JACOB OCHTERVELT
(Rotterdam 1634 – 1682 Amsterdam)

A Nurse and a Child in the Foyer of an elegant Townhouse

Signed and dated on the floor, lower right: J. Ochtervelt f./1663
On canvas, 32 x 26¼ ins. (81.5 x 66.8 cm)

PROVENANCE
Thomas Theodore Cremer (1742-1815), probably Rotterdam
His (deceased) sale, Rotterdam, Leen, 16 April 1816, lot 84, 394 fl. to
Sérafin Lambert Louis Malfait, Lille (1775-1827) (“In the hall of an elegant building, right at
the open door, is a maid holding a child by the hand, who appears to have alms to give to a
gypsy woman, who comes begging with her children; further back one sees through an
opening to a room where a man and a woman are in conversation with each other. This piece
is uncommonly bright and silvery in colour and the perspective is well conceived. It could be
called one of the best works by this master”)
Charles Piérard, Valenciennes
His estate sale, Paris, Hôtel Drouot, 20 March 1860, lot 53, for 900 francs
Le Comte de M***
His estate sale, Paris, Delbergue-Cormont, 29 December 1860, lot 23 for 610 francs
Acquired in circa 1982 by the previous owner
Private collection, Europe, until 2014

NARRATIVE
The scene takes place in the entrance-hall of an elegant town house. Through the open front
door we catch a glimpse of the street beyond. A young mother, holding a nursing infant to
her breast, and her son have come to the door asking for money. Despite their ragged
clothing, they are clean and well-kempt. The boy sets his foot tentatively on the hall floor,
holding out his hat before him, while his mother remains partly hidden behind the doorframe.
Standing in the hallway is a nurse, who has brought her young charge, a boy of about two or
three-years-old, to see the beggars at the door. As directed, the youngster drops a coin into
the beggar’s hat, while casting a look in the direction of the viewer. His parents watch
approvingly from the adjoining room. The household pet, a brown and white spaniel, barks
excitedly at the strangers.

Ochtervelt spent most of his active life in his native city of Rotterdam. Houbraken reported
that he was apprenticed to the Haarlem painter Nicolaes Berchem at the same time as Pieter
de Hooch. He may also have studied with his fellow Rotterdamer Ludolf de Jongh. He is
best known for his high-life genre scenes which show the influence of Frans van Mieris and Gerard ter Borch.

This beautiful painting, which recently surfaced on the market for the first time since 1860, is an important addition to Ochtervelt’s oeuvre. It belongs to a series of closely related paintings that show members of a well-to-do family in a voorhuis, or foyer, of an elegant town house, receiving itinerant street musicians or vendors at the open door. In her 1979 monograph on Ochtervelt, Susan Kuretsky, who was unaware of the existence of the present work, identified nine other paintings of this type, of which all but one are in museums around the world. Ochtervelt cannot claim credit for the invention of this theme – the idea may have been suggested to him by Ludolf de Jongh, who had utilised an elegant, light-filled entrance hall as the setting for his Lady receiving a Letter, or de Hooch who often employed the motif a figure seen against a backlit doorway in his paintings – but it was Ochtervelt who most fully realised the theme’s potential. It was his stroke of genius to view his scenes from the perspective of the wealthy householder, looking out towards the street beyond. In his hands, the threshold thus becomes the line of demarcation between the indoor and outdoor light and space, the separation of the private and public realms of life and the differentiation of social classes. The paintings in this group constitute Ochtervelt’s most original contribution to the history of genre.

Of the ten pictures in the series, the present painting is the only one to feature beggars. Three of the series (Saint Louis Museum of Art; Gemäldegalerie Staatliche Museen, in Berlin; The Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam) depict street musicians entertaining the residents of the house, while the others portray a variety of tradespeople presenting their wares at the door: three are of fishmongers (Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis, in The Hague, The Pushkin Museum, Moscow and the Hermitage in St. Petersburg) one is of a poultry seller (whereabouts unknown) and another portrays a vendor of grapes (the Hermitage, St. Petersburg). Beggars asking for alms at the door had featured previously in the work of such artists as Nicolaes Maes, Rembrandt and Jan Steen, but once again Ochtervelt seems to the only one to have employed an interior setting for such a scene and his approach to the subject is especially subtle in its conception. The contrast between the privileged world of the patrician family and the uncertainties of life on the streets is striking: the splendid marble hallway and costly attire of its inhabitants underscore the social distinctions. At the same time the painting eloquently reflects contemporary attitudes concerning the conduct of the well-off towards the needy. In the seventeenth century the performing of charitable acts was considered to be the duty of every good Christian. Here, the child in the act of giving to the poor is practising the virtue of charity. The little brown and white dog was very likely intended to represent the idea of good upbringing, since the young master of the house is clearly the very model of good behaviour. Also symbolic is the statue of cupid standing on the mantelpiece in the backroom which alludes to the bond of love that unites the child’s parents.

Jacob Ochtervelt was born in Rotterdam where he was baptised in the Reformed Church in February 1634. His father Lucas Hendricksz. was bridgeman of the Roode Brugge and not particularly well off: he had six children. According to Houbraken, Ochtervelt entered the studio of the Haarlem landscapist Nicolaes Berchem together with Pieter de Hooch. He may also have studied with the Rotterdam master Ludolf de Jongh. In 1655, Ochtervelt married...
Dirkje Meesters in the Dutch Reformed Church in Rotterdam. The couple apparently had no children of their own, but Jacob became guardian to his brother Jan’s children and, after 1665, helped to provide for Andries Meesters, an orphaned child of his wife’s family. Although he is recorded in fourteen documents in Rotterdam between 1661 and 1672, there is no mention of his entry into the St. Luke’s painters’ Guild. The first appearance of his name in the Guild register is in 1667 when he was nominated for *hoofdman* (leader), but the honour went to Cornelis Saftleven. By 1674 the artist and his wife were resident in Amsterdam according to the city’s tax register and, in the same year, Ochtervelt painted a group portrait of the *Regents of the Amsterdam Leper House*, now in the Rijksmuseum. By 1679 the couple had moved to a large house on the Keizersgracht. Ochtervelt was buried in the Nieuwezijds Chapel in Amsterdam in 1682.

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1. S. D. Kuretsky, *The Paintings of Jacob Ochtervelt (1634-1682)*, 1979, cat. nos. 16, 24 and 62; cat nos. 41, 55 and 103; cat no. 50, 51 and 54.
3. A. Houbraken, *De groote schouwburgh der Nederlandsche Konstschilders en Schilderessen*, vol. ii (1719), p. 35. If this information is correct, Ochtervelt’s apprenticeship must have occurred sometime between 1646 when Berchem returned from Italy and 1655, the year in which Ochtervelt married Dirkje Meesters in Rotterdam.