

An Allegory of Vanitas

Jacob Duck

Utrecht? ca. 1600 - 1667 Utrecht



MASTERPAINTINGS

Bijl - Van Uik



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Oil on oak panel

38.7 x 31.5 cm

Signed lower left: "JADvck. [JAD in monogram]"

Datable second half 1650s

Provenance

With art dealer Richard H. Ward, London, 1930-32

Kurt Rohde, Berlin, acquired from the above in 1932

Thence by descent to Elisabeth Rohde, Berlin, until sold at the below Sale Berlin (Grisebach), 3 July 2015, lot 3079, where acquired

An Allegory of Vanitas

A splendidly attired young woman sits near a table on which is a still life of vanitas attributes. A fragile glass stands near a skull adorned with a long string of pearls and blue ribbons.¹ We also see an ebony black jewelry casket, an hourglass, a few old books, a blown-out candle and a drapery of yellow satin silk. A letter or document with a wax seal attached is carelessly thrown on the floor. On the right foreground are several musical instruments: a viola da gamba, a violin and a theorbo.

Jacob Duck's output largely consists of brothel and guardroom scenes, both initially often densely populated.² It was in his later production that the noisy and crowded interiors gradually developed into quieter scenes with fewer protagonists. In doing so Duck was experimenting with composition formulae that offered a whole range of new dramaturgic possibilities. He explored these artistic avenues in competition with the leading artists painting guardroom scenes, such as Symon Kick (1603-1652) and Gerard ter Borch (1617-1681). The reduction of the number of figures led to a preference for upright formats and invited the artist to zoom in on the protagonists, resulting in a more detailed description of the dress, gestures and physiognomies. Although few dated works by Duck are known, it is thanks to these features that our painting can be classified as a mature masterpiece. Moreover, the painting is quite accurately datable to the second half of the 1650s on account of the woman's striking silk satin dress, which clearly bears the stamp of fashion. His evocative images such as the present, typical for the final stage of his production, sum up what the scholar Jochai Rosen has aptly called the artist's "apogee in elegance and refinement".³

¹ Apparently, the skull was deemed an unattractive motif by a later owner of the painting, who decided to have it overpainted. This overpaint has now been removed.



² Jochai Rosen has catalogued around 150 extant paintings in Rosen 2003 (see under literature). In addition to genre paintings, Duck has, incidentally, also treated other subject matter, such as Biblical themes, and a few portraits are recorded by his hand. He also produced a handful of drawings and etchings.

³ Rosen 2003 (note 2), p. 70. It also contributed to what Nanette Salomon has summarized as the gentrification of Dutch genre painting; the way in which middle class society increasingly sought to imitate the conduct traditionally associated with the aristocracy, see: Salomon 1998 (see under literature), pp. 124, 125.

4 See for this: M. P. van Maarseveen et al. (ed.), *Beelden van een strijd: oorlog en kunst vóór de Vrede van Munster*, exh. cat. Delft, Stedelijk Museum Het Prinsenhof, 1998, passim. Compare also E. Borger, *De Hollandse kortegaard. Geschilderde wachtlokalen uit de Gouden Eeuw*, exh. cat. Naarden, Nederlands Vestingmuseum and J. Rosen, *Soldiers at leisure: the guardroom scene in Dutch genre painting of the Golden Age*, Amsterdam 2010, esp. pp. 13-26.

5 For this work, see: Rosen 2003 (note 2), nr. 129, pp. 62, 63, fig. 31 and Salomon 1998 (note 3), nr. 8, p. 143, ill.

6 See for this painting Rosen 2003 (note 2), nr. 127, pp. 61, 62, fig. 148: Salomon 1998 (note 3), nr. 10, p. 143, ill.

7 For this work see Rosen 2003 (note 2), nr. 32, p. 16 and Salomon 1998 (see note 3), nr. 35, p. 149, ill.

Duck's oeuvre is permeated with vanitas. A large percentage of his works are guardroom scenes in which the protagonists are involved in idle pursuits and in general display loose morals. During the Eighty Years' War the presence of garized troops would have transformed many Dutch cities into a stage for unruly behavior.⁴ This reality is reflected in Duck's raucous soldiers' scenes. These images are about war, lust, sloth, status and greed, which as earthly, and by Christian tradition, sinful concerns are loosely associated with vanitas. Duck also devoted a few paintings explicitly to the theme of vanitas in which the allegorical nature is pronounced. Our painting is a case in point. Set in an interior with contemporary furniture, it has the appearance of a genre scene. However, we are certainly not looking at an ordinary situation drawn from seventeenth-century daily life and a closer look reveals the scene's unequivocally allegorical character. The young lady in white satin is posing at a table topped with an array of vanitas paraphernalia. Contemporary beholders would have readily grasped the vanitas message Duck is conveying in this painting.

