

# JOHNNY VAN HAEFTEN

OLD MASTER PAINTINGS

CS210

## JAN VAN BIJLERT

(1597/98 – Utrecht - 1671)

### A Brothel Scene

Signed, upper left: Jv bijlert f

On panel, 34 x 45 cm



### PROVENANCE

With Paris art dealer Vuyk, c. 1939

Private Collection, the Netherlands

### LITERATURE

P. Huys Janssen, Jan van Bijlert (1597/8-1671) Painter in Utrecht, 1996, p. 158, cat. no. 156, plate no. 129.

### NARRATIVE

A party of three is seated around a table. Seen in profile, closest to the viewer, is a cavalier in a large plumed hat, with his sword slung across his back, who sits quietly smoking a pipe. Sitting at the other end of the table is a young woman, dressed in a blue and yellow costume, with pearls in her hair and a plunging neckline. Making eyes at the swashbuckling fellow, she tips up her empty glass in a gesture that would probably have been seen in the seventeenth century as a lewd suggestion. On her right, a flamboyantly-dressed man in a red jacket and feathered cap, raises his glass and toasts the company: a flask of wine and plate of oysters appear on the table before him. An old woman in a turban approaches from the right, bearing a brazier of hot coals and a pipe.

After training as a painter with Abraham Bloemaert in Utrecht, Jan van Bijlert made the traditional pilgrimage to Rome. His extended stay in the city made a deep impression on him and he returned home around 1625, fired with enthusiasm for contemporary Italian art, especially the work of Caravaggio. Back in Utrecht, Bijlert followed in the footsteps of his fellow townsmen, Gerrit van Honthorst, Hendrick ter Brugghen and Dirck van Baburen, who had returned from Rome before him, infusing his own work with the compositions, bold naturalism and dramatic *chiaroscuro* of Caravaggio. Nevertheless, like Honthorst, he gradually abandoned his Caravaggesque style of the 1620s, in favour of a more restrained classicism, using a brighter palette and clear lighting.

Bijlert was primarily a painter of history and genre subjects, but he was also an able portraitist. Bijlert's history and genre scenes fall into two main categories: first, the large-scale compositions, with life-size, half- or three-quarter-length figures, painted in styles that

vary from Caravaggism to Classicism and secondly, genre pieces with small figures in the tradition of such artists as Dirck Hals, Pieter Codde and Jacob Duck and small-figured history pieces that are reminiscent of Cornelis van Poelenburg. However, these categories are not at all watertight and there are plenty of exceptions to the rule. Here, for instance, Bijlert has employed a typically Caravaggesque scheme, with a few half-length figures, seated round a table, but on a much more intimate scale and whilst strong contrasts of light and shade are used to enhance the sense of drama, the characteristically tenebrous effects and earthy palette of the Italian master are replaced by a clear illumination and bright colour scheme in tints of yellow, blue, sea-green and coral-red.

Although the setting is scarcely indicated in this little painting, the scene undoubtedly takes place in a house of ill-repute. All the standard elements of a brothel scene, or *bordeeltje*, as such subjects were known in the seventeenth century, are here: the two young men (the clients), the old woman in a turban (the procuress) and the young woman in her fancy apparel, with her seductive looks and exposed breasts (the floozy), not to mention the plate of oysters (commonly thought to be an aphrodisiac). The theme of mercenary love had long been popular with Netherlandish artists. In the sixteenth century, the pictorial tradition of the brothel was closely associated with the New Testament parable of the Prodigal Son (St. Luke 15:11-32), who squandered his inheritance on wine, women and song. Indeed, some of the early images of feasting and whoring contained small subsidiary scenes showing the Prodigal Son being driven from the whorehouse, thereby explicitly calling attention to the consequences of such degenerate behaviour. However, like many other traditional genre themes, during the first decades of the seventeenth century, the brothel scene became gradually distanced from its religious origins and took on a life of its own. In 1622, Dirck van Baburen introduced *The Procuress*<sup>i</sup> into the repertoire of the "Utrecht Caravaggisti": Honthorst quickly followed suit in 1625<sup>ii</sup>, as did Bijlert in the following year<sup>iii</sup>. By the time that Bijlert painted this little picture, c. 1634-45, the subject matter had been thoroughly updated and secularised. The Biblical references and overtly moralising overtones have disappeared and a light-hearted mood prevails.

Jan van Bijlert was born in Utrecht in 1597 or 1598, the son of the glass painter Herman Beerntsz. van Bijlert and Elisabeth Willemsdr. van Laeckervelt. Like his older brothers, Jan was initially trained in his father's craft. According to Joachim von Sandrart, he subsequently entered the workshop of Abraham Bloemaert and then rounded off his education with a trip to France and Italy. Although Bijlert probably embarked on his travels around 1616 or 1617, he is first documented in Rome in 1621, when he was living in the Via Margutta with three other Netherlandish painters. He was a founding member of the *Schildersbent*, the society of Netherlandish artists in Rome and may have been the artist nicknamed "Aeneas" by his fellow *Bentvueghels*. Bijlert returned to his native city in 1624 and enrolled in the local militia the following year. In 1625, he married Margrieta Kemings in the Reformed Church in Utrecht: their children were subsequently baptised there and Bijlert himself became of a member of the Reformed Church in 1630. In the same year, he joined the Guild of St. Luke (before that date he had probably been a member of the glass-painters' guild) and was appointed dean of the guild for the first time in 1632: between that year and 1670, he served repeatedly as either dean or warden of the guild. In 1634, he became a regent of the St. Job's Hospice and later, in 1642, principal of the charitable foundation. After the death of his first wife, in 1660,

Bijlert married Cecilia van Gelove, the widow of the housepainter and paint dealer Jelis van Thiel. The artist died in Utrecht in November 1671 and was buried in the Nicolaaskerk.

The artist's oeuvre comprises approximately two hundred works, of which only fourteen are dated. Utrecht burgomasters and nobles, such as the Strick van Linschoten family, can be counted among his patrons. In the early 1630s, works by his hand entered the collections of the Stadholder Frederik Hendrik and the Winter King, Frederick V. His pupils included Bertram de Fouchier, Abraham Willaerts, Ludolf de Jongh and Mattheus Wytmans<sup>iv</sup>.

P.M.

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<sup>i</sup> Dirck van Baburen, *The Procuress*, signed and dated 1622, on canvas, 101 x 107.3 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, M. Theresa B. Hopkins Fund, 50.2721.

<sup>ii</sup> Gerrit van Honthorst, *The Procuress*, signed and dated 1625, on panel, 71 x 104 cm, Centraal Museum, Utrecht, inv. no. 10786.

<sup>iii</sup> Jan van Bijlert, *The Matchmaker*, signed and dated 1626, on canvas, 77.7 x 110.2 cm, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Brunswick, inv. no. 188.

<sup>iv</sup> For the sources used in this biography see: Joaneath A. Spicer, Lynn Federle Orr, et. al, *Masters of Light Dutch Painters in Utrecht during the Golden Age*, exh. cat., Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore & the National Gallery, London 1997-1998, pp. 374-375 And Jonathan Bikker, et. al., *Dutch paintings of the seventeenth century in the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam Vol. I – Artists born between 1570 and 1600*, p. 67.