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Omnia Vanitas: Peter Claesz in Haarlem, Paris and Nuremberg

The Louvre Museum exhibits among its masterpieces of Dutch painting a very large still life "with musical instruments" by Pieter Claesz (1596/97-1660)<sup>1</sup> which has entered his collections in circumstances which need to be recalled, at a time when European museums are trying to clarify the status of Jewish property stolen under the Nazi regime. The work belonged to Friedrich Unter (1890-1954), Viennese owner of a major textile company. Of Jewish confession, imprisoned by the Gestapo, he was able to take refuge in July 1938 with his partner Otto Anninger in Aurillac in France, in exchange with the abandonment of most of its heritage. He then asked for French nationality and reiterated his request in December of the same year proposing to offer the Louvre this work by Claesz and two other paintings<sup>2</sup>. He proposed them « en qualité de français » hoping a naturalization which was denied to him on September 7, 1939, because he could not justify three years of residence in France whereas the donation had been accepted the preceding April 4. Refugee in the United States, Unter tried in vain to recover his paintings until his death. His daughter was able to have the legitimacy of this claim recognized in 2009 and was finally compensated by decision in 2011.

This work by Peter Claesz is the only one kept at the Louvre Museum (Fig. 1). First attributed erroneously to Clara Peeters, because of a bad reading of the signature, it was reproduced by the French musicologist Marc Pincherle in 1959 in his famous *Illustrated History of Music*<sup>3</sup>, then it was published in 1962 by Albert Pomme de Mirimonde with the right attribution<sup>4</sup>. Mirimonde, who was an amateur art historian and a prolific author on musical iconography, considered this work "of exceptional importance". In his comments, he first dwells on the presence, among heterogeneous objects and musical instruments, of a turtle which he claims provoked usually sarcasms of the Louvre visitors ("suscite le plus souvent les railleries du public ") because the title of the work, "Still life with musical instruments", as indicated at

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<sup>1</sup> Oil on canvas, 69 x 122 cm, signed down in the middle « A° P.C. (monogram) 1623 ». R.F. 1939-11. Jacques Foucart, *Catalogue des peintures flamandes et hollandaises du musée du Louvre*, Paris, Gallimard/Musée du Louvre éditions, 2009, p. 110.

<sup>2</sup> Jan II de Heem, *Vanité avec bouquet de fleurs et pipe* R.F. 1939-10. and Francesco Trevisani, *La Famille de Darius aux pieds d'Alexandre* (this work was at that time considered as 18th c. French school), R.F. 1939-12. See Didier Rykner, « Le Louvre accepte de dédommager la fille du donateur de trois tableaux », *La Tribune de l'Art*, 15 september 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Marc Pincherle, *Histoire illustrée de la musique*, Paris, Gallimard, 1959.

<sup>4</sup> Albert Pomme de Mirimonde, « La musique dans les œuvres hollandaises du Louvre. II – Natures mortes », *La Revue du Louvre et des musées de France*, 1962/4, p. 175-184/180.

that time on the cartel in the exhibition room of the Louvre, did not reveal its deep meaning: he correctly points out that it is actually an "Allegory of the five senses and a vanity of the enjoyments it provides". It is today labeled "Vanity". In this article, he told us that the turtle, as a " retractile animal, is an old symbol of Touch". Mirimonde justified more precisely the symbolic and not anecdotal value of this animal in the pages he devoted to this painting in his ultimate book on *Le langage secret de certains tableaux du musée du Louvre*<sup>5</sup>. He cites indeed a print by Hendrick Goltzius (1558-1616), *Tactus*, where The Touch is represented by a couple of lovers stroking while a turtle is placed in the foreground on the knees of the seductress <sup>6</sup>.

