

Bijl-Van Urk

Adriaen Brouwer

Oudenaerde 1605/06 - 1638 Antwerp

Peasants Playing Card in a Tavern

Oil on panel 33.5 x 54 cm

Datable 1624/25

Provenance

Private collection, Germany, from at least 1986 onwards

Sale New York (Christie's), 12 January 1996, lot 182

With Marc Rogge Gallery, Belgium

Private collection, Belgium

With Jan Muller Antiques, Ghent

Literature

K. Renger, 'Zwei neuentdeckte Gemälde Adriaen Brouwers', *Kunst und Antiquitäten* (1994), nrs. 7/8, pp. 26-30

Men and women sit round a table, drink and play card. This energetic image sums up the art of Adriaen Brouwer, one of the most influential artists in the seventeenth century. Brouwer modelled Bruegelian peasant painting into a new independent branch of art, opening up a whole new range of artistic avenues. Novel is the unprecedented realism; the protagonists are individuals with vividly expressed human emotions, a far cry from the stereotyped stock figures of Pieter Bruegel the Elder and other older practitioners of peasant genre. This paramount feature in depicting lower class people can be readily observed in our tavern interior and in the other less than 60 or so paintings by his hand that have been preserved.¹

In our painting the vigorous brushwork echoes the animated atmosphere. Karolien de Clippel has aptly noted that one of Brouwer's 'strongest accomplishments consisted in using form metaphorically so that format, colour, size and technique became meaningful'.² There also exist intriguing parallels between Brouwer himself and his art, and they have long been a subject of debate and investigation, making it worthwhile to briefly sketch his fragmentarily documented biography here.³ Brouwer is first documented in 1625 in Amsterdam and a year later he is described as a 'friend' of the Haarlem rhetoricians' association. In 1631/32, we find him in the records of the painters' guild in Antwerp, where he would stay until his death. In 1633 Brouwer borrowed a substantial 1,600 guilders to be repaid in paintings and for unknown reasons

Kennemerstraatweg 174 – 1815 LE Alkmaar – Nederland – Mob.: +31 6 5342 5432 – Tel.: +31 72 5120080

Site: [www. Bijlvanurk.com](http://www.Bijlvanurk.com) - E-mail: sander@bijlvanurk.com – KvK Noordwest- Holland 37093206
BTW nr. NL 8136.63.489.B01 – Bank: ING Alkmaar 67.06.00.512

Bijl-Van Urk

was held prisoner in the Castle of Antwerp, remaining there until September that year. The following year he moved in with the engraver Paulus Pontius and was around that time a member of the 'Violieren' rhetoricians' chamber. Brouwer endured financial trouble throughout his life and his biographers portrayed him as a loose living buffoon, in short as a habitual figure in his peasant scenes; a picture not difficult to reconcile with the documented details.

In spite of his reputation, none of the seventeenth-century authors doubted the fact of his genius. Brouwer was extremely highly esteemed during his lifetime, not least by fellow artists. The news of his premature death is said to have brought tears to the eyes of Peter Paul Rubens, who avidly collected Brouwer's paintings.⁴ Another great master collecting Brouwer's rare paintings was Rembrandt. Further proof of Brouwer's acclaim with artists and collectors alike, was the ready market for copies and imitations that already existed during his lifetime.⁵ Even in his own century, Brouwer's colourful life gave rise to all kinds of tales around his persona and his work achieved an equally legendary status.

Brouwer's oeuvre has been thoroughly studied, but our painting was unknown and only surfaced in 1986. In his article on this and another early painting the Brouwer specialist Konrad Renger made meticulously comparisons with other paintings and expressed his idea that it could be 'das früheste bislang bekannte Werk Brouwers' (the earliest work known so far), datable to the mid 1620s.⁶ None of Brouwer's works is dated so a precise chronology cannot be given. However, Renger's observations stand up to scrutiny. Renger mentions a small group of paintings in which he was able to pinpoint a mix of highly specific motifs, stylistic and technical features as well as signs of inexperience. These paintings can thus reasonably be assumed to constitute Brouwer's earliest preserved output. The motifs that Renger mentions are the figure on the other end of the table that puts a jug at his mouth, the hearth with flames and plumes of rising smoke, the man in the background seen on his back and leaning out of a half-door, the drawing with a sketched head nailed to the wooden wall, the rag hanging on a nail attached to the same wooden partition and the forgotten red cap sitting on an extending beam.

