**Pieter Neeffs The Elder (Antwerp 1578? - Antwerp c. 1656/61)**

**The Interior of a Gothic Church with Elegant Company**
signed 'PEETER NEEFFS' (lower right to the base of the column)
oil on panel
29 x 43 cm (11⅜ x 16⅞ in)

Pieter Neeffs the Elder specialised in views of church interiors, and the present painting is a typical example of his work. In the depiction of the cathedral's interior, Neeffs has strived to convey the geometry and architectural rhythm of the building, as well as its grandeur and scale. The interior depicted here is likely to have been derived from The Cathedral of Our Lady in Antwerp, whose vast nave clearly served as inspiration throughout Neeffs' career, although in Flemish architectural painting 'actual church portraits are unusual – most of the interiors are imaginary views'.[1] Dwarfed by the Gothic grandeur, various members of Antwerp society mill about in the foreground. This serves not only as an artistic device to guide the eye and animate the scene, but it also reflects the central role religious buildings played in seventeenth-century daily life.

One of the outstanding features of Neeffs' work is his handling of tonal variety. In the present work he delicately moves from light to shade, as the sun streams through the tall gothic windows, and plays off the monumental architecture. The sunlight of the present work has a genuine warmth to it, especially when contrasted with *Antwerp Cathedral,* in which the light feels harsher and colder, as if depicted on a winters day. Neeffs took this variation in his treatment of light further still, by often depicting nocturnes.

Neeffs was born in Antwerp, and was probably trained by either Hendrick van Steenwijk the Elder or Younger; the latter's influence is particularly evident in Neeffs' work. Van Steenwijk was a key figure in the development of architectural painting, and Neeffs and his son Pieter Neefs the Younger carried on the Steenwijk tradition in Antwerp.[2] Neeffs' style is characterised by deeply receding spaces, created through the use of linear perspective and contrasting areas of light and dark, qualities very much in evidence in the present work.

[1] Rosenberg, J., Slive, S., & ter Kuile, E. H., *Dutch Art and Architecture 1600-1800* (Penguin Books, Baltimore, 1966), p. 188.
[2] Ibid., p. 189.

**Artist description:**

Pieter Neeffs was a painter and draughtsman and one of a Flemish family of artists. The family specialized in paintings of architectural interiors. Their most frequent subject was the interior of Antwerp Cathedral; the details of sculpture, altars and paintings vary in accuracy, and sometimes the subject seems to be very freely interpreted. The Neefs also liked to depict the effects of artificial illumination in crypt-like spaces (in the manner of Hendrick van Steenwijck the younger).

It has been suggested that Pieter was born just after his elder brothers, who were born in 1576 and 1577 in Antwerp, where the family lived. Pieter was probably taught by Hendrick van Steenwijk the elder or younger; the latter's influence is evident in his work. The earliest record of Pieter Neefs is a signed and dated painting of the *Interior of a Gothic Church* (1605; Dresden, Gemäldegallerie, Alte Meister). In 1609–10 Pieter was enrolled as a master in the Guild of St Luke in Antwerp, and on 30 April 1612 he married Maria Lauterbeens (d 1655–6), with whom he had five children. In 1636 he painted an *Interior of St Paul's, Antwerp* (Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum). His paintings have a delicate tonality with a softness in the transitions between light and shade.

**Collections**

Neeffs is represented in the following collections: The Hermitage, St. Petersburg; National Gallery, London; Wallace Collection, London; National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon; Kunsthistorisches Museum; Vienna; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; Ashmolean Museum at the University of Oxford; Bowes Museum, County Durham; Dulwich Picture Gallery, London, amongst others.