SPHINX FINE ART



Sebastian Vrancx (Antwerp 1573 - Antwerp 1647)

A Landscape with a Convoy on a Wooded Track under Attack

oil on panel
44 x 64 cm (17⅜ x 25¼ in)

Sebastian Vrancx was one of the first artists in the Netherlands to attempt battle scenes and *A Landscape with Convoy on a Wooded Track under Attack* offers an excellent example of his work. A wagon is under attack from bandits who have been hiding in the undergrowth on the right-hand side of the painting. The wagon has stopped as its driver flees for the safety of the bushes, whilst its occupants are left stranded inside. The wagon is guarded by three soldiers on horseback but in their startled state none have managed to engage their attackers. A line of bandits emerge from their hiding place and circle behind and around their victims, thus adding further to the confusion. Two figures remain in the bushes to provide covering fire and above them, perched in a tree, is one of their companions who has been keeping watch for the convoy and now helps to direct the attack. The scene is set in a softly coloured and brightly-lit landscape, which contrasts with the darker theme of the painting.

Attack of Robbers, another scene of conflict, in the Hermitage, also possesses the decorative qualities and Vrancx's typically poised figures, just as in *A Landscape with a Convoy on a Wooded Track under Attack.* A clear narrative, with travellers on horses attempting to ward off robbers, creates a personal and absorbing image. It once more reveals Vrancx's delight in detailing his paintings with the dynamic qualities that make his compositions appealing on both an aesthetic and historical level.

The two works portray incidents of violent ambush that were all too common in Vrancx's time. As Geoffrey Parker notes, 'most military actions of the early modern period involved relatively few troops; many of them also involved civilians' and this is reflected by the helplessness of the civilian victims in these paintings, a recurring theme in Vrancx's work.[1]

These two works depict small surprise attacks populated by relatively few figures and the violence is one-sided in its nature. However, Vrancx also painted military battle scenes which are heavily populated and depict the clashes of large armies, an example being the Hermitage's *Battle Scene.* Although it is considerably more hectic than *A Landscape with Convoy on a Wooded Track under Attack,* the Hermitage's work has comparable features. In both works Vrancx depicts the variety of emotions and actions that are brought about by violence and so the figures engross the viewers' attention. Both works are additionally set in panoramic landscapes and the restrained palettes are enlivened by splashes of red.

Born in Antwerp, it seems probable that Vrancx was trained in the workshop of Adam van Noort (1561-1641), under whom Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) also studied. Vrancx started to paint small-scale cavalry scenes early in his career and over half his oeuvre is devoted to battle scenes. He became an officer in the Antwerp Civic Guard in 1613 and eight years later was made a captain. It was no doubt this first-hand military experience that formed his interest and skill in the depiction of cavalry engagements and the battles of the Dutch wars, leading him to become a key figure in the development of such subjects.

However, Vrancx was an extremely versatile painter and also painted palace architecture, with groups of distinguished people enjoying themselves, allegorical scenes and landscapes. In this latter genre his *Avenue with Trees and a Country House* (Kunsthalle, Hamburg) is particularly noteworthy as it was echoed by Meindert Hobbema's (1638-1709) famous *Avenue at Middelharnis* (1689, National Gallery, London).

Vrancx often collaborated with other artists, providing staffage for painters including Joos de Momper (1564-1635), Jan Brueghel I (1568-1625) and Pieter Neefs the Elder (1578?-c.1656/61). His influence on the genre of battle painting was considerable; in the southern Netherlands he was followed by Pieter Meulener (1602-1654), and in France by Adam-Frans van der Meulen (1632-1690). In the northern Netherlands Vrancx's influence can be seen clearly in the work of Esaias van de Velde (1587-1630) and Pauwels van Hillegaert (1595/6-1640).

We are grateful to Willem van de Watering for confirming the attribution, having examined the work in the original.

[1] Parker, G., *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Warfare,* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 158.

Artist description:

Vrancx is best known for his depictions of battle scenes and was probably the first artist in the northern or southern Netherlands to attempt this subject-matter. He was the son of Jan Vrancx and Barbara Coutereau. Van Mander's claim that he trained as a painter with Adam van Noort seems possible but is unconfirmed. Vrancx's earliest known work, a drawing, is closely related to the Antwerp scrollwork decorations of Cornelis Floris and Cornelis Bos. The next drawings and paintings were executed during Vrancx's stay in Italy (c. 1596–1601) and show strong parallels with the early style of Paul Bril, who was working in Rome, and of Jan Breughel I. Typical examples are the *Massacre of the Innocents and its pendant Crossing the Red Sea* (both 1600; Parma; on dep. Rome, Palazzo Montecitorio); they reveal a liking for anecdotal detail and for colourfully dressed figures who move in a decorative, but

conventional landscape. These features remained characteristic of his style throughout his career. The vividly gesticulating figures and the clumsy trees, which look as if they are made of marzipan, were used only in this early period, before the guild year 1600–01, when Vrancx became a free master.

Early in his career Vrancx, who later joined a civic guard company, began to paint the small-scale cavalry scenes for which he was to become well known. Notable is his untraced Battle between Lekkerbeetje and Bréauté on the Heath of Vught (1601), of which numerous versions survive, including an incorrectly attributed copy. Over half his oeuvre is devoted to this subject-matter, and, apart from Jan Snellinck, Vrancx was the principal artist to introduce the subject of cavalry battles to the Netherlands: in the southern Netherlands he was followed by Pieter Meulener (1602–54) and Jacques van der Wijhen (b c. 1588) and in France by Adam-Frans van der Meulen, who was a pupil of Pieter Snayers, himself a pupil of Vrancx. In the northern Netherlands Vrancx's influence can be seen clearly in the work of Esaias van de Velde and Pauwels van Hillegaert (1595/6–1640). Vrancx's cavalry scenes remained conservative, comparable with those by Antonio Tempesta.

Between c. 1602 and c. 1611 Vrancx produced his first treatments of palace architecture borrowed from Hans Vredeman de Vries, with groups of distinguished people enjoying themselves, and a moralizing undertone. The print after Vrancx by Jacob Matham of the *Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man* (1606; Hollstein, xi, p. 220) is a good example, in which Vrancx organized the space according to a rigid central perspective (a recurring feature in subsequent works); another, later, example is his *Interior of the Jesuit Church in Antwerp* (Vienna, Kunsthistoriches Museum). He also applied this principle to landscape painting: his *Avenue with Trees and a Country House* (Hamburg, Kunsthalle; wrongly attributed to Adriaen van de Venne) is echoed in Meindert Hobbema's famous *Avenue at Middelharnis* (1689; