

S P H I N X F I N E A R T



Joseph van Aken (Antwerp 1699 - London 1749)

A Vegetable Seller and his Son Offering Wares to a Lady and a Cleric by a Statue of Bacchus
& *A Vegetable and Fruit Market by a Statue of Venus, with a Town by a River Beyond* oil on canvas, a pair 75.6 x 63.5 cm (29¾ x 25 in)

In *A Vegetable Seller and his Son Offering Wares to a Lady and a Cleric by a Statue of Bacchus* a vegetable seller is trying to convince an elegant young lady to buy some of his marrows. The lady turns away, seemingly uninterested, and the cleric, who is accompanying her on a walk, directs her attention to the size of the vegetable. Standing over the figures is a statue of the Roman god Bacchus. This statue helps contribute to the feel of an Italianate landscape, in which the figures stand. The wind-swept tree to Bacchus' right suggests there is a strong bluster blowing through the landscape, yet there is little other indication of this aside from the dark, overcast looming sky, and the lady having removed her hat. The other figures also seem unaffected, and the river is positively calm.

The accompanying work, *A Vegetable and Fruit Market by a Statue of Venus, with a Town by a River Beyond* is set in a very similar, though brighter, landscape. Greater emphasis is placed on the classical aspects of the landscape, for as well as the statue, which in this case is of Venus, the market is positioned alongside a classical building, and a circular portico is also discernable in the distant town. In the centre of the painting, a lady reels off her requested list of produce to the crouching vendor, whose collection includes cabbages, cauliflowers and artichokes. On the left-hand side, another seller is weighing some cherries, and sitting under the statue a figure rests smoking a pipe.

The two paintings share many characteristics, which help unite them as a pair, the most obvious being

the landscape in which they are set. Both paintings are similar in subject matter, and touch on the contrast between the social classes. This is particularly apparent in *A Vegetable Seller and his Son Offering Wares to a Lady and a Cleric by a Statue of Bacchus*, where the vivid and rich colours of the lady's fine clothing are contrasted with the dirty, muted red of the vendor's tatty and torn coat, thus emphasising their different social statuses. Other details, such as the prominent classical statues, which despite being of different deities, help unite the two pictures as a pair. Similarly, in *A Vegetable Seller and his Son Offering Wares to a Lady and a Cleric by a Statue of Bacchus* a dog is vigorously scratching himself whereas in *A Vegetable and Fruit Market by a Statue of Venus, with a Town by a River Beyond* a dog growls menacingly.

The subject matter of these two paintings is a recurring one within van Aken's oeuvre, having dedicated numerous works to views of Covent Garden, which at the time was the biggest market in London, his [*Old Covent Garden*](#), being such an example. Although this bustling urban scene stands in stark contrast to the peaceful landscapes thus far discussed, the interaction between figures, typified in *A Vegetable Seller and his Son Offering Wares to a Lady and a Cleric by a Statue of Bacchus* and in *A Vegetable and Fruit Market by a Statue of Venus, with a Town by a River Beyond*, is replicated many times over and on a greater scale in *Old Covent Garden*. The figures seen in one work would not seem out of place in another, and it is merely the setting that appears so different. In the foreground of *Old Covent Garden* the vivid colour of the lady's red cloak makes her stand out against the predominantly sombre palette of the painting. The luxury of her clothing, in comparison to the surrounding figures, marks out her social status, as does the servant standing behind, carrying her shopping. On the right-hand side of the painting there is a growling dog, which is almost identical to the one in *A Vegetable and Fruit Market by a Statue of Venus, with a Town by a River Beyond*. This repetition of features is fairly common in van Aken's work, for example a statue of Bacchus also appears in the background of the Tate's [*An English Family at Tea*](#).

Van Aken started his career in Antwerp where he began painting genre scenes in the Flemish tradition. He arrived in London with his brothers around 1720 and continued to produce genre paintings as well as conversation pieces. His *Old Covent Garden* and *The Old Stocks Market* (c. 1740, Bank of England, London) show his adaptation of this genre tradition to contemporary London scenes, and the several versions of these works attest to their popularity. Van Aken also painted portraits, and his conversation pieces such as *An English Family at Tea*, betray a French influence in their lively brushwork and informal composition.

In the 1730s and 1740s, because of his talent in rendering materials of all kinds, such as satin, velvet and gold lace, van Aken abandoned independent work, taking up employment as a drapery painter for other artists. He worked for many leading portrait painters of the day, including Joseph Highmore, Thomas Hudson, George Knapp, Henry Winstanley, Arthur Pond, Allan Ramsay and Joseph Wright of Derby. Usually, these artists painted only the face, leaving van Aken to fill in the rest. Some of these artists often relied heavily on his judgement, an example being Winstanley, who painted his faces on a piece of cloth which van Aken would then paste onto a larger canvas, arranging the composition himself. However, others, such as Ramsay, sent him drawings and instructions suggesting postures and draperies. In 1737, the English writer and engraver, George Vertue, remarked that van Aken had lately excelled in painting 'particularly the postures for painters of portraits who send their pictures when they have done the faces to be dressed and decorated by him'.¹ Van Aken was especially known for his costumes, which were inspired by those in van Dyck's paintings, as well as being derived from Rubens' portrait of *Hélène Fourment* (Museu Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon). One highly fashionable composition, closely modelled on *Hélène Fourment*, was used by Ramsay, Hudson and Wright several times, but it has been demonstrated that the design originated with van Aken. On the work of English portraitists, Vertue remarked 'it's very difficult to know one hand from another', such was van Aken's popularity.² Horace Walpole also remarked 'Almost every painter's works were painted by van Aken'.³ Van Aken's output was so prolific that it has led some to comment that English portraiture in the age of Reynolds would not have existed without him. Artists, to an extent, made their reputations on his ability, and his elegant poses and sumptuous draperies attracted patronage for them. In 1745 his services were solicited by John Robinson, a portrait painter from Bath, but van Aken's other employers were so jealous of his ability that they threatened to withdraw offers of employment if he agreed to work for

