

JOHNNY VAN HAEFTEN

OLD MASTER PAINTINGS

CS0400

JOHANN ROTTENHAMMER

(Munich 1564/5 – 1625 Augsburg)

and

JAN BRUEGHEL the Elder

(Brussels 1568 – 1625 Antwerp)



The Feast of the Gods

Signed and dated, lower left: *Gio Rottenhammer 1602/F. in Venetia*

Oil on copper, 12¼ x 16 ins. (31.2 x 40.5 cm)

PROVENANCE

Possibly *the mensi gli dei* acquired for 500 *scudi* from Hans Rottenhammer by the Emperor Rudolf II (1562-1612), Prague

Probably Antoine-Joseph-François de Lacs, Marquis d'Arcambal (1728-1790)

His sale, Paris, 22 February 1776, lot 14 for 751 *livres* to Jacques Langlier (as "*Le Festin des Dieux; composition de plus de cinquante Figures, toute variées de forme & d'attitude: ce Tableau est transparent de couleur, & des plus agréable; le fond est terminé par un Paysage: on y Remarque le pinceau précieux de Breughel, dans les details, & le dessin savant de Rothenamer, dans le sujet. Ces deux Maîtres ont fait de ce Tableau un morceau intéressant & capital*")

With Jacques Langlier (1732-1814), Paris

Probably Renaud-César, Duc de Choiseul-Praslin (1735-1791), Paris

His posthumous sale, Paris, Paillet, 18 February 1793, lot 72, for 1121 *livres* to Alexandre-Joseph Paillet (as Brueghel, Rottenhammer and Van Kessel): "*Un tableau de la plus riche ordonnance & du plus précieux detail dans toute ses parties; il représente un sujet de festin des Dieux dans un site de paysage, composé des bosquets agréables. Cette partie, peinte par Breughels de Velours, est de la plus étonnante finesse pour l'exécution. Tous les accessoires de fleurs, coquillages, & les mets qui couvrent la table, sont de la main de Van Kessel. Ces trois Artistes ont travaillé d'un accord parfait, pour produire un ouvrage aussi éclatant que précieux. Parmi les différens groupes de ce morceau, composé de cinquante figures, on Remarque Silène yvre sur la droite, & nombre d'enfans qui semblent avoir pris grande part au repas. Nous citons cet Ouvrage comme un des plus riches & des plus achevés de J. Rothenamer*".

Maurice Abram de Zincoort (1836-1908), and then by descent until sold;

Anon sale, Paris, Christie's, 21 June 2012, lot 15

With Johnny Van Haeften Limited, London, 2012

Private collection, England, 2012-2022.

LITERATURE

Possibly C. Ridolfi, *Maraviglie dell'arte*, Venice, 1648, (1837 edition, Padua) vol. II, p. 266

Possibly H. Borgreff, in *Hans Rottenhammer: begehrt, vergessen, neu entdeckt*, exh. cat. Lemgo and Prague, Munich 2008, pp. 141-42, under no. 44.

In a forest clearing, gods and goddesses are seated round a table, laden with fine glass- and metal-ware and plates of sumptuous fare. The feast is in full swing: a wine cooler and tall jugs of refreshments stand by the table, while fruit and other delectable foodstuffs are strewn about the grass. At the left-hand end of the table, Apollo with his Muses serenades the assembled company with sweet melodies. Minerva, seated with her back to the viewer, her plumed helmet lying on the ground, and Mercury sitting opposite in his winged cap, listen attentively. By contrast to this civilised entertainment, at the other end of the table, an intoxicated Bacchus presides over an orgy of decadence. Wearing a crown of vine leaves and clutching a bunch of grapes, he is supported on either side by satyrs. To his right, a goddess fondles the ear of a satyr, who responds with a lascivious look, while behind him satyrs play raucous tunes on panpipes. In the foreground, a group of putti and satyr children play with a black billy-goat, a symbol of lust, while others display the unsavoury consequences of overindulgence. In the background, maenads and satyrs dance around a cauldron in a drunken revelry, or cavort with one another in rocky caves. Putti bearing garlands of flowers fly overhead.

Johann Rottenhammer, a native of Munich, left for Italy in 1589. After a stay in Venice, he made his way to Rome around 1593 or 1594. There, according to Karel van Mander, he “did paintings on metal plates, in the same manner as the artists of the Netherlands do. He did not paint as an ordinary painter; he made excellent compositions”ⁱ. In Rome, he also met the Flemings Jan Brueghel the Elder and Paul Bril (1554-1626), with whom he collaborated by providing figures in their landscape paintings. His joint ventures with Brueghel are well attested by the frequent references to the German artist in Brueghel’s correspondence with his great patron Cardinal Federico Borromeo and are also mentioned by Rottenhammer’s first biographer Carlo Ridolfiⁱⁱ. Remarkably, their fruitful partnership continued even after Rottenhammer’s return to Venice in 1595 and Brueghel’s to Antwerp in 1596. This type of long-distance collaboration was not an uncommon phenomenon at that time and was largely made possible by the practice of painting on small copper plates which were both robust and easy to transport.

