

JOSEPH VAN AKEN

(Antwerp? c.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)

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.

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 Italianate feel of an landscape, in which the figures are standing. 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 apart from the dark, overcast sky, and the lady who has removed her hat. The other figures 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 places her order with a crouching vendor whose produce includes cabbages, cauliflowers and artichokes. On the left-hand side, another seller weighs some cherries, and sitting under the statue a figure rests with a pipe in hand.

The two paintings share many characteristics which 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 colours of the lady's fine clothing are contrasted with the dirty, muted red of the vendor's tatty and torn coat. Other details, such as the prominent classical statues, provide a visual link between the two scenes, as does the presence of a dog seen vigorously scratching himself in *A Vegetable Seller and his Son Offering Wares to a Lady and a Cleric by a Statue of Bacchus* and growling menacingly in *A Vegetable and Fruit Market by a Statue of Venus, with a Town by a River Beyond*.

The subject matter of these two paintings recurs throughout van Aken's oeuvre. He dedicated a number of his works to views of Covent Garden, which at the time was the biggest market in London, an example of which is his *Old Covent Garden*, (fig.1). Although this bustling urban scene stands

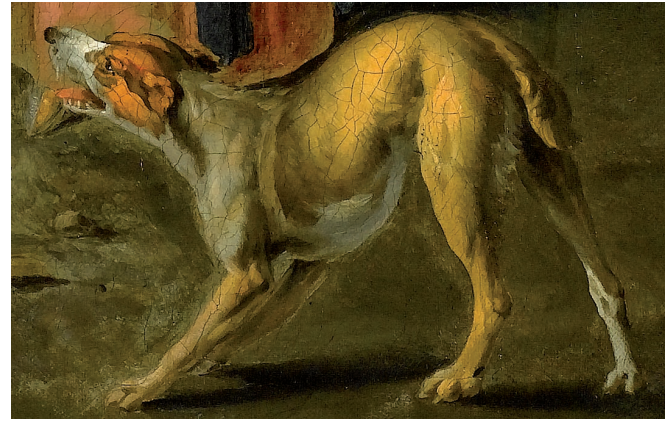
in stark contrast to the peaceful landscapes mentioned so far, the interaction between figures, typified in the present works, is replicated many times and on a far greater scale in *Old Covent Garden*. The figures seen in one work would not seem out of place in another, and it is merely the setting that appears markedly 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 luxurious nature of her clothing, in comparison to the surrounding figures, draws attention to 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 certain motifs is fairly common in van Aken's work, for example, a statue of Bacchus also appears in the background of an *An English Family at Tea* in the Tate, London, (fig. 2).



Joseph van Aken, *Old Covent Garden*, 1725-1730,
Government Art Collection, UK (Figure 1)



Joseph van Aken, *A Vegetable Seller and his Son Offering Wares to a Lady and a Cleric by a Statue of Bacchus* (Detail)



Joseph van Aken, *A Vegetable Seller and his Son Offering Wares to a Lady and a Cleric by a Statue of Bacchus* (Detail)

Van Aken began his career in Antwerp where he painted 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 compositions.

In the 1730s and 1740s, on account of his talent in rendering materials 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 (1692-1780), Thomas Hudson (?1701-1779), George Knapp (1698-1778), Arthur Pond (1701-1758), Allan Ramsay (1713-1784) and Joseph Wright of Derby (1734-1797). Usually, these artists painted only the face of the sitter, leaving van Aken to fill in the rest of the composition. Some of these artists often relied heavily upon 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



Joseph van Aken, *An English Family at Tea*, c.1720, The Tate, London (Figure 2)

1737, the English writer and engraver, George Vertue (1684-1756), 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 Anthony van Dyck's (1599-1641) paintings, as well as being derived from Peter Paul Rubens' (1577-1640) 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 Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792) (see Inventory) would not have existed without him. Artists, to an extent, made their reputations on his ability, as his elegant poses and sumptuous draperies attracted patronage. 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 (1684-1745). Such extreme reactions are a useful gauge of van Aken's popularity at the time, as well as a reflection of his discreet input into the works of important artists. 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*, exemplify the qualities that made his work a success. Both paintings depict a range of different draperies and garments 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 (1697-1764) 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.



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