

JOHNNY VAN HAEFTEN

OLD MASTER PAINTINGS

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MELCHIOR DE HONDECOETER

(Utrecht 1636 – 1695 Amsterdam)

Ducks and other Birds in a Park-like Landscape



Signed, in the centre foreground: *M. D'Hondekoeter*

Oil on canvas, 67 x 53½ ins. (170 x 136 cm)

PROVENANCE

(Presumably) Henry Bentinck, 2nd Earl and 1st Duke of Portland (1682-1726), or his son, William, 2nd Duke of Portland (1709-1762), Bulstrode Park, Buckinghamshire, and by descent to the 2nd Duke's son

William Henry Cavendish Cavendish-Bentinck, 3rd Duke of Portland (1738-1809), at Bulstrode, where recorded in his posthumous inventory, compiled by Thomas Hill, 1809, no. 18 "Ducks. Hondekoeter", and by descent to his son,

William Henry, 4th Duke of Portland (1768-1854), by whom moved with other pictures from Bulstrode to Burlington House, London, in 1810 (*List of Pictures formerly at Bulstrode*, no. 14, there attributed to *Weynix*) and subsequently to Welbeck Abbey, Nottinghamshire (Catalogue of *circa* 1812, no. 11; Catalogue of 1861, no. 472), and by descent at Welbeck, where recorded on the Staircase Landing in the Oxford Wing by Charles Fairfax Murray (1894), to Lady Anne Cavendish-Bentinck (1916-2008)

The Harley Foundation, Welbeck Abbey, Nottinghamshire, 2018

LITERATURE

Gustav Waagen, *Galleries and Cabinets of Art in Great Britain*, supplement, 1857, pp. 512-516, recorded at Welbeck Abbey (*Ante-Room. Melchior Hondekoeter. 1 and 2. Two pictures with water-fowls and a family of hen and chickens belong to his good works*)

C. Fairfax Murray, *Catalogue of the Pictures belonging to His Grace the Duke of Portland, at Welbeck Abbey, and in London*, London, 1894, p. 78, no. 269.

R. W. Goulding, *Catalogue of the Pictures belonging to His Grace the Duke of Portland*, K. G., Cambridge, 1936, p. 104, no. 269.

Melchior de Hondecoeter is the most illustrious member of a family of painters of Flemish origin. He was born in Utrecht and trained there first with his father Gysbert de Hondecoeter (1604-53) and then with his uncle Jan Baptist Weenix (1621-1659). He worked in The Hague from around 1658 to 1663, before settling permanently in Amsterdam. His fame rests chiefly on his large-scale paintings of birds in park-like landscapes which became the height of fashion in the last quarter of the seventeenth century.

The painting of birds was something of a tradition in Melchior's family. His grandfather Gillis de Hondecoeter (c. 1580-1638) frequently painted fanciful landscapes filled with birds and animals akin to those by Roelandt Savery (1576-1639). So, too, did his father Gysbert de Hondecoeter, however, during the course of his career Gysbert developed a speciality in naturalistic, close up depictions of poultry and waterfowl in farmyards and landscapes. Initially, Melchior followed closely in his father's footsteps, painting similar scenes of domestic fowl in poultry yards in a subdued palette, but after his move to Amsterdam, he created a new type of bird painting, inspired by those of the earlier Flemish master Frans Snyders (1579-1657), whose works he collected. The paintings from this period, which are larger in scale and more decorative and colourful than before, feature domestic fowl alongside rare, foreign species in country parks enhanced by columns, fountains, urns, classical sculpture, and other architectural features.

This superb painting is a prime example of the latter type. Domestic fowl mingle with wild and exotic species of birds in the formal gardens of a grand country house. In the foreground, a crested duck swims with her ducklings in an ornamental pond, while her mate proudly patrols the bank. A waxwing perches on an old wooden fence nearby, while a pair of fancy pigeons surveys the scene from a vantage point atop a wall, adorned with terracotta urns, and a starling swoops down from above. In the adjoining walled garden, featuring a circular pool and fountain, appears a variety of ducks and geese – including a shoveler duck, a Muscovy duck and an Egyptian goose – together with a crowned crane and a turkey. A pair of brilliant pink flamingos can be glimpsed through a gateway beyond. A green teal on the wing and a swallow flying overhead further enliven the composition. The decorative quality of the scene arises not only from the natural beauty of the avian subjects but also from the grandiose format and the lavish record of naturalistic detail in the birds' plumage, the moss-covered tree trunk and the varied wild and cultivated plants and flowers. Both the abundance of exotic species and the stately setting evoke the country estates belonging to wealthy and titled members of Dutch society.

Hondecoeter's realistic portrayal of birds was unrivalled in seventeenth-century art. His biographer Arnold Houbraken claimed that Melchior had trained a rooster to hold a pose for him on request. Although this tale is unlikely to be true, there can be little doubt that he applied his remarkable powers of observation to the study of living birds, for he not only accurately described their physical characteristics, but also succeeded in capturing their attitudes and behaviour. However, somewhat surprisingly he does not seem to have produced preparatory drawings, rather he made *ad vivum* studies of animals and birds directly in oil on canvas. A few examples of such studies are known today.

According to Houbraken, Hondecoeter enjoyed great success with his large bird paintings and remained active well into old age. His paintings were collected by the wealthy regents and

merchants of Amsterdam, as well as by the Stadholder-King Willem III, who commissioned works from the artist for his palaces of Honselaersdijk and Het Loo and for his hunting lodge, Soestdijk. Indeed, many of his paintings were specifically designed as wall decoration for a particular room or setting. In the eighteenth century, de Hondecoeter's magnificent canvases became popular with English aristocrats who used them to adorn the walls of their grand country houses. None of the original ensembles of de Hondecoeter's work have survived but a good impression of their effect can be seen today in the Hondecoeter Room at Belton House, in Lincolnshire.

The present painting comes from the celebrated Portland Collection at Welbeck Abbey in Nottinghamshire. The picture was certainly in the collection by 1809 when it appeared in the inventory of paintings at Bulstrode Park, the ancestral home of the Bentinck family in Buckinghamshire, following the death of William Henry Cavendish Cavendish-Bentick, 3rd Duke of Portland (1738-1809). However, it had probably entered the collection at a much earlier date since the engraver and antiquarian George Vertue (1624-1756) recorded seeing paintings by Hondecoeter ("peeces of Hondecooter of fowles dead beards &c...")ⁱ on a visit to Bulstrode Park around 1749. There are further mentions of paintings by Hondecoeter in *Notes on Pictures at Bulstrode* by John Achardⁱⁱ, who was a tutor to the sons of William Bentinck (1709-1762), 2nd Duke of Portland and his wife, Lady Margaret Cavendish Harley (1715-1762). The picture subsequently formed part of a group of paintings removed from Bulstrode to the 4th Duke's London residence, Burlington House, before being relocated to Welbeck Abbey, the family house in Nottinghamshire.

BIOGRAPHY

According to the artist's biographer Arnold Houbrakenⁱⁱⁱ, Melchior de Hondecoeter was born in Utrecht in 1636. A representative of the fourth generation of a family of painters originally from Flanders, Melchior was the grandson of the landscape painter Gillis de Hondecoeter (c. 1580-1638) and son of the landscape and bird painter Gysbert de Hondecoeter (1604-53). He studied first with his father and then with his uncle Jan Baptist Weenix (1621-1659), a painter of Italianate landscapes and still lifes of dead game. After the death of his uncle in 1659, he moved to The Hague and joined the local painters' confraternity, *Pictura*. He served as a *hoofdman* of *Pictura* in 1662. In 1663, he moved to Amsterdam where he married Suzanna Tradel. In 1668, he was granted citizenship of Amsterdam. He continued to reside there on the Lauriergracht until his death on 3 April, 1695.

Melchior de Hondecoeter painted live birds, still lifes with dead birds and game-pieces, including some *trompe l'oeils*.

ⁱ Vertue Note Books, Volume V, in *Walpole Society*, 1937-1938, vol.26, p. 70 [V.46,B.M 51] "at Bulstrode Duke of Portlands in the Hall. Several large peeces of Huntings Doggs Staggs, &c. finely painted. By De Vos. &c. next room peeces of Hondecooter of fowles dead beards &c-..."

ⁱⁱ John Achard, *Notes on Pictures at Bulstrode*, "A Piece of Fowls by Ondercooten".

ⁱⁱⁱ Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh*, (1718-21), vol. iii, p. 68.