A highly comparable composition in the Indianapolis Museum of Art by Duck, no doubt dating from this same late period, shows an identical interior and also features an elderly woman (fig. 1).⁵ In this version the young woman plays a lute. By showing the main protagonist playing a musical instrument – it can be argued – Duck made the symbolic nature of the image less apparent. In a related painting we see a young woman primping herself in front of a mirror (fig. 2). In this toilet scene vanitas is not anymore the primary subject, it has become a motif, albeit an important one.⁶

How thin the line between vanitas proper and genre can be, is illustrated by Duck's small panel in the National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin from the 1630s, which shows a woman fallen asleep and leaning on a table on which are a costly goblet, money and jewelry (fig. 3).⁷ This is not an allegory of vanitas: the background scene clarifies that we are looking at a guardroom scene and the precious items is war loot. The vanitas overtones are, nevertheless, clear.



Figure 1: Jacob Duck, *Vanitas: A Woman at Her Toilet Table Playing a Lute*. INDIANAPOLIS, INDIANAPOLIS MUSEUM OF ART.



Figure 2: Jacob Duck, *Vanitas: A Woman at her Toilet*. PRESENT WHEREABOUTS UNKNOWN



Figure 3: Jacob Duck, *A Woman Fallen Asleep*. DUBLIN, NATIONAL GALLERY OF IRELAND



Figure 4: Jacob Duck, *Allegory of Vanitas*. Sold at Christie's for \$ 542.500,-, 27 January, NY 2010.

PRESENT WHEREABOUTS
UNKNOWN



Figure 5: Jacob Duck, *The Penitent Mary Magdalen*.

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Yet another work, also painted in the 1630s, is an allegory in the true sense of the word (fig. 4).⁸

An integral part of Duck's creativity is his fondness of exploring every possible nuance of vanitas. For instance, the casting, posing and the choice of items in our painting is thought-through inventively. It cannot have escaped the notice of contemporary viewers that the woman's pose, with her hands clasped, shown as if in contemplation shows a strong resemblance to depictions of the penitent Mary Magdalen. In fact, Duck painted a repentant Mary Magdalen striking a very similar pose (fig. 5).⁹ The small vase in our painting can be likened to Magdalen's ointment jar, which, together with a skull are her usual attributes. They make the reference all the more compelling. Mary Magdalen was often associated with the concept of vanitas in the art of the early modern era.¹⁰

A connection to Mary Magdalen's former profession as a prostitute in Duck's painting is provided by the old hag; a procuress. This stereotyped figure recurs in a number of brothel scenes by Duck and in many by his fellow artists, among them the Utrecht Caravaggist painters. There is no doubt that Duck perceived the young and seductive woman as the female saint, but he chose to show her in the guise of a seventeenth-century prostitute, covered with pearls of vice.

⁸ This painting was sold at in New York at (Christie's), 27 January 2010, lot 23 for 542500 USD. See also: Salomon 1998 (note 3), nr. 103, pp. 96-98, 165, ill. According to Eddy de Jongh we can interpret the seated woman as Vrouw Wereld. This symbolic representation of the world enjoyed popularity in German and Netherlandish in medieval and Renaissance imagery. See: E. de Jongh, "Vermommingen van Vrouw Wereld in de zeventiende eeuw", in E. de Jongh, *Kwesties van betekenis: thema en motief in de Nederlandse schilderkunst van de zeventiende eeuw*, Leiden 1995, pp. 60-82. Nanette Salomon calls this painting an Allegory of the Christian Faith. See: Salomon 1998 (note 3), nr. 102, p. 165.

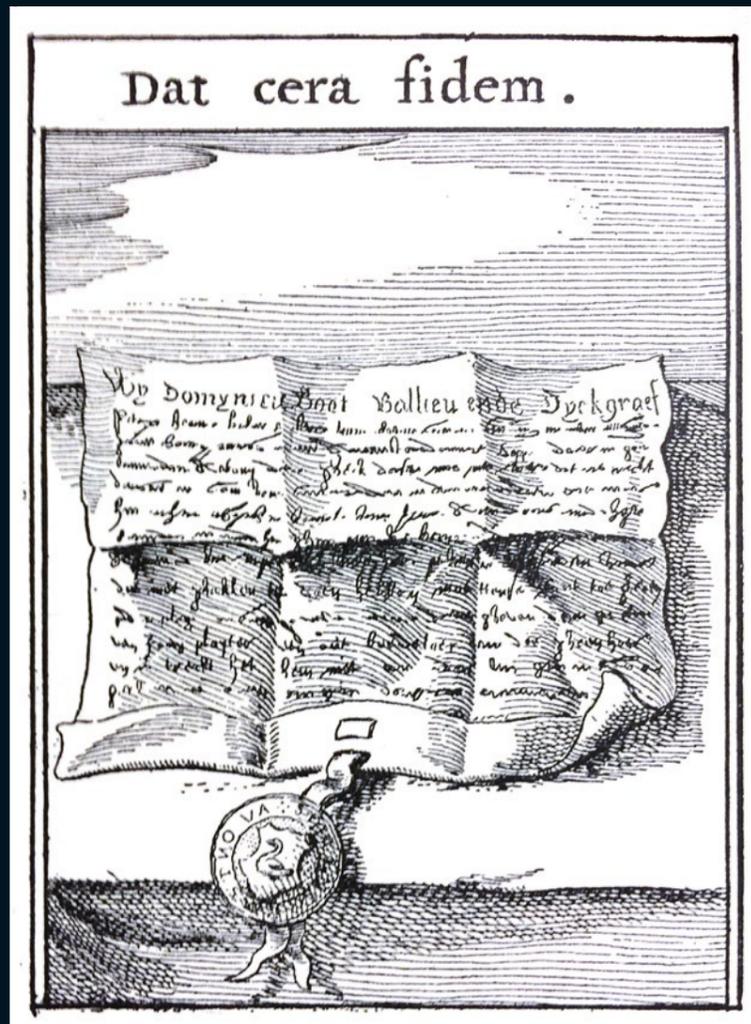
⁹ Rosen 2003 (note 2), nr. 134, p. 64.

