues that La Tour could have learned everything he needed to know without ever leaving Lorraine. His home province had its own school of successful Caravaggesque artists, a few of whom are shown in the Washington exhibition.

At all events, by the time La Tour's marriage contract was recorded in 1617, he was entitled, according to the municipal entry, to call himself a painter. He married up, taking to wife Diane le Nerf of nearby Luneville, two years his senior, daughter of the duke's superintendent of finances, whose family had risen into the new, minor nobility. In 35 years of marriage, the couple would produce ten children. Only three survived into adulthood, two daughters and a son, Etienne, who became a painter and worked with his father but inherited neither his genius nor his drive. The Washington exhibition has a late, rather damaged work, *The Education of the Virgin*, borrowed from the Frick Museum. A piece lit by the trademark candle, it hangs in the show as "attributed" to Georges. The Frick, on the other hand, labels it as possibly the work of Etienne.

Three years after their wedding, the young La Tours moved from Vic, settling permanently in nearby Luneville, an important town where La Tour was, profitably, the only resident painter. Politically, Lorraine was a duchy; its ruling duke was Henry II, who became a collector of La Tour's art. After the French monarch swallowed part of Lorraine for his kingdom, the duke was replaced by a governor who also admired the artist. For six years, the town annually ordered a La Tour picture to be presented to him as a gift and paid sums large enough to keep the artist in comfort.



Wielding a knife and a hurdy-gurdy handle, a street performer attacks a piper in *The Musicians' Brawl*, from 1625-27. Fascinated by life in the streets, La Tour often chose beggars and impoverished musicians as subjects

For his subjects, La Tour's earliest interests seem to have veered regularly between the spiritual and the temporal. The exhibition has three fine early images of saints, surviving pieces from a set of 13 half-length portrayals of Christ and the Apostles, which hung in the cathedral of Albi until the late 18th century.

But La Tour was also fascinated by life in the street, turning a remorseless eye on what Conisbee aptly calls the "existential isolation of poverty." The imagery can be savage in its candor, yet it never effaces human dignity. The National Gallery show offers his crowded canvas of a mean beggar's "brawl" (left); a work-worn, hungry old couple scooping a meal of peas out of small bowls; and three portrayals of blind hurdy-gurdy

players. The musicians are a much repeated subject; the Washington selection includes a monumental full-length singing figure with a dog crouched at his feet.

La Tour apparently became popular and successful almost as soon as he settled into Luneville. The archives tell us he was godfather to the children of many friends and a witness at numerous weddings. He took on apprentices for good sums paid by their families, and bought property including a fine house.

The dusty old municipal records also reveal a difficult man who, particularly in his later years, was not exactly a model of civic virtue. There were complaints that he refused to contribute his quota to the poor while a famine raged, that he assaulted a sergeant at arms, and that he administered a savage beating to a peasant. One



In a detail of *The Magdalene at the Mirror*, c. 1635, La Tour captures an intimate moment of contemplation.

particularly detailed set of charges reported La Tour "making himself obnoxious to everyone by the great number of dogs . . . he keeps, acting as though he were the lord of the manor, sending his dogs after hare into the standing crops which they trample down and ruin." This portrait of a rich, proud, bullying lord of the land sorts oddly with the work of the artist who, sometime in the 1630s, turned much of his attention to "nocturnes"--justly celebrated pictures of holy figures magically caught in the light and shadow of a flickering candle flame.

Given what we know of La Tour's asocial behavior, it might be tempting to think of his religious art as merely an act of commercialism, a shrewd effort to provide what monied society demanded. It was the time of the Counter-Reformation, with the Catholic Church striving to meet the challenge of Protestantism by stirring a new religious fervor. La Tour lived and matured in an age that produced new religious orders, new churches, new schools and, for those who could afford them, new styles of imagery of human holiness.

One of the striking aspects of his religious art was that, often, the men and women who peopled his canvases might have been encountered in the village square or the Friday fish market. They were neighbors transformed, indeed exalted, by belief and repentance. In the wake of the disasters regularly inflicted on Lorraine, the French scholar Jacques Thuillier tells us, the nocturnes became a "meditation on the fragility of man, the uncertainty of destiny, on suffering, death."

