

# JOHNNY VAN HAEFTEN

OLD MASTER PAINTINGS

CS0420

## JUDITH LEYSTER

(Haarlem 1609 – 1660 Heemstede)

The Musicians, *circa* 1628

Signed in monogram (JL in ligature with star), lower right,  
on the chair leg.

Oil on panel, 13½ x 9 ins. (34.3 x 22.9 cm)



## PROVENANCE

Sale (possibly Miss Dickenson), Christie's, 23 April 1920, lot 69; sold to Pawsey & Payne for 240 gns<sup>i</sup>

With Goudstikker, Amsterdam

Siegbert Stern, Neubabelsberg

James Vigevena Galleries<sup>ii</sup>, Los Angeles,

Consigned on 2 October 1943 to Schaeffer for £1,200

With Schaeffer & Brandt Gallery, New York (inv. no. 906)

Consigned on 29 November 1944 to Knoedler by the above, for \$1800

Estate of Walter G. Danielson, Los Angeles<sup>iii</sup>

Sale, Bonhams & Butterfield, San Francisco, 15 November 2006, lot 4022 (as Dirck Hals)

With Adam Williams, New York, & Johnny Van Haeften Limited, London, 2006

Private collection, the Netherlands, 2006-2023

## LITERATURE

Allan Ellenius, "Reminder for a Young Gentleman: Notes on a Seventeenth-Century Vanitas", *Figura: Idea and Form*, New Series I, 1959, pp. 120-121, illus. p. 121.

Frima Fox Hofrichter, *Judith Leyster: a Woman Painter in Holland's Golden Age*, Doornspijk, 1989, p. 70, no. B6, pl. 95.

Pieter Biesboer, *et. al.*, *Satire en Vermaak. Het genrestuk in de tijd van Hals*, Zwolle/Haarlem, 2003, p. 23-24, 124-127, ill. Pl. 15, fig. 23.1.

## NOTE

We are grateful to Dr. Frima Fox Hofrichter for her help in cataloguing this painting and for confirming the attribution to Judith Leyster following first-hand inspection. We are delighted to be able to include her revised catalogue entry on the painting here.

This small painting by Judith Leyster (1609-1660), affirms both the delight in music and the unease in considering one's mortality that typified life in the Low Countries in the early part of the seventeenth century. In 1633, Judith Leyster became the first female member of the Guild of St. Luke of Haarlem—The Painters' Guild. She was primarily a genre painter but also executed still-life, and portrait paintings with an oeuvre of about 25 paintings. Only a few of her paintings are dated; and those date within the limited span of 1629-1635. Yet many works are signed with her monogram, a visual pun on her last name—Leyster, or Leading Star. It is a conjoined J, L and a star extending from the L to the right, as seen on the bench leg in *The Musicians*.

Men and women playing musical instruments, often with joy was a common theme in Leyster's paintings. Here, two young men are playing musical instruments across a table laden with many curious objects set in a rather stark room, shown with only a beamed ceiling and a window at the left, shedding light and shadow on the figures. A bench sits perpendicular to the table, with a cloak draped over it. Those tabletop objects are the key to understanding that the painting is a *vanitas*, a reminder to the viewer of the shortness of life, and to prepare (by having a good and moral life) for death and its judgement. The objects include an overturned lute, a violin, 2 worn closed books and an open one (as that one is set on the lute, it is probably a music book), burning coals in a clay brazier, a candle which has already burned low and most significantly, a human skull with a clay pipe rather irreverently stuck through it.

The skull is the most overt symbol of death; the burning coals will soon go out; there is no longer smoke from the pipe and the wick of the candle has already burned out. Thus, the objects are all linked by their finality. And music too, besides its connection to pleasure, was a powerful *vanitas* symbol, as life can be as fleeting as the musical notes, which cannot be contained. Music is gone as soon as it is heard.

*Vanitas* paintings of all types became emblematic to the culture and times of The Netherlands as the 1620s and 1630s were witness to the widespread yet arbitrary nature of death from one of "the worst periods of plague in the 17<sup>th</sup> century."<sup>iv</sup> Thus death was a constant in their lives.

The young men have often been described, on the right, as one who is standing, dressed in elaborately colorful clothing, and the other, facing us,

looking up to our left, is seated, wearing a fashionably oversized hat. But a careful inspection reveals that the lower part of the “seated” figure is not visible, nor is a chair. He isn’t actually “seated.” Perhaps he is a boy, not a man, standing behind the legs of the table (although this arrangement, too, is difficult to fully comprehend).<sup>v</sup> Leyster has placed an enormous hat on at least one other boy in her paintings (National Gallery, London), so it is not an indication of adulthood; and one sees this juxtaposition of a young boy wearing a huge hat also in the work of her husband, Jan Miense Molenaer (c.1610-1668). Notable is the dramatic flair of the long, red feather topped by a smaller blue one on the standing man’s hat, nearly draping down his back. His bright green, slashed doublet costume is similar to that seen on the lute player in her *Serenade* (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam) of 1629.