¹⁰ See for instance: F. Bergot, "Le rien de tout: deux figures de la Vanité: Marie Madeleine et Saint Jérôme", in: A. Tapié (ed.), *Les Vanités dans la peinture au XVIIe siècle: Méditations sur la richesse, le dénuement et la redemption*, exh. cat. Caen, Musée des Beaux-Arts 1997, pp. 43-48 and in *ibid*: pp. 136-165.

Duck played with more registers of the vanitas iconography. Roemer Visscher included an emblem titled “Dat cera fidem” (the seal gives trust) in his popular *Sinnepoppen* of 1614, showing a document with a wax seal and advising one to trust only sealed documents (fig. 6). In Duck’s scene, this official document, seal attached, lies on the ground as if it is a worthless piece of paper. The point that Duck is bringing across, is that in the face of death even important documents are of no use.

Although the vanitas content is inescapable, our painting is no less a technical tour de force. Duck shows an index of his artistic skills. Light enters through a window at the left and then spreads evenly across the interior. The silk satin dress of the woman, which beautifully stands out against Duck’s typical grey palette, is rendered with fastidious care. Also in his depiction of the various other materials Duck achieves an unprecedented degree of verisimilitude. The artist combines the striking realism with a contemplative mood that is a new quality in his oeuvre and which suits the allegoric subject perfectly. This splendidly preserved painting is a highpoint of Duck’s late career.

Figure 6: Roemer Visscher, emblem from *Sinnepoppen* (1614).



Jacob Duck

Jacob Duck was likely born in Utrecht probably the second son of Jan Jansz Duck and Maria Bool.¹¹ His mother was a linen merchant in Utrecht, where Jacob spent his youth. In 1611 his parents apprenticed him to a goldsmith and he was registered as a master in the goldsmith’s guild in 1619, even appearing in the guild records as late as 1642. In 1620 Duck married Rijckgen Crook, who bore him at least eight children, six of them were daughters who survived childhood. The following year the records of the guild list him as a pupil (“leerlinghe”) of Joost Cornelisz Droochsloot (1586-1666). That same year he is recorded as an apprentice portrait painter (“conterfeyt jongen”). By 1630-32, he was listed as an independent master in the guild’s records, but he must have been painting for a while already because his earliest dated work is even earlier: 1628.¹² Duck stayed a resident of Utrecht during these years and his presence in this town is documented at least until 1649. By 1660, however, he is recorded as living in The Hague. One year later, he is back in Utrecht. He died here 20 or 21 January 1667 and was buried 28 January at the St. Mary Magdalena monastery.

¹¹ For a detailed account of Duck’s life, see Rosen 2003 (note 2), pp. 49-57.

¹² Rosen states that Duck may have been active as a painter as early as 1626, see: Rosen 2003 (note 2), p. 53.



Literature

- *The Burlington Magazine* 56 (1930), June, ill. (adv. R.H. Ward)
- A.W. Moore, *Dutch and Flemish Painting in Norfolk: a history of taste and influence, fashion and collecting*, London 1988, p. 145, note 1 to no. 10
- N. Salomon, *Jacob Duck and the gentrification of Dutch genre painting*, Doornspijk 1998, nr. 9, p. 143, ill. fig. nr. 91 (with erroneous dimensions)
- J. Rosen, *Jacob Duck and the "Guardroom" Painters: minor masters as inventors in Dutch 17th-century genre painting*, PhD thesis (Hebrew University, Jerusalem) 2003, nr. 128, p. 62 (with bigger dimensions)
- J. Rosen, *Jacob Duck (c.1600-1667): Catalogue Raisonné: Oculi. Studies in the Arts of The Low Countries*, Amsterdam 2016, nr. 123, ill.

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