

JOHNNY VAN HAEFTEN

OLD MASTER PAINTINGS

CS0233

FRANS POST

(Leiden 1612 -1680 Haarlem)

A Landscape in Brazil



Signed, and dated lower left F. POST. 1663
Oil on panel, 9 x 11 ¼ ins. (22.9 x 28.6 cm)

PROVENANCE

Private collection, since the 18th century by descent;
Sale, Sotheby's, London, 4 July, 2007, lot 32;
With Johnny Van Haeften Ltd
From whom acquired by a private collector, New York 2007

NARRATIVE

The Haarlem painter Frans Post occupies a unique position in Dutch seventeenth-century art. He was the first professionally trained European artist to paint the landscape of the New World and, as far as we know, devoted his entire production to views of Brazil.

In 1630, the Dutch seized control of the Portuguese settlement in north-eastern Brazil. The young Prince Johan Maurits of Nassau-Siegen (1604-1679) was appointed Governor General of the new territory and was charged with establishing a secure footing for the Dutch West India Company. On 25 October 1636, he set sail for South America accompanied by a team of artists and scientists, including the landscapist Frans Post and the figure painter Albert Eckhout (c. 1610-1665). The expedition arrived at Recife in January the following year. Post remained there for seven years, during which time he made a visual record of the flora and fauna, as well as the topography of the region, before returning to the Netherlands in 1644. Yet of the many paintings and drawings made during his South American sojourn, only seven paintings and a sketchbook, preserved in the Scheepvaart Museum, in Amsterdam, survive today.

Back in Haarlem, Post continued painting views of Brazil, based on the material he had amassed during his time abroad and his recollections of the exotic scenery. Apparently there was an enthusiastic market for his works and his prices were relatively high. Among the admirers of his Brazilian landscapes was the Stadholder Frederik Hendrik, who in 1644 and 1650 paid handsomely for paintings by Post.

The handful of paintings that survive from Post's period in Brazil are distinguished from his later paintings by their topographical fidelity and somewhat primitive character. After his return to Holland, the simplicity and directness of these early works gradually made way for a

more elaborately contrived approach and a reliance upon traditional compositional formulae. In his later paintings, Post frequently took liberties with the topography of the region, reusing and adapting motifs from his stock in trade to suit his picture-making, while focusing his attention on capturing the exotic flavour of the tropical terrain and its inhabitants. Post's Brazilian views evidently satisfied a demand for evocative depictions of faraway lands, populated by exotic natives, animals and plants. It is not hard to understand why they appealed to those accustomed to the grey skies and flat terrain of the Dutch Republic. His pictures may also have aroused patriotic sentiments in Dutchmen who liked to be reminded of their nation's imperial triumphs overseas.

This small panel, which is dated 1663, only came to light after the English edition of the most recent *catalogue raisonné* of Frans Post's works had gone to pressⁱ. It belongs to the early part of the "third phase" of Post's career - the years between 1661-1669 - as defined by the Correa do Logos, who summarise it thus: "This short, nine-year period is generally regarded as the most brilliant and prolific of the artist's career..."ⁱⁱ Post's highly finished works were evidently time-consuming to produce and, even during this productive phase, he only managed to produce an average of eight paintings a yearⁱⁱⁱ. Only one other painting – a depiction of an unidentified but well-preserved Franciscan convent, in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin^{iv} – is dated 1663.

The present painting is composed according to a compositional scheme employed by Post in the majority of his paintings following his return to the Netherlands. By placing the viewer on rising ground, Post is able to show a panoramic view over a partly ruined village towards an extensive marshy plain – known as *varzea* – beyond. The scene is framed on either side by ruined buildings and darkened tropical vegetation that enhance the sense of recession into the distance. On the right, the distinctive outlines of the leaves and fruit of a papaya tree are silhouetted against the sky. The foreground and middle distance are enlivened by brightly attired African slaves and a bluish purple haze shimmers in the distance. The location of the scene cannot be identified and, like most of his paintings from this period, is probably imaginary. The roofless church in the distance with an oculus in its pediment is vaguely reminiscent of the Franciscan cloister of Igarapé, while the still-inhabited native houses along the village street resemble those taken from the central parts of Post's views of the ruins of Olinda^v.

The son of the Haarlem glass painter Jan Jansz. Post (d. 1614) and younger brother of the painter and architect Pieter Post (1608-69), Frans Post was born around 1612 in Haarlem. In 1636, he went to Brazil in the entourage of Prince Johan Maurits of Nassau-Siegen. The party arrived at Recife in January 1637. During his seven-year stay in the Dutch colony Post executed many paintings and drawings for his patron. In 1644, Frans returned to The Netherlands and settled permanently in Haarlem. In 1646, he joined the Haarlem painters' guild, serving as *vinder* in 1656/57 and *penningmeester* in 1658. Post designed illustrations for Caspar van Baerle's treatise on the administration of Johan Maurits in Brazil entitled *Rerum per octennium in Brasilia*, published in Amsterdam in 1647. On 27 March 1650, he married Jannetje Bogaert, the daughter of a schoolmaster, in Zandvoort. The couple had five children. Post joined the Reformed Church on 9 October 1654. His last dated painting is of 1669, and he does not appear to have worked in the last decade of his life, when he is

described as “having fallen to drinking and become shaky”^{vi}. Post was buried in Haarlem’s Grote Kerk on 17 February 1680.

P.M.

ⁱ Pedro & Bia Correa do Lago, *Frans Post (1612-1680). Catalogue Raisonné*, Milan, 2007.

ⁱⁱ Correa do Lago, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

ⁱⁱⁱ Correa do Lago, *ibid.*, p. 190.

^{iv} Correa do Lago, *ibid.*, pp. 208-9, no. 55, reproduced.

^v The Portuguese Brazilian village of Olinda was burnt by the Dutch in 1631. A street of small houses similar to those in the present painting can be seen in the central part of Post’s *Views of the ruins of Olinda*, dated 1665, now in a private collection in Greenwich, Connecticut: Correa do Lago, *ibid.*, p. 244, no. 81, reproduced.

^{vi} Report of Jacob Cohen, 9 January 1679, quoted in Joachim de Sousa-Leão, *Frans Post 1612-1680*, Amsterdam, 1973, p. 32.