In Claesz's painting, apart from this living animal, all the other senses are evoked by inanimate objects assembled on a table or placed near it. They are all as beautiful as the musical instruments that accompany this refined snack. This ensemble consists of a small lute with seven-course, a violin, a cornett cutaway partially in diamond-shaped at its upper part, a recorder and a magnificent bass violin with five strings with a golden yellow varnish, harmonious curves underlined by a double purfling, with the fingerboard adorned with a geometric inlay, all craftsmanship details that seem to show that the same maker is probably the author of the treble and the bass violin. For some actual instrument makers and organologist, these bowed instruments show strong links with the violin school of Brescia – especially that of Giovanni Paolo Maggini (1581-1632) from whom, however, is so difficult, even impossible, to authenticate instruments –, a production which constituted a reference imitated throughout all Europe of the Golden Age. The cut of the two tailpieces (considered by some commentators, probably a bit hastily, as features of the Dutch school <sup>7</sup>) and the veracity of the two bows with a smooth stick and clip-in frog, slipped under the strings and wedged under the feet of the bridge

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<sup>5</sup> Albert Pomme de Mirimonde, « Nature morte dite « aux instruments de musique » : Vanité des jouissances procurées par les sens par Pieter Claesz », *Le Langage secret de certains tableaux du musée du Louvre*, Paris, Ministère de la Culture – Éditions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 1984, p. 91-92.

<sup>6</sup> *Tactus*. It is part of a series of *Five senses*, is in fact by Jan Pietersz Saenredam (1565-1607) after Hendrick Goltzius and is commented by a Latin sentence: « Que conspecta nocent, manibus contingere noli, / Ne mox peiori corripiare malo » (Do not grasp in your hands those things which are harmful, once you have seen them, in case you are soon seized by a worse evil ». The sketching for this engraving, prepared with pen and brown ink, enhanced with brown wash (15,9 x 12,4), is the property of the P. et N. de Boer Fondation at Amsterdam.

<sup>7</sup> Fred G. Meijer, in Exhibition Catalogue *Music & Painting in the Golden Age*, The Hague, Hoogsteder & The glass of wine reflected in a mirror to suggest the sight, the pipe, its tinder and the heater filled with embers near the tobacco box for smelling, bread, pie as cookies as a symbol of taste and the musical instruments to evoke hearing, everything is arranged to make this still life an allegory of sensual pleasures. Hoogsteder, Zwolle, Wanders Publishers, 1994, p. 166-167, n° 10.

for that of the bass, are as many details of incredible precision that rival the sparkling light of wine bottles, the decorative luxury of tortoiseshell and that of the delicate pastries.

The glass of wine reflected in a mirror is intended to suggest the sight, the pipe, its tinder and the brasero filled with embers near the tobacco box evokes smelling, bread, pies and cookies are a symbol of taste and the musical instruments of hearing, and finally everything is arranged to make this still life an allegory of sensual pleasures.

But its meditative dimension also makes it an allegory of the ephemeral, and even a real hidden vanitas. The reflection of the glass of wine could also mean the illusion provided by drunkenness. The discreet presence of books shows the uselessness of knowledge. The open watch is usually the symbol of time passing inexorably.

And the bottles of wine, in the refreshing plate where the turtle delights, reflect also, in a dramatized optical effect, the unreal appearance of these fleeting pleasures.

But the presence, at the same time, of bread and wine, symbols that can confront pleasures – and therefore vice – with the Eucharist, should lead us to interpret this painting as an "Allegory of the Two Loves", thus opposing the secular life and pleasures of carnal love to religious life and sacred love.

This shift from the Allegory of the Five Senses to a moral interpretation, even religious, has been frequently used by artists from the North, and by those from France, like Lubin Baugin (1610-1663), for instance in his famous *Nature morte à l'échiquier* with a mandora, also exhibited in the Louvre.

Martina Brunner-Bulst, in her seminal monograph on Pieter Claesz<sup>8</sup>, even considers that the painting of the Louvre is a kind of monumental essay intended to measure itself against the famous print of Theodor Dirck Matham (1605-1676) which preceded it by a year (it is dated 1622) and which bears in a cartouche surmounted by a skull the title "Vanitas" (Fig. 2)<sup>9</sup>. In this engraving the composition is also organized from a table where on a Oriental carpet is an opened song book. It is surrounded by a cittern whose mounting seems to correspond to one of

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<sup>8</sup> Martina Brunner-Bulst, *Pieter Claesz. Der Hauptmeister des Haarlemer Stillebens im 17. Jahrhundert. Kritischer Oeuvrekatalog*, Lingen, Luca Verlag, 2004, p. 146-151/147.

