

# JOHNNY VAN HAEFTEN

OLD MASTER PAINTINGS

VP5020

**DAVID TENIERS the Younger**  
(Antwerp 1610 – 1690 Brussels)

An Alchemist in his Workshop.

Signed, lower right: *D. TENIERS. FEC*  
Oil on canvas, 24 x 30¼ (61 x 76.5 cm)



## PROVENANCE

Philipp Merian (1773-1848), Basle

Merian-Wieland, Basle, from 1806

By descent to Johann Jakob Bachofen-Merian (1788-1876), Switzerland

By descent to Adèle Passavant-Bachofen (1823-1883), Switzerland, from 1877

By descent, Passavant-Allemandi, Switzerland, 1933

By descent, private collection, Switzerland, until 2022

Anon sale, Koller Auktionen AG, Zurich, 1 April, 2022, Lot 3032

## LITERATURE

C. Schultze & G. Wolf, *Partie des tableaux de la collection de Mr. Bacofen*, Basle, [1877], no. 33.

## NOTE

Dr. Margret Klinge dates this painting to the early 1660s, when the painter was working in Brussels.

Together with Adriaen Brouwer (1605/6-1638), David Teniers the Younger was the most important seventeenth-century Flemish painter of low-life genre scenes. Unlike Brouwer, however, who was short-lived and whose oeuvre is small, Teniers produced an extensive body of work in a career spanning some fifty years. He was enormously versatile: genre subjects were his speciality, but he also painted religious and mythological scenes, landscapes, allegories, portraits, gallery paintings and monkey satires.

From relatively humble beginnings, Teniers rose rapidly to the top of his profession. In 1633, he became a master in the Antwerp guild of St. Luke and, by 1645, was dean of the guild. Both his marriage in 1637 to Anna Brueghel, the seventeen-year-old daughter of Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568-1625), and his association with Rubens (1577-1640), who was a witness at their wedding, aided his ascent. From the late 1640s, he enjoyed the patronage of prominent individuals, including the Archbishop of Bruges and the art-loving Archduke Leopold Wilhelm, Governor of the Southern Netherlands, to whom he became court painter in 1651. His success brought him both wealth and status, and his paintings remained popular long after his death.

In this painting, which has recently emerged on the market after some two hundred years in an old Swiss collection, Teniers addressed one of his favourite subjects. A grey-haired alchemist, wearing a fur-trimmed hat and leather jacket, is depicted amidst the clutter of his laboratory. He stands before a blazing fire, stirring something in a small earthenware vessel, while reading intently from a small book. The contents of a lidded pot is being heated over the flames; another earthenware vessel, a brazier, and a pair of bellows stand nearby. The spacious, light-filled room is filled with a plethora of pots, cauldrons, bottles, flasks and crucibles, and assorted metal utensils and quasi-scientific apparatus, crowded on shelves, or lying about on the floor. A stuffed fish hangs from the ceiling. On a table in the right-hand corner is a collection of glazed pots and jars, a box, some papers, weighing scales and an hourglass. On the floor at its base are piles of books and a small brown and white spaniel, curled up asleep. A man pokes his head enquiringly through an open hatch above. In the left-hand corner, spilling from an overturned wicker basket are blocks of some black mineral substance, or perhaps charcoal. Towards the back of the room, four assistants stoke a furnace and perform alchemical experiments.

The alchemist was a popular theme in Netherlandish literature and low-life genre prints and paintings. As in so many other genre themes, the pictorial tradition can trace its roots to a print after Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c. 1525/30-1569) depicting an alchemist wasting his money in the vain pursuit of a formula for transmuting base metals into gold (fig. 1). Published in 1558, it shows a chaotic scene of an alchemist in his workshop with a scholar pointing to a page in a book, inscribed with the pun, *Alge Mist* (Everything Wasted). This unmistakable paradigm of human folly no doubt provided the source of inspiration for many of the seventeenth-century representations of the subject in Netherlandish art. Similar ideas are expressed in numerous emblem books of the period, featuring alchemists as figures of derision and scorn. Typical of these is an example from Florentius Schoonhovius's *Emblemata*<sup>i</sup>, showing an alchemist stoking a fire, with a Latin inscription warning, "While I pursue uncertainty with certain means, I convert everything into smoke and ash".



Fig. 1. Hieronymus Cock, after Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Alchemist*, engraving.

Teniers's first representations of alchemists began in the 1640s, but he returned to the subject at least a dozen times during the course of his career<sup>ii</sup>. This painting, dating from the early 1660s, stands out as one of his best renditions of the theme. Fellow Flemish artist David Ryckaert III (1612-1661) soon followed Teniers's example, taking up the theme on several occasions. In the second half of the seventeenth century, depictions of alchemists in their workshops became popular with a number of Dutch painters, among them Frans van Mieris (1635-1681), Jan Steen (1626-1679), Adriaen van Ostade (1610-1685), Cornelis Bega (1632-1664) and Thomas Wijck (c. 1616-1677).