This ambitiously conceived painting is a superlative example of the two painters’ collaborative achievements. The sensuous Italianate figures, which reflect the influence of the great sixteenth-century Venetian masters, are by Rottenhammer, while the delicately rendered landscape and lavish still-life elements are by Brueghel. The former’s smooth, refined technique is clearly distinguishable from the minutely textured brushwork of his colleague, nevertheless, the two hands are skilfully integrated into a unified and harmonious composition. A careful examination of the paint surface, in particular the areas where one layer of paint overlaps the contours of another, seems to indicate that the figures were painted before the landscape and still-life elements: indeed, the glass carafe of wine standing on the table at the centre of the composition could only have been added after Rottenhammer had completed his figures. That this was his usual practice is confirmed by Ridolfi, who reported that in his collaborative ventures with Bril, Rottenhammer first painted the figures in Venice and then sent the panels to Rome where Bril added the landscapesⁱⁱⁱ. It must be noted, however, that there are also a few documented cases in which the reverse was true^{iv}.

The Banquet of the Gods was a highly popular theme with Mannerist painters in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. Various mythological stories - including *The Wedding of Bacchus and Ariadne*, *The Wedding of Peleus and Thetis*, *The Feast of Acheloüs* and *The Feast of Odysseus and Calypso* - provided the pretext for such scenes, but its primary appeal lay in the opportunity it offered for the depiction of a large gathering of nude figures in a variety of poses, ranged around a sumptuous banquet table. The subject naturally had a strong sensory allure, in addition to which it could assume a variety of meanings. This painting has traditionally been entitled *The Wedding of Bacchus and Ariadne*, but it is by no means certain whether this is the case, since the main protagonists of that occasion are not readily identifiable here. However, what is abundantly clear is that an allegorical interpretation was intended by the juxtaposition of the group with Apollo at one end of the table, with that of Bacchus and his retinue at the other. In paintings of this period, mythological tales, like stories from the Bible, were invariably given moralistic interpretations and it was not unusual to represent, by way of contrast, scenes of impropriety as an allusion to the path of virtuousness. As Karel van Mander (1548-1606) explained in his 1604 interpretation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, buried within the seemingly superficial narratives was a wealth of general wisdom and instruction which could inspire moral improvement and the pursuit of a virtuous life^v.

Here, the complex iconography seems to suggest an allegory of vice and virtue, or more specifically, the conflict between two opposing aspects of man's nature, namely the intellect and the emotions. To the humanist way of thinking, the passionate spirit of Bacchus stood in direct contrast to the sober clarity of reason, personified by Apollo. Here, the god, with his lyre and laurel crown, his attributes, is portrayed as the patron of poetry and music and leader of the Muses. He is supported on his right by Minerva, the goddess of wisdom, who like Apollo, is a benevolent and civilising influence and, on his left, by Mercury, the personification of eloquence and reason. These models of virtue avert their eyes from the licentious and overindulgent behaviour of Bacchus and his acolytes, representing the darker, more passionate side of man, while the sick children and over-ripe fruit lying on the ground in the right-hand corner leave us in no doubt as to the cautionary nature of this tale.

In his biography of Rottenhammer, written just twenty-three years after the artist's death, Ridolfi mentioned that Rottenhammer had painted a *Feast of the Gods* for the Emperor Rudolf II, "with amphorae and other precious things for which he received 500 scudi and much recognition"^{vi}. Until the recent re-emergence of this painting from an old French collection, it has often been assumed that the painting to which Ridolfi referred was *The Banquet of the Gods*, dated 1600, in the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg (Fig. 1). Ridolfi's description is, however, a far better match for the present work, with its prominently featured wine jugs and lavish array of costly glass, porcelain and metal vessels, than it is for the St. Petersburg painting, in which such items are not in evidence. Furthermore, the picture's date of 1602 raises the possibility that Brueghel himself could have presented it to the Emperor on his visit to Prague in 1604. Although this last suggestion is speculative, the subject matter of the picture, as well as its extraordinarily high quality and refined execution, all support the hypothesis that it was painted for Rudolf II, one of the greatest patrons and collectors of his day and a particular lover of erotic themes and intellectual mythologies.

After the death of Rudolf in January 1612, his vast collections of paintings, sculptures and other works of art did not remain intact for long. His successor, Matthias, moved his court and parts of the collection back to Vienna, while other paintings went to Archduke Albrecht in the Netherlands. During the 1620s and 1630s some works were sold and what remained in Prague became booty to the Swedish troops who sacked Hradčany in 1648. In these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that this painting, along with many others, disappeared from sight. Nevertheless, the composition was known through copies, the best of which is today in the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg (Fig. 2) and a version of the subject by Hendrick van Balen and Jan Brueghel the Elder, now in Museum der Bildenden Künste, in Leipzig (Fig. 3).



