

JOHNNY VAN HAEFTEN

OLD MASTER PAINTINGS

CS0392

DENIJS VAN ALSLOOT

(Brussels before 1573 – 1635/6)

A Summer Landscape with a Lady and Gentleman Seated and Sportsmen returning with Game



Traces of signature and date, lower centre: ... *Pict. 1607*
On canvas, 26¼ x 35¼ ins. (66.7 x 89.5 cm)

PROVENANCE

With Frost and Reed Gallery, London, 1969

From whom purchased by the father of the previous owner

Private collection, England, until 2015

Anon sale, Sotheby's, London, 9 July 2015, lot 173

With Johnny Van Haeften Limited, London, 2015

Private collection, Guernsey, 2015-2021

EXHIBITED

Dutch and Flemish Old Master Paintings. Catalogue Twenty, Johnny Van Haeften Limited, London, 2015, no. 1.

NOTE

The staffage is most likely to be by Sebastiaen Vrancx (1573-1647)

NOTE

We are grateful to Dr. Sabine van Sprang, author of *Denijs van Alsloot (vers 1568-1625/26): peintre paysagiste au service de la cour des archiducs Albert et Isabelle*, 2014, for confirming the attribution of this painting to Denijs van Alsloot, on the basis of photographs.

Despite a successful career as court painter to the Archdukes Albert and Isabella in Brussels, surprisingly little is known about Denijs van Alsloot. The son of a tapestry worker of the same name, he was probably born in Brussels around 1568. He is mentioned for the first time as a master in the Brussels guild of painters in 1599, when he began taking on apprentices. Around the same time, he entered the service of the archducal couple. In his early career, van Alsloot probably worked in the same industry as his father, producing designs and cartoons for tapestry weavers. His activities as a painter, however, seem only to begin around 1606. Thereafter, dated examples of his work are known until 1621. He frequently signed his work with his name followed by an abbreviation of his official title as court painter – *Serenissorum Archiducum Pictor*. Probably owing to his short career, his painted oeuvre is relatively small.

Van Alsloot specialised in forest landscapes, both summer and winter views. Some are purely fanciful, while others are representations of identifiable places, including views of the abbey of Groenendael and the royal estates at Mariemont and Tervuren, in the Forêt de Soignes, near Brussels. His landscapes are often provided with figures by other specialists. At the beginning of his career he seems to have worked with Sebastiaen Vrancx (1573-1647), whose distinctive figure style is recognisable here, but later the Brussels history painter Hendrik de Clerck (c. 1570?-1630) took over as his principal collaborator, providing biblical or mythological scenes in his landscapes. In addition to landscapes, van Alsloot was commissioned by his royal patrons to execute a series of paintings commemorating the *Ommegang* procession held in Brussels on 31 May 1615. Besides the patronage of the archducal couple, van Alsloot's position at court would have given him access to an exclusive circle of courtiers, government officials and advisors, from which he probably drew the majority of his clients. His connections at court no doubt also brought him into contact with visiting foreign princes and diplomats. The fact that two of his paintings are listed in the 1632 inventory of the pictures belonging to the Dutch Stadholder Frederik Hendrik, Prince of Orange, and his wife Amalia van Solms, and two others were in the famous collection of the Marqués de Leganésⁱ, an ambassador of the Spanish court in Brussels, suggests that he enjoyed something of an international reputation.

This fine example of van Alsloot's art depicts an imaginary scene set in a heavily wooded landscape. In the centre is a stand of tall trees, whose branches rise to the top of the canvas, dividing the composition into two halves. Seated on the ground beneath the majestic canopy of leaves are two elegantly dressed young lovers, who are enjoying a tryst in the seclusion of the forest: the gentleman's horse, peering out from behind a tree, looks us straight in the eye. To the left, penetrating deeply into the woods is a meandering track along which several hunters and their dogs are approaching. To the right, a vista opens up between the trees, offering a panoramic view of a mountainous river valley that recedes far into the distance. The middle ground is occupied by a wooden bridge, across which strolls a couple out for a country walk. Especially evocative are the vivid details of flora and fauna that enliven the rich green, bosky interior and the shafts of sunlight that penetrate the leaf cover, illuminating winding paths and openings between the trees.

