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JACOB JORDAENS (Antwerp) 1593 - 1678

The Satyr and the Peasant Family

oil on canvas

160 x 180 cm

Provenance:

J. Soloman

by descent to Mrs. Soloman

Christie's, London, 14 July 1930, lot 115

acquired by Rosenbaum family of art dealers

Matthiesen Gallery and Michael Simpson Ltd, 1992 private collection

Sotheby's, New York, 28 January 2008, lot no. 59

private collection, London

Jacob Jordaens at first acquaintance appears to be the quintessentially Flemish painter of his century, alive to native tradition in colour, design and choice of subject, the illustrator of Flemish life and of Flemish proverbs. He lived only in Antwerp, and never travelled further than Amsterdam. Indeed, when he moved house, it was just from the Everdijstraat to the Hoogstraat, or in the Hoogstraat from one house to the next in order to join the two. He had only one master, Adam van Noort, who, like Jordaens never went to Italy.

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However, Jordaens, unlike van Noort, was not to be of merely provincial reputation. Within his lifetime the demand for his work extended far beyond the bound of Flanders: to Uppsala, to London, to Vienna, to Florence and to Turin, as well as to Amsterdam and The Hague. Amongst his pupils, of whom the names of more than a score are registered, one came from Poland, another was recommended from Sweden. His fame was spread abroad by sets of tapestries woven by the Brussels weavers from his cartoons, and by impressions from copperplates engraved after his designs in Antwerp, as well as by paintings. He illustrated stories from Aesop, Homer, Ovid and Livy; as well as the homely saws of Jacob Cats. He depicted the moment in her banquet for Anthony when Cleopatra dissolves her pearl in wine; and he did so with a gusto outdone only by his relish for the moment in the Epiphany Feast when the Twelfth Night King raises his glass to drink. As a narrator he lacked the more profound scholarly instincts of Rubens, or his brand of Christian Stoicism. But he moralized his tales generally without pedantry: the history of Alexander or of Ulysses or of Charlemagne, as well as the Acts of the Apostles or the Parables of the New Testament. Cheerful incidents in the life of the Holy Family he made as vividly accessible as the incidents of his own household or of his neighbour's. But his deep feelings for the tragic scenes of the Passion - he was in this a true follower of Caravaggio - transmogrified ordinary types and commonplace objects.

The subject of our painting was among the favourite profane themes of the artist's early career. On several occasions he adapted Aesop, *Fables*, LXXIV, to his purposes: the absurdity of the peasant who, having breathed on his hands to warm them, then blows on his porridge to cool it, excites the visiting satyr's shocked protest. The moral is that one should beware of people who 'blow hot and cold'. Jordaens' easiest known treatment was painted on a much smaller scale around 1616.¹ That treatment was important for Jan Liss, who was in Antwerp 1616-19.

Next in date appears to be the present painting, which is Caravaggesque in the vigorous and distinctively Flemish idiom of Jordaens, and we are able to date it by style and circumstance. Jordaens modelled the mother and the child on his wife and their first born, Elizabeth, who had been baptized on 26 June 1617. The child appears to be aged about three. The composition is set in the interior of a farmhouse, illuminated from an unseen source at the left, with a subtly rich play of *chiaroscuro* not only on the features and gestures of the figures human and pagan, but also on the splendidly realized still-life hung on the wall. The play of light differs from that in the well-known composition of the same subject (Kassel, Staatliche Gemäldegalerie), which was painted almost immediately after the present work. The slightly larger Kassel painting (172 x 194 cm) sets the scene outdoors on a hill, the figures sunlit, slightly more from the front (this is most obvious in the young peasant standing at the back), and also more harshly. Whereas the palette in the present, hitherto unpublished, composition is close to that used by Caravaggio (i.e. blue, buff, white, grey-brown and subdued red). This palette is especially

¹ Oil on canvas, 67.2 x 51 cm.: exhibited *Jacob Jordaens*, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 1968-9, cat. no. 6.

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evident in the less agitated draperies of the mother, the child and the peasant. Jordaens appears to have been directly inspired by Caravaggio's *Madonna of the Rosary* (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum), which was reputedly brought to Antwerp by Louis Finson, who died there in 1617.