One of La Tour's most popular subjects appears to have been Mary Magdalene, captured and fixed at the moment when she has thrown away objects of earthly vanity, sometimes with her hand on a skull, often confronting her image in a mirror. There are five autograph versions of the subject--three in the show--and another three known from contemporary copies. The Magdalene story seemed to have had a solid hold on La Tour's imagination; each picture was somewhat different, each in its own way affecting.



The La Tour work most celebrated in the artist's time was perhaps *Saint Sebastian Tended by Irene* (left). Legend held that the Roman soldier, pierced by arrows and close to death, was miraculously nursed to health by the widowed Irene. Saint Sebastian was of signal importance in La Tour's day, the figure most often invoked against the never-absent threat of plague. One version of the painting was made for Louis XIII, possibly in a period when La Tour is thought by some scholars to have spent time working in Paris. The king was said to have been so smitten with the picture that he cleared every other painting out of his bedroom.

The original is lost, but the subject understandably became famous: at least ten copies from other hands exist. And it brought La Tour formal royal recognition adding to his luster and probably to his price. He was named Peintre ordinaire du Roy, an honor that gave him official standing as an artist of the royal court.

Almost certainly the keynote image, the best-known piece in the National Gallery exhibition—surely the best known in Europe—is *The Newborn Child*. Postage stamps and Christmas cards have shown that young mother gazing raptly at her swaddled infant, the two radiant in the light of a candle shielded by the hand of an older woman, who may be the child's grandmother. The Rennes Musee des Beaux-Arts didn't want to let it go; it is the most important work in the institution. "It's their Mona Lisa," Conisbee explains. He finally negotiated the loan by offering in exchange a painting of Breton girls by Gauguin; the Brittany museum has no picture by that artist, so much of whose work was done there.

In scholarly circles, the subject of *The Newborn* has stirred thorny controversy. Given La Tour's tendency to place religious imagery in secular settings, some authorities consider it entirely plausible that the painting is meant to show us the Christ child with Mary and Saint Anne. Another school of experts insists it



Although lacking traditional religious trappings, La Tour's austere *Newborn Child*, from the mid-1640s, is nonetheless deeply moving. Illuminated by a single candle, the figures take on a monumental quality.

is not and can never be mistaken for a nativity scene. At least one admirer, Aldous Huxley, once argued that the question of intent did not matter. "Even if La Tour's art is totally lacking religiosity," he wrote, "it is nevertheless profoundly religious in the sense that it reveals with unequaled intensity the all present divinity."

Considering the disasters that periodically savaged Lorraine and its inhabitants, it is astonishing that La Tour was able to turn out paintings of such serene beauty and that at least some of them survived. Throughout the 1630s, the area was a magnet for devastation. Epidemics and famine filled the earth with victims. Soldiers fighting religious and political wars crisscrossed the countryside, pillaging as they went. One September day in 1638, as the residents fled, the entire city of Luneville was burned.

Some experts are certain that the greater part of La Tour's work, possibly as many as 400 paintings, was lost to thievery or to flames. Here again, unanimity breaks down. Conisbee is persuaded that La Tour was too busy enjoying the privileged life of a country gentleman—he enjoyed his wine, he was a horseman, a keen huntsman—to be prolific, and the curator can imagine a life's work numbering little more than 150 pictures.

The life ended January 30, 1652, two weeks after Madame La Tour died. While public records reported the cause as pleurisy, it seems likelier to have been the plague. La Tour apparently left no will; his children, obeying his wishes, gave a plot of land he owned to the Order of the Capuchin Fathers.

Presumably, La Tour worked at his art sporadically until his fatal illness. At least one authority, Pierre Rosenberg, who is now director of the Louvre, saw a "slow deterioration" in the final years. In a 1973 study, he judged the painting in the late work poor, the invention exhausted. Perhaps, he suggested, La Tour's distance from the dominant art community in Paris was finally fatal to his art, and isolated as he was, he had no resources with which to renew himself. Perhaps. Yet, it is hard to feel more than a momentary twinge about this lapse in the presence of the enduring beauty he managed to leave behind.

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By Helen Dudar

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