This important landscape of 1607, which has only come to light recently, may be counted among the earliest known paintings of Denijs van Alsloot. There is a painting of *A Forest Landscape with a View of the Priory of Rouge-Cloître*ⁱⁱ, executed on a copper panel bearing the mark of the panel-maker Pieter Stas and the date 1605, which may predate it by a year, and a

small group of dated drawings and paintings from 1608ⁱⁱⁱ. Remarkably, with such a highly accomplished work as this, van Alsloot emerges from obscurity as a fully fledged master, completely in control of his means. Already evident here are all the hallmarks that we associate with his style. Especially characteristic is the compositional scheme, with its juxtaposition of a close-up view of a forest interior on one side, with a panoramic vista on the other. This dual feature of deep vistas to left and right, together with the use of aerial perspective in successive planes of colour - brown, green and blue - lends the composition a sense of great depth. Also typical of van Alsloot are the graceful, sinuous trunks that rise to the top of the composition, and the decorative pattern of interlacing foliage streaked with sunlight and shadow.

The forest interiors of Denijs van Alsloot belong to a long tradition in Flemish painting, the roots of which may be found in the mid-sixteenth-century landscape drawings, paintings and prints of Peter Bruegel the Elder. The genre was further developed in the later sixteenth century by such Flemish-born artists as Hans Bol, Gillis van Coninxloo, Jacob Savery, Lucas van Valckenborch, David Vinckboons and others, working in various different artistic centres. A key figure in this development, and one who was without doubt an important source of inspiration for van Alsloot, was Bruegel's younger son Jan Brueghel the Elder, who perfected his close-up views of the forest in the closing years of the century. It is perhaps no coincidence that van Alsloot's easel paintings seem to begin around the time that Brueghel established his own links with the archducal court at Brussels^{iv}. Indeed, Brueghel's influence is very evident in this early work by van Alsloot, especially in the detailed and descriptive representation of nature, the subtle distribution of light and shade, and in the intensely blue, distant prospect on the right. Yet certain decorative impulses are also apparent in the lacy foliage and sinuous trunks that no doubt bear witness to the artist's early experience as a designer of tapestries, a field with its own rich tradition. From an early age, he must, for instance, have been familiar with such famous tapestry cycles as those designed by Barent van Orley featuring the hunts of Emperor Maximilian set in woodlands inspired by the Forêt de Soignes.

BIOGRAPHY

Documentary sources provide only sporadic glimpses of Denijs van Alsloot's life. The son of a Brussels tapestry worker of the same name, his birth, probably in Brussels, must have occurred around 1568. The earliest reference to his name is a receipt dated 26 May 1593 for the gilding and decoration of the Garnier family monument in Notre-Dame-du-Sablon in Brussels. The records of the Brussels painters' guild do not mention the date of his admission as a master, but show that he took on three apprentices between 1599 and 1604, the last being Pieter van der Borcht. In 1599 -1600 he entered the service of the Archdukes Albert and Isabella, who entrusted him with many important commissions. In 1603 and 1604 van Alsloot received payments from them for the design and weaving of two pieces of tapestry. The artist apparently did not take up easel painting until after 1606: his earliest dated painting is from 1607. In 1611, he took on another apprentice, Willem de Moye. No paintings dated after 1621 are known. The guild records indicate that Denijs van Alsloot was still alive in January 1625, but in December 1626, two of his works that he had bequeathed to a niece were bought by the Archduchess Isabella.

ⁱ See: Sabine van Sprang, *Denijs van Alsloot (vers 1568-1625/26): peintre paysagiste au service de la cour des archiducs Albert et Isabelle*, Turnhout, 2014, pp. 33-34.

ⁱⁱ Denijs van Alsloot, *A Forest Landscape with a View of the Priory of Rouge-Cloître*, on copper, 38.1 x 53.9 cm, signed, collection of the KBC, Antwerp. The painting was described by Walter Bernt in 1978 as being dated 1606, but no date is evident today. See: Sabine van Sprang, *ibid.*, cat. no. 1.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sabine van Sprang, *ibid.*, cat. Nos. 2, 3, 4 & D2 & D3.

^{iv} See: Anne T. Woollett & Ariane van Suchtelen in *Rubens & Brueghel: A Working Friendship*, exh. cat., The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles and Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis, The Hague, 2006, pp. 15-16. Writing in 1606 to his patron Federico Borromeo, Jan Brueghel makes reference to trips to Brussels to paint rare flowers in the gardens of the archdukes and by 1608 he held the position of “painter to their Royal Highnesses”.