<sup>9</sup> Rijksmuseum, RP-P-1904-30. Engraving, 23,2 x 33,2 cm. Author signature on the interior window frame: « Theodorus Matham fecit. 1622 ». The publisher, the father of the author, Jacob Matham, signed above and on the cabinet cornice : « Jac. Matham excud. » et « Cum privil. Sa. Cae. Mtis ».

the usual Dutch models <sup>10</sup> (its pegbox is ornamented with a little negro head wearing a collar<sup>11</sup>) and a lute with seven-course, a oboe only identified by its conical bore, to which are added an open cassette filled with coins and a chain, a large pewter wine pitcher, two glasses (roemer), one empty and turned over, the other full of wine. Right on a separate shelf, a small five-stringed bass violin, with its double purfling on the soundboard and has a tailpiece presenting curiously the same features as the one we saw in Claesz painting.

We should notice the technical virtuosity of Matham who is not only able to make sensible the presence of wine in one of the glasses, to transcribe the music, to position the frets and half frets on the fingerboard of the cittern but also to let us discover the wavy wood used for the ribs of the bass violin with its rare if not unique geometric patterns engraved on the heel of the neck. Notice also the clip-in frog of the bow on the right corner of the table.

The lyrics set to music in the open book are very readable and even signed « I.A. Bannius », i.e. Joan Albert Ban (1597-1644) famous Catholic priest, amateur composer and music theorist. The open double page reproduces one of his compositions for two voices (Cantus and Tenor) on very readable words by Ovide (Epistulae Tristia Ex Ponto – IV, 3, 35):

*Omnia sunt hominum tenui pendencia filo,  
Et subito casu, quae valere, ruunt.*

All things human hang by a slender thread;  
and that which seemed to stand strong of a sudden falls and sinks in ruins

Under the print is a sextain also signed by I.A. Bannius:

*Quid mundus ? quid edeliciae ? quid vana voluptas ?  
Faetor, tristitiae, fumus et umbra, nihil.  
Non aurum nec ebut, civus, et potus organa, plausus  
(Cum pereant celeri tempore) juncta beant.  
Tempus et aeternum duo sunt quae nostra vocantur,  
Haec meditanda homini ; Caetera mortis erunt.*

Complementing the moral of this collection of highly symbolic objects, its "comments" formed both by the words of the song book and by the verses placed under the print, a window suggests

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<sup>10</sup> Sebastián Núñez and Verónica Estevez, « Description of the remains of two Dutch citterns », *Gitarre und Zister. Bauweise, Spieltechnik und Geschichte bis 1800*. 22. Musikinstrumentenbau-Symposium Michaelstein, Monika Lustig (ed.), Michaelstein, Stiftung Kloster Michaelstein, Verlag Janos Stekovics, 2005, Michaelsteiner Konferenzberichte 66, p. 69-78 ; Louis Peter Grijp, « The cittern of Swellinck and Vermeer. Contextual information for the excavated Zuyderzee citterns », *Idem*, p. 79-85.

<sup>11</sup> This motive is sometimes also used during the 17th century to ornament dance masters kits (Paris, Musée de la Musique, E. 78 and E. 214) and a wind box level button in a 18th century Dutch organ use the same decorative detail (Paris, Musée de la Musique, E. 1885).

in the background a merry company, very carefree, feasting around a table, in a room richly adorned with paintings, while a small orchestra is playing on a tribune.

In the end, this T. Matham print is considered to be the first musical vanitas in the history of art. For Thea Vignau-Wilberg, it is an Ode to music by the theorist Joan Albert Ban. According to her, after studying theology in Cologne and Louvain, Ban was back in Haarlem as early as 1622. He collaborated already with Dirck and Jacob Matham for the Latin text of an important *Descent from the Cross* engraved after a painting by Geertgen tot Sint Jans, print dedicated to Jacob van Campen, the architect of Amsterdam City Hall and member of the Guild of Saint Luke of Haarlem, to which the Mathams also belonged<sup>12</sup>. In 1628, Joan Albert Ban became a canon in Haarlem. A friend of René Descartes, Pieter Corneliszoon Hooft and Constantijn Huygens, he corresponded several times with Marin Mersenne<sup>13</sup>. Although autodidact in music, Ban developed a method of composition from the text he called *musica flexamina* (in Dutch *zielroerende zang*), the song that touches the soul. Mersenne put him to the test by subjecting him to improve his theories using Antoine Boësset's verses from an air de cour, and later he criticized the result, which of course offended Ban, who complained to Huygens and Descartes<sup>14</sup>. Ban published his theories in a small treatise *Kort Sangh-Bericht* and he printed in 1642 a collection of ten Dutch madrigals (*Zangh-bloemzel*).