Fig. 1. Johann Rottenhammer and Jan Brueghel the Elder, *The Feast of the Gods: the Wedding of Neptune and Amphitrite*, signed and dated: 1600 H. Rotttnhamer/F.I. Venetia, on copper, 34 x 45 cm, State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, inv. No. 688.



Fig. 2. Copy after Rottenhammer and Brueghel, *The Feast of the Gods*, copper, 35 x 46 cm, State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.



Fig. 3. Hendrick van Balen and Jan Brueghel the Elder, *The Feast of the Gods*, c. 1605-06, on copper, 33.5 x 46 cm, Leipzig, Museum der Bildenden Künste, inv. No. 1717.

BIOGRAPHIES

Johann (also known as Hans) Rottenhammer was born in Munich in 1564, where his father was an equerry at the court of Duke William V. He received his training from the court painter Hans Donauer (1521-1596), before making the customary trip to Italy in 1588. The documentary evidence indicates that he was in Treviso in 1589 and in Venice by 1591. In 1593 or 1594, he went to Rome, where he lived for about a year and a half, before returning to Venice in September 1595^{vii}. In 1596, he married a Venetian woman, Elisabetta da Fabris. Rottenhammer's reputation in Venice must have been considerable, for already in the early 1600s prints after his compositions were being engraved by the likes of Lucas Kilian (1569-1637) and Raphael Sadeler I (1560-1632). His paintings – mostly cabinet pictures on copper – were collected by the grandest families, including the Gonzaga of Mantua and the Emperor Rudolf II. Towards the end of his stay in Venice, Rottenhammer received a prestigious commission for an altarpiece of the *Annunciation (in situ)* for the German church of S. Bartolomeo al Rialto, to replace Dürer's *Virgin of the Rose Garlands*, which Rudolf had acquired for his own collection in Prague. In 1606, Rottenhammer returned to Augsburg, where he immediately received major commissions, mostly for large-scale altarpieces and decorative schemes. He remained in Augsburg for the rest of his life, but despite his reputation and popularity, ran up huge debts, chiefly owing to over-indulgence in drink. Rottenhammer died impoverished in 1625.

Jan Brueghel the Elder was born in Brussels in 1568, the second son of Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c. 1529/30 – 1569) and Maeycken Coecke van Aelst. His father died shortly after his birth and it is said that his earliest artistic training was with his maternal grandmother, Mayken Verhulst, a miniaturist and watercolour painter. According to the biographer and art theorist, Karel van Mander, he was taught to paint in oils by Pieter Gotekindt in Antwerp. Brueghel travelled to Italy between 1589 and 1596 and, in Rome, met Cardinal Federico Borromeo, who became his most important patron and with whom he conducted an extensive correspondence for the rest of his life. Upon his return to Antwerp, he joined the St. Luke's Guild and became dean in 1601. He married Isabella de Jode in 1599 and, in 1601, their first son, Jan Brueghel the Younger (1601-1678) was born. His wife died suddenly in 1603, perhaps at the birth of their daughter, Paschasia. In 1604, he travelled to Prague, returning to Antwerp later that year. The following year he married Catharina van Marienberghe who bore him eight children. In 1606, he was in Nuremburg and the same year he was appointed court painter to the Archdukes Albert and Isabella in Brussels. Around 1613, he visited Holland on a diplomatic mission in the company of Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) and Hendrick van Balen (1575-1632). In 1625, Jan Brueghel died from cholera during an epidemic which also claimed the lives of three of his children.

ⁱ Karel van Mander, *Het Schilder-boeck*, Haarlem, 1604, 1936 ed., p. 409.

ⁱⁱ C. Ridolfi, *Meraviglie dell'arte*, Venice, 1648, ii, p. 76.

ⁱⁱⁱ See: Luuk Pijl, "Paintings by Paul Brill in collaboration with Rottenhammer, Elsheimer and Rubens", *Burlington Magazine*, No. 1147, 1998, p. 660, note 7.

^{iv} For example, Rottenhammer's painting of a *Winter Landscape with Angels scattering Flowers* (Pinacoteca Ambrosiana, Milan). Cardinal Federico Borromeo commissioned the picture from Brueghel when the artist was in Antwerp. He painted the landscape there and sent the copper panel to Milan, where Rottenhammer added the figures. Then it was returned to Antwerp so that Brueghel could add the finishing touches of the angels' flowers. See: Michael K. Komanecky, *Copper as Canvas: two centuries of masterpiece paintings on*

copper, Phoenix Art Museum, 199, p. 157, note 28.

^v Karel van Mander, *Voor-reden op de Wtleggingh*, fol. III and IV vso.

^{vi} See: H. Borgreff, *Hans Rottenhammer: begehrt, vergessen, neu entdeckt*, exh. cat. Lemgo and Prague, Munich 2008, p. 142.

^{vii} For new documentation regarding Rottenhammer's early years in Italy see: Michel Hochmann, "Hans Rottenhammer and Pietro Mera: two northern artists in Rome and Venice", *The Burlington Magazine*, CXLV, September 2003, pp. 641-645.