It is not hard to see why Teniers was attracted to the alchemist theme as it gave him the opportunity to depict an imaginary interior filled with an array of curious objects, while at the same time conveying a moralising message in humorous terms. Although Teniers's alchemist here is portrayed much more sympathetically than those in most sixteenth-century prints, such elements as the animal skull hanging on the wall, the snuffed-out candle above the alchemist's head, and the various overturned vessels would nevertheless have been recognised by contemporary viewers as *vanitas* symbols, pointing to the sheer futility of his efforts. Above all, Teniers saw the alchemist's laboratory as a chance to demonstrate his prowess as a painter of still-life objects. Thanks to the fine state of preservation in which this painting has come down to us we can today fully appreciate his harmonious palette, fluid effects of light, and the delicate brushwork with which he describes the various textures and surfaces of assorted earthenware and glass vessels.

Other good examples of paintings of alchemists by Teniers may be found in The Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis, in The Hague<sup>iii</sup>, the Philadelphia Museum of Art<sup>iv</sup>, the Museo del Prado, Madrid<sup>v</sup>, and in the collection of H. M. the Queen, Buckingham Palace, London<sup>vi</sup>.

## BIOGRAPHY

Baptised in Antwerp on 15 December 1610, David Teniers was the son of a painter and art dealer of the same name. He studied first with his father, becoming a master in the Antwerp guild of St. Luke in 1632/33. On 22 June 1637, Teniers married Anna Brueghel, daughter of the celebrated painter, Jan Brueghel the Elder. Since the latter's death in 1625, Rubens had been Anna's guardian and was also a witness at her wedding. This alliance brought Teniers wealth and status. In 1642, the young couple took up residence in Brueghel's former home, 'De Meireminne' (The Siren) in the Lange Nieuwstraat.

In 1644/45, when Teniers was elected dean of the Antwerp Guild, his fame was reaching its peak. During these years he enjoyed the patronage of the art lover and connoisseur, Antonius Triest, Bishop of Ghent and it was through his influence that, in 1647, Teniers received his first commission from the newly appointed Governor of the Southern Netherlands, Archduke Leopold Wilhelm. In 1650, Teniers moved to Brussels to take up a position in the archduke's service, as his *ayuda de camera*, or chamberlain. In 1651, he travelled to London to purchase paintings from the former collection of Charles I and painted a series of interior views of Leopold Wilhelm's gallery of paintings. He also embarked upon an ambitious project to produce an illustrated catalogue of the Italian pictures in the archducal collection. To this end, he painted small-scale copies of the Archduke's paintings which served as *modelli* for the 243 engravings, eventually published at the artist's expense in 1660, four years after Leopold Wilhelm's return to Vienna. Teniers continued to serve as Court Painter to his successor, Don Juan of Austria, until 1659. His other royal patrons included Philip IV of Spain, Queen Christina of Sweden, James II of England and William of Orange.

In 1656 Teniers's wife Anna died. Less than six months later he married Isabella de Fren, daughter of the secretary of the Council of Brabant. In 1655, Teniers had been granted the right to bear a coat of arms, but following his marriage to Isabella, a lady of superior social rank, he petitioned Philip IV to grant him a noble title. In 1662, he was able to acquire a country estate, "Dry Toren" (Three Towers), at Perk, close to Rubens's former residence, "Het Steen". In 1663, Teniers was instrumental in the founding of the Academy in Antwerp, based on the Roman and Parisian models. He continued working well into old age - the latest dated painting is of 1683 - and died in Brussels in April 1690.

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<sup>i</sup> Gouda, 1618.

<sup>ii</sup> See list of examples in Peter C. Sutton, *et. al*, *The Age of Rubens*, exh. cat., Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and Toledo Museum of Art, 1994, p. 420, note 7.

<sup>iii</sup> David Teniers II, *The Alchemist*, signed and dated 1650, on panel, 37.4 x 27.4 cm, inv. no. 261.

<sup>iv</sup> David Teniers II, *The Alchemist*, signed and dated 1649, on panel, 59.4 x 83.8 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, John G. Johnson collection, no. 689.

<sup>v</sup> David Teniers II, *The Alchemist*, on panel, 32 x 25 cm, Museo del Prado, inv. no. P001804.

<sup>vi</sup> David Teniers II, *The Alchemist*, on panel, 35.6 x 41.6 cm, H. M. the Queen, Buckingham Palace, London.