There are other differences between the present composition and the Kassel variant, which are less obvious, even in reproduction. In the Kassel picture there is no wall on which to hang a basket and jugs, no kitchen floor on which to scatter garlic cloves, nor is the child's head covered with a white kerchief. Moreover, the white tablecloth is folded in a different manner, and the satyr's loins are loosely girt, and his brow bound, with sprays of foliage. Equally, the colours of the mother and child's dresses are entirely different. Furthermore, in the present painting, and apparent only in the infra-red photographs, are numerous *pentimenti*: in the crown of the straw hat; in the outlines of the satyr's leg and right arm; in the mother's drapery; and, most significantly, in the shift of the young peasant's head at the background (detail of infra-red photograph Fig. 2A & B). This shift establishes beyond doubt the present painting's priority over the variant at Kassel. Thus unconsciously, in this instance at least, Jordaens followed the habit of Caravaggio in working out a composition on the canvas without recourse to pen and wash trials on paper.²

Jordaens certainly experimented with such trials in the course of illustrating this, his favourite theme. For example, on the *verso* of a study for *The Holy Family with St John, his Parents and Angels*, in the Louvre,³ is in a more finished study for the same subject, which is related to two almost identical autograph paintings in Goteborg and Brussels.⁴ However in the case of the present painting, and in the Kassel version, Jordaens took pains to study as closely as he could the pose of the satyr, as a single figure, in the same manner as another study, *Male nude seated*⁵, which is related to the principal figure in *The Mocking of Christ* (Williamstown, Mass., the Williams College Museum of Art). In a large

² N. Easthaugh, *A Survey by infra-red reflectography digital image processing of Jacob Jordaens. The Satyr and the Peasant Family*, August 1993, Ref: 93231.1.

The following report presents the results of a survey of the painting depicting *The Satyr and the Peasant Family* by Jacob Jordaens using infra-red reflectography/digital image processing (IRR/DIP).

A key to the positions of the seven IRR/DIP images taken during the survey and a summary of the findings are shown in figure 2A and B. There are a number of changes evident in this painting, most of which are apparent from careful visual examination. Some however are revealed more clearly by the IRR/DIP technique used for this report and in particular we may note the additional figure revealed to the left of the satyr (Fig 2A and B). Other alterations which became especially clear under IRR/DIP are that of the leg of the child on the left and the re-positioning of the hand of the woman in the hat. The appearance of most of the other *pentimenti*, such as that down the right arm of the satyr under the head of the boy or the breast of the woman on the left are clearly the result of a technique which involves the basic design being laid in with a light-coloured and impasted paint over which darker colours are then applied. In fact there are a number of other minor alterations not readily visible by IRR/DIP (such as in the blue skirt of the woman holding the child on the left), which are like this.

³ R.-A. d'Hulst, *Jordaens's Drawings*, Brussels, 1974, no. A 38.

⁴ D'Hulst, *op. cit.*, no. A 54.

⁵ D'Hulst, *op. cit.*, no. A 72.

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study for *The Satyr and the Peasant* (Fig. 3)⁶, to right of a fully realised study of the satyr's pose is an abandoned preliminary sketch in the manner of Jordaens's series of early academies, which are divided between the Darmstadt, Hessisches Landesmuseum and the Düsseldorf Kunstmuseum. Further differences include a distinctive chip on the band below the rim of the porridge bowl beside the satyr, which is not found in either the Kassel painting, nor the present work. Moreover, The curved handle of the ladle, held by the boy, whose head is visible by the satyr's bicep, appears unsupported in the drawing. The magnificently drawn head of the satyr in the drawing is turned in three quarter profile. The satyr's right forearm has been shifted upward to clear the ladle. There are also significant differences in the foliage (absent altogether from the satyr's lap in the present painting) and on the face and body of the satyr (e.g. the furrowed brow and fleshy folds of the torso, which further mark the present work as an autograph variant, rather than a studio copy.⁷

The peasant with his bowl of porridge, his outstretched arm of his wife seated beside him, and the child wearing a kerchief were all favoured motifs of the artist, which Jordaens frequently reused in other compositions painted over a fifteen-year period. Several of these motifs recur in version of the same subject dated c.1630-35, which is set in an interior (Pushkin Museum, Moscow). A small autograph *modello* for this work was engraved in reverse (Fig. 4) by Jacob Neefs in Antwerp around 1610 and is lettered: *jac. Jordaens invent:/ cum privilegio./ Jacobus Neefs sculpsit.*⁸ Loosely translated, Aesop's verses read: 'Why, satyr, do you now shun the farmer so ungraciously? Is it because you saw him blow on his hands to warm them, and on his porridge to cool it?', to which the satyr replies: 'I abhor this ambiguity of blowing hot and cold.'

Prof. Michael Jaffé, *Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge 1973 – 1990.*

⁶ Black chalk, heightened with white, 405 x 260 mm, sold at Sotheby's Mak van Waay on 25 April 1983, lot 83, as 'Studio of Jordaens' to Houthakker.

⁷ e.g. d'Hulst, *op. cit.*, no. A 12.

⁸ *Kunsthalle Bremen. Erwerbungen der letzten Jahren*, Bremen, 1951, p. 58, no 23, illus. p. 14.