

# JOHNNY VAN HAEFTEN

OLD MASTER PAINTINGS

CS0409

## JOHANNES LEEMANS

(c. 1633 – The Hague - 1688)

A Trompe L'Oeil Still Life with a Bird Cage and  
Hunting Equipment

Signed and dated: *J. Leemans/ 1677*

Oil on canvas, 32 ¼ x 43 ¼ ins. (82.1 x 110 cm)



## PROVENANCE

Anonymous sale, Sotheby's, Amsterdam, 10 May 2005, lot 26

With David Koetser, Zurich, and Rafael Valls, London, 2006

Private Collection, Germany, 2007-2022

## NOTE

The central part of this still life, with the birdcage, hunting horn and bag, is identical to that of a signed work, dated 1669, recorded with Leger Galleries, London in 1962

Johannes Leemans and his brother Anthonie (1631-before 1673) specialised in trompe l'oeil paintings of hunting gear, a genre that found a ready audience in The Hague. Johannes spent his entire life in The Hague, where he was also active as a wine merchant. Dated examples of his work are extant from 1664 to 1686, two years before his death.

This signed and dated painting of 1677 is highly characteristic of Leemans's still-life paintings. Seemingly hanging from nails driven into a bare wall is a collection of hunting accessories. A small bird in a cage appears at the centre, beneath which hang a powder horn, a leather strap, a net bag, and a white hunting bag, containing wooden stakes and a length of folded net. Appearing to left and right are various types of decoy whistles, suspended from coloured ribbons, and three falcons' hoods, attached to a leather strap. The various textures of wood, leather, horn, and feather are carefully reproduced, and the warm browns and tans, enlivened by accents of bright blue and red, contrast with the cool grey of the wall. A raking light entering from the left creates areas of shadow on the wall, enhancing the illusion that the hunting paraphernalia, which is painted life-size, has entered fully into the viewer's realm.

Around the middle of the seventeenth century, a fashion for game still lifes developed in The Dutch Republic. Within this category, illusionistic still lifes of dead game and hunting gear became a specialist genre practised by a few artists. Such paintings were especially popular in the old, aristocratic city of The Hague, where the Stadholder had his residence and court. The Leemans brothers were not the only specialists in this field; in 1661, Melchior d'Hondecoeter (1636-1695), the famous painter of birds, hung a painting of this type in the hall of the painters' guild, Confrérie Pictura, and Jacobus Biltius (1633-1681) also produced trompe l'oeil paintings of dead game birds during his time in The Hague. After 1654, Johannes's brother Anthonie pursued his career in Amsterdam, but there was evidently sufficient demand in The Hague for Johannes to devote himself exclusively to trompe l'oeil depictions of hunting gear for the rest of his life.

That the vogue for hunting still lifes of various types flourished in mid-seventeenth-century Holland had much to do with contemporary associations between hunting and the aristocracy. Hunting had traditionally been the preserve of the nobility and its practices were carefully regulated by the court in The Hague. The pursuit of most game was limited to the aristocracy and other high officers of state, with the sport of falconry regarded as the most exclusive noble privilege. Thus, Leemans's inclusion here of three falcons' hoods and other equipment associated with falconry was likely intended to appeal to the tastes of an elite clientele. Also, ornate hunting accessories, such as the white silken hunting bag, trimmed with blue braid, that occupies a central position in the composition, imply that the hunter was a man of wealth and refinement.

Most of Leemans's paintings adhere to a similar scheme although he varied the objects depicted from one composition to another. It is noteworthy, however, that the central part of this still life, with the birdcage, powder horn and bag, is identical to that of a signed and dated work of 1669, which was with the Leger Galleries, in London, in 1962.

## BIOGRAPHY

The son of Anthonie Leemans and Anneken Jans van der Poel, Johannes Leemans was born in The Hague. The precise date of his birth is not known, however, from a document dated in Amsterdam on 5 May 1671, in which Leemans states his age to be thirty-eight, it can be deduced that he was born in around 1633. His older brother Anthonie Leemans (1630-in or before 1673) also became a painter and his sister, Sara, married the painter Sijmen Roodt in 1648. Apart from a short stay in Amsterdam around 1671, he spent his entire life in The Hague. In 1673, he rented a house and a garden on the Zuidwal, and a year later he rented a house on the Buitensingel, above a glassworks. By 1681, he appears to have been living in a house on the east side of Boeckhorststraat, and the following year, he bought a house in the same street for 2400 guilders. As well as being a painter, Johannes Leemans was, like his father, active in the wine trade. It is likely that Johannes took over the wine business from his father as, especially towards the end of his life, he was more often referred to as a wine merchant than as a painter. He seems to have prospered since a few years later, in 1684, he bought another house and a yard on the west side of Boekhorststraat, for 2900 guilders. He may also have been involved in the real estate business for a year later, he bought another yard with a shed on it, also on Boekhorststraat, for 1200 guilders.

Both Anthonie and Johannes Leemans are best known for their trompe l'oeil paintings of hunting equipment and occasionally dead game. The more versatile of the two, Anthonie also painted *vanitas* still lifes, fruit pieces and genre scenes. Aggressive behaviour seems to have run in the family for both brothers had a reputation for violence. On 19 September 1654, Anthonie was charged with a criminal offence for stabbing a man in the neck. Shortly afterwards, following his marriage that same year, he relocated from The Hague to Amsterdam, possibly in an attempt to escape justice. Some years later, around 1665, Johannes became involved in a manslaughter case, and in 1687, his own son, Anthony, testified that he had behaved aggressively in his house and upset his wife. He died in The Hague and was buried there on 19 July 1688.