Typical for the technique of Brouwer's earliest works are the passages of hatching with characteristically short brushstrokes. The peculiar reddish glow on the floor can be detected in other early paintings as well. Renger also recognized features that were only to come to full fruition later in Brouwer's mature production, such as the flesh-tones in the faces of the protagonists that are executed with gentle parallel strokes and the artist's ability to evoke the state of mind of the figures whose face we cannot actually see, such as the card player with his back to the spectator, and in general a worked-out and thought-through psychological interaction between the protagonists.

A striking feature of Brouwer's technique is the bright palette of locally applied colours, especially the powerful accents of red and pink. These can be observed in our painting and in the *Pancake Man* in Philadelphia, furthermore to a lesser degree in the *Peasants*'

Bijl-Van Urk

Feast in Zurich (Kunsthaus), the *Fight over Cards* in the The Hague (Mauritshuis) and the *Slaughter Feast* in Schwerin (Staatliches Museum).

If our painting dates from in around 1625 it is likely to have been executed in Amsterdam, where Brouwer was staying with the art dealer Barent van Someren. This seems to be corroborated by the dimensions of the panel, the long side of which measures exactly 21 Amsterdam duim.⁷ The restorer Martin Bijl thinks, based on his extensive knowledge of early-seventeenth century panels, that the saw marks on the panel even allow for a slightly earlier date of mid 1624. Peter Klein, who conducted a dendrochronological examination, writes in his report that the panel could have been ready for use by 1622 at the earliest.⁸

Interestingly, Rembrandt's earliest paintings, especially his series of the five sins, also dated to c. 1624 show a similar palette and the penchant for lowlife protagonists expressing a variety of emotions.⁹ It is likely that Rembrandt, who keenly kept abreast with the latest novelties in Dutch painting from early on and would later in life own no less than eight paintings by Brouwer, had already been absorbing aspects of the latter's style.

What certainly will have appealed to Rembrandt and which he adopted to great effect from Brouwer in his small-scale juvenile works on panel is imbuing his images with a powerful energy that far exceeds the small dimensions, as though the protagonists burst from the picture plane. The latter quality is also apparent in our painting. Brouwer achieved this here by placing a figure in pink and a blazing red cap on the foreground and having him glance outside the painting, thus creating a strong link between our presence and the painted scene. There is no way around it; the viewer is immediately drawn into the rowdy interior.

However compellingly realistic and witty this scene may seem, Brouwer's depictions are entrenched in a long moralistic artistic and literary tradition of perceiving peasants as exemplifying all kinds of sinful behaviour. Brouwer's protagonists often quarrel, beat each other up, smoke, drink heavily, feast, sing and sleep. As innocent playing a game of cards nowadays is, in the early modern era it was deemed an idle pursuit par excellence. Similarly, the man emptying a jug in our scene would have been seen as an emblem of gluttony. This and similar manifestations of excessive unrestrained behaviour convey by tradition a moral message, warning the spectator to live in moderation and to refrain from idleness. Brouwer, however, added a new dimension to this time-honoured subject matter with his spirited characterizations and it was this quality that made his paintings so irresistible.

The appeal of Brouwer's paintings is further enhanced by the appearance of a seemingly effortless and spontaneous execution. This appearance, however, could only have been achieved with the utmost disciplined concentration in wielding the brush. The pentimenti that can be observed in our painting should therefore not be mistaken for

Bijl- Van Urk

spontaneity, a rapid pace in the execution or a lack of preparation, but rather as a relentless search for perfection during the work process.¹⁰ Brouwer's sparkling scene is no doubt the result of careful gestation. This beautifully preserved early work represents a highpoint in Brouwer's small and exquisite oeuvre. In it, his prized artistic virtuosity and flavour of human comedy already reign in full glory.