Inspired by the composition, and especially the moral dimension, established as a model by Dirck Matham's print, Pieter Claesz shows, during the years following his first large still life in the form of a vanitas, that he re-used frequently the same emblematic vocabulary, and even the same objects.

One of his vanitas still life, preserved at the Germanisches Nationalmuseum<sup>15</sup>, is like a sort of small replica of the specimen in the Louvre (Fig. 3). It is composed around a violin that seems to be by the same maker as the bowed instruments in the Louvre painting. But a destructive

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<sup>12</sup> Thea Vignau-Wilberg, « Omnia Vanitas. Dirck Mathams Ode an die Musik und der Musiktheoretiker Jan Albert Ban », in Wolfgang Augustyn und Iris Lauterbach (Hrsg), *Rondo. Beiträge für Peter Diemer zum 65. Geburtstag*, Munich, Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte, 2010, p. 121-124.

<sup>13</sup> Marin Mersenne, *Correspondance du P. Marin Mersenne, Religieux minime, publiée et annotée par Cornelis De Waard*, Paris, Éditions du Centre national de la Recherche scientifique, 1969-1972, vol. II, III, VII, VIII, IX, X.

<sup>14</sup> Rudolf Rasch, *Driehonderd brieven over muziek van, aan en rond Constantijn Huygens*, 300 lettres de Huygens, réunies, présentées et traduites par Rudolf Rash, Hilversum, Éditions Verloren, 2007, 2 vol. Voir aussi Rudolf Rasch, « Ban, Bannius, Joan Alert, Joannes Albertus », *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart, MGG*, Ludwig Finscher (ed.), Kassel, Bärenreiter, Stuttgart, Metzler, 2002, Personenteil 2, col. 137-139.

<sup>15</sup> *Stilleben mit Glaskugel*, Oil on oak wood, 35,9 x 59 cm, Inv. Nr. : GnM 1409. Voir Andreas Tacke, *Die Gemälde des 17. Jahrhunderts im Germanischen Nationalmuseum. Bestandskatalog*, Mainz, Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1995, p. 69-70, n° 23.

blast seems to have passed here: the candlestick is extinguished, the glass is overturned, the nut (symbol of abundance and fertility) is dried and broken, the books (the knowledge), the pen and its jostled inkwell (the power) seem useless. The case and the key of the pocket watch are in uncertain balance as the breath of life, and the passage of time, inexorable, is evoked by the watch. The skull concealed behind the books gives full scope to this meditation on the inevitable death that the painter can consider and take on his own, as we can see explicitly since the artist is reflected, painting this vanity, in the glass ball, symbol of the brilliance and vanity of human life, his own as ours<sup>16</sup>.

### Illustrations

1. Peter Claesz (vers 1597-1660), *Nature morte à la basse de violon*, 1623, huile sur bois, 69 x 122 cm, Paris, musée du Louvre, R.F.1939-11. Photo©RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre)/Michel Urtado.

2. Theodor Dirck Matham (1605-1676), *Vanitas*, 1622, Etching, 23,2 x 33,2 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Rijksprentenkabinet. RP-P-1904-30.  
Photo©<http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.collect.151177>

3. Peter Claesz (vers 1597-1660), *Vanité au violon et à boule de verre*, 1628, huile sur panneau de chêne, 35,9 x 59 cm, Nuremberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Gemäldegalerie, GM 1409. Photo©GNM.

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<sup>16</sup> Albert Pomme de, « Musique et symbolisme chez Jan Davidszoon de Heem, Cornelis-Janszoon et Jan II Janszoon de Heem », *Jaarboek van het Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten (Antwerpen)*, 1970, p. 241-295/260-264 ; Florence Gétreau, *Voir la Musique*, Paris, Citadelles & Mazenod, 2017, p. 157-158.