This figure has been related to some in works by Dirck Hals (1596-1656), the younger brother of the more famous Frans Hals (c.1585-1664).<sup>vi</sup> The costume of the standing man, his hat, his pose, our view of the placement of the flute and the position of the violin player are remarkably similar (fig.1) to figures in Dirck Hals’s paintings and drawings from about 1627.<sup>vii</sup>

The influence of Dirck Hals, the style of the men’s clothing and the spatial anomalies in the painting suggest *The Musicians* is an early work. Leyster’s earliest dated paintings are both from 1629 (both Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam). Yet Samuel Ampzing in his *Description and Praise of the City of Haarlem in Holland*, of 1628 (but written 1626/27), already mentions the teenage Judith Leyster as a painter.<sup>viii</sup> *The Musicians* may have been painted earlier than the dated works we have. I propose a date of c.1628.<sup>ix</sup>

In this early work, we already find evidence of her mastery of surface design, with the play of line and angles. The strong diagonal fold of the boy’s hat is parallel to the line of his violin’s bow, which is parallel to the pipe through the skull which also parallels the line of buttons on the folded cloak lying on the bench. This deliberate design of parallel patterns is juxtaposed on the right side, with the strong verticals of the pleats in the leggings of the standing man, his slashed doublet (and the very act of his standing). This verticality is then capped by the eye-catching sweep of the brilliant red feather on the black hat. Judith Leyster will continue this play of design elements with the placement of musical instruments and often deftly angled hats throughout her career.

Dr. Frima Fox Hofrichter

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<sup>i</sup> The painting is listed with other “Different Properties” and no name of the owner is provided. An annotated auction catalogue at the Frick Art Reference Library indicates the price was 252 guineas. This was perhaps an error and should have read £252, as £252 equals 240 guineas.

<sup>ii</sup> Vigeveno was the son-in-law of Siegbert Stern. This is significant as many paintings from Stern’s large collection have been restituted to his heirs. This painting had been investigated, but as *The Musicians* went from Stern to his son-in-law, there was no evidence that it had been confiscated in the 1930s nor the subject of a forced sale and was not eligible for restitution.

<sup>iii</sup> Walter G. Danielson was the Consul General of Sweden in Los Angeles from 1937-1976.

<sup>iv</sup> Ronald Rommes, “Plague in Northwestern Europe. The Dutch Experience, 1350-1670,” p.53 in *Population and History*, Italy, 2015 <https://popolazioneestoria.it/article/view/705>. The Bubonic Plague of c. 1665 may have been greater, but the high death rate in the 1620s and 30s was from both the plague and related dysentery. The death rate was recorded primarily in cities and not in the rural countryside, and therefore was much higher than known. p.53, 54.

<sup>v</sup> Leyster’s mastery of foreshortening seems to have been problematic throughout her career. But this seems only apparent with human figures, not with still-life elements. This may be the result of not participating in life-study classes, as a young woman artist. There were no rules forbidding her, but she may not have been included (or didn’t include herself) for reasons of propriety. The “missing” lower half of the boy is one of the reasons for suggesting an early date. Even a few years later, she addresses the technique of foreshortening figures, largely by avoiding it.

<sup>vi</sup> A discussion of the influence of Dirck Hals on Leyster can be found in Pieter Biesboer, “Judith Leyster: Painter of ‘Modern Figures’” pp. 80-82, in *Judith Leyster, A Dutch Master and her World*, ed. by P. Biesboer and J. Welu, Haarlem/Worcester, 1993 and in Cynthia von Bogendorf Rupprath, “De muzen van het vroeg 17de-eeuwse Haarlem bronnen van genremotieven,” pp. 23-25, in *Satire en Vermaak*, ed. by P. Biesboer and M. Sitt, Haarlem, 2003.

<sup>vii</sup> Von Bogendorf Rupprath, pp.23-24, uses the example of a musical group by Dirck Hals (Pushkin Museum, Moscow, fig 1.), c. 1627, where his most left seated man and his most right standing man are in strikingly similar poses and costumes as in *The Musicians*.

<sup>viii</sup> Samuel Ampzing, *Beschrijvinge ende Lof der Stad Haerlem in Holland* Haarlem, 1628, p. 370, includes her in a marginal passage. The book was first published in 1621 and then greatly revised in 1626/27 and then published in 1628.

<sup>ix</sup> Von Bogendorf Rupprath, pp.124-127, suggests that a monogrammed, but undated and simpler version of the painting (Cat. 23), may be a study for this one, and hence painted earlier. That painting’s suggested date is c.1629, p. 124 and then c.1630, p. 127. A dendrochronological study was taken by Peter Klein (p. 127, note 10), who suggested that the panel could have been ready by 1630. Our painting, the presumably later one, is dated in the same catalog as c.1628-29, p. 24, and c.1629, p.126. The various dates are all close to each other, yet at times inconsistent. As Leyster’s range of dated works is 1629-1635, discerning dates for the undated works is especially difficult as the span is so limited. We concur that it is an early work by Leyster.