Notes

¹ A recent *catalogue raisonné* does not exist although Dr Karolien de Clippel, Hasselt, has been working on one. Her unpublished material will however be incorporated in the forthcoming catalogue that will be published in conjunction with the Brouwer exhibition to be held in 2018 in Oudenaerde. Oddly, Brouwer had not been included by John Smith in his *A catalogue raisonné of the works of the most eminent Dutch, Flemish, and French painters*, 8 vols. and a supplement, London 1829-42. The first attempt to catalogue Brouwer's oeuvre was: C. Hofstede de Groot, *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten Holländischen Maler des XVII. Jahrhunderts*, 10 vols., Esslingen & Paris 1907-28, vol. 3 (1910). Important subsequent monographic studies in which Brouwer's entire then known work is discussed are: W. Von Bode, *Adriaen Brouwer: sein Leben und seine Werke*, Berlin 1924 and G. Knuttel, Wzn., *Adriaen Brouwer: the master and his work*, The Hague 1962.

² K. De Clippel, 'Rubens meets Brouwer. Confrontations with low-life genre painting', *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 55 (2004), p. 317.

³ For a concise biography see Konrad Renger's excellent entry in *The Dictionary of Art*, 34 vols., New York 1996, vol. 4, pp. 870-873.

⁴ Rubens owned no less than seventeen paintings. See for the list of Brouwer's paintings in Rubens's possession: De Clippel, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 328.

⁵ See for the reproductive prints that were made from his works: H. Scholz, *Brouwer invenit: druckgraphische Reproduktionen des 17.-19. Jahrhunderts nach Gemälden und Zeichnungen Adriaen Brouwers*, Marburg 1985. For an assessment of his imitators in the seventeenth century both in the Northern and Southern Netherlands, see: K. Renger & H. von Sonnenburg, *Adriaen Brouwer und das niederländische Bauerngenre 1600-1660*, exh. cat. Munich (Alte Pinakothek) 1986, pp. 52-63.

⁶ See Renger, *op. cit.* (see under literature), p. 29.

⁷ The Amsterdam duim was 2.57 cm. For this see: J.M. Verhoeff, *De oude Nederlandse maten en gewichten*, Amsterdam 1983. The two different duimen that were used in seventeenth-century Haarlem do not tally with the length of the panel (which as opposed to the width is leading in determining the local inch used).

⁸ Professor Klein, Hamburg, writes in his report of 6 December 2016: 'Unter Voraussetzung der Splintholzstatistik für Osteuropa ergibt sich ein frühestes Fälldatum des verwendeten Baumes ab 1620 eher wahrscheinlich ist jedoch ein Fälldatum zwischen 1624..1626....1630. Eine früheste Entstehung des Gemäldes wäre bei einer minimalen Lagerzeit des Holzes von zwei Jahren ab 1622 denkbar. Eher ist jedoch bei einem Median von 15 Splintholzjahrringen und einer minimalen Lagerzeit des Holzes von 2 Jahren eine Entstehung des Gemäldes ab 1628 zu vermuten.'

Bijl- Van Urk

⁹ Karolien de Clippel was the first to point out these parallels in a lecture at the Historians of Netherlandish Art Congress held in Antwerp in 2002 (email communication with Dr De Clippel of 7 January 2017). For three of this series, see: E. van de Wetering, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings: Rembrandt's Paintings Revisited: a Complete Survey*, 6 vols., Dordrecht, Boston, Lancaster etc., 2014, nr. 1-3, pp. 480-481. A fourth painting from the series resurfaced in 2016 and is presently with two of the other paintings in the Leiden Collection, New York. Influence of the Utrecht Caravaggist painters such as Gerard van Honthorst have also, rightly so, been detected in Rembrandt's early series. See for instance: E. van de Wetering et al., *The mystery of the young Rembrandt*, exh. cat. Kassel (Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister); Amsterdam (Rembrandthuis) 2001-02, pp. 152ff.

¹⁰ The infraredreflectogram reveals a number of small and larger pentimenti, the most prominent being the seated man in the left and the pig in the lower right corner, which initially seems to have been a different animal.