Robinson. He received a similar threat when he was offered work by the popular portrait painter Jean-Baptiste van Loo. Such extreme reaction is a gauge of van Aken's popularity at the time, as well as a reflection of his discreet input into the works of important artists. If one looks at paintings such as *A Vegetable Seller and his Son Offering Wares to a Lady and a Cleric by a Statue of Bacchus* or *An English Family at Tea*, one can see why he was so successful. Both paintings have a range of different draperies, belonging to rich and poor, male and female, all of which are invariably brilliantly painted.

In 1748 van Aken travelled to France with a number of artists, including William Hogarth and Hudson, and then by himself to the Netherlands. It was on this trip that, while sketching in Calais, Hogarth was arrested as a spy and on his return immediately began his famous painting *O the Roast Beef of Old England* (or *Calais Gate*; Tate, London).

Hogarth commemorated van Aken's death in 1749 with a caricature depicting the disconsolate portrait painters lamenting at his funeral, and Ramsay and Hudson were joint executors of his will.⁴ Van Aken's younger brother, Alexander van Aken, was also a drapery painter and was employed by Hudson after Joseph's death. Another brother, Arnold, was also an artist, but his output was limited to small conversation pieces and a series of engravings of fish.

¹ R. Edwards, 'The Conversation Pictures of Joseph van Aken', *Apollo*, XXIII, 1936, p. 80

² 'The Note-books of George Vertue', *Walpole Soc.*, xxii, 1934, p. 117

³ Ellis Waterhouse, *The Dictionary of British 18th Century Painters in Oils and Crayons*, 1981, p.377

⁴ Edwards, p. 81

Provenance:

Wilton Gallery, London, 1951;
W.R. Jeudwine collection, London;
purchased by Sir James Hunter-Blair, 7th Baronet (1889-1985), Blairquhan Castle, Scotland;
by descent to Sir Edward Hunter-Blair, 8th Baronet (1920-2006).

Literature:

Ralph Edwards, *Early Conversation Pictures from the Middle Ages to about 1730: a Study in Origins* (Country Life Ltd., London, 1954), p.57;

Francis Russell, 'Confidence and Taste: The Blairquhan Collection' in *Country Life*, 14 August 1986, p.502.

Artist description:

Joseph van Aken was a Flemish painter active in England. He began in Antwerp painting genre scenes in the Flemish tradition but arrived in London with his family around 1720 and continued to produce genre paintings as well as conversation pieces. His *Interior of an Alehouse* reveals his Flemish training, although the figures are wooden and stilted and the work devoid of moralising intent. His *Covent Garden Market* (c. 1726–30; version, London, Museum of London) and *The Old Stocks Market* (c. 1740; version, London, Bank of England) show his adaptation of this genre tradition to contemporary London scenes, and the several versions of these works attest to their popularity. Van Aken also painted portraits and conversation pieces including *A Musical Party on a Terrace* (c. 1725; Eastbourne, Towner Art Gallery & Local History Museum), which betrays a French influence in its lively brushwork and informal composition.

In the 1730s and 1740s van Aken abandoned independent work, taking up employment as a drapery painter for other artists. He worked for Joseph Highmore, Thomas Hudson, George Knapp, Henry Winstanley, Arthur Pond, Allan Ramsay, Bartholomew Dandridge and others. Usually, these artists painted only the face, leaving van Aken to fill in the rest. Some of them relied heavily on his judgement: Winstanley painted his faces on a piece of cloth, which van Aken would then paste on to a larger canvas, arranging the composition himself; others, such as Ramsay, sent him drawings and instructions suggesting postures and draperies. Van Aken was especially known for his costumes inspired by those in Anthony van Dyck's paintings, as well as that derived from Rubens's portrait of *Hélène Fourment*

(Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum).

Horace Walpole's quip 'Almost every painter's works were painted by van Aken' suggests van Aken's prolific output has led to problems of attribution. In addition, artists made their reputations to no small degree on his ability, and his elegant poses and sumptuous draperies attracted patronage for them. In 1745 his services were solicited by John Robinson (c. 1715–45), a portrait painter from Bath; but van Aken's other employers were so jealous of his ability that they threatened to withdraw offers of employment if he agreed to work for Robinson. He received a similar threat when he was offered work by the popular portrait painter Jean-Baptiste van Loo. Such extreme reaction is a gauge of van Aken's popularity at the time, as well as a reflection of his discreet input into the works of important artists. In 1748 he travelled to Paris with Hogarth and Hayman, and then by himself to the Netherlands.

Ramsay and Hudson were joint executors of van Aken's will. His younger brother, Alexander van Aken (d. 1757), was also a drapery painter and was employed by Hudson after Joseph's death. Another brother, Arnold (d. 1736), was also an artist, but his output was limited to small conversation pieces and a series of engravings of fish, entitled *The Wonders of the Deep* (1736).

Collections

Joseph van Aken is represented in the following collections: Tate Gallery, London; Museum of London; Ashmolean Museum at the University of Oxford, Manchester City Art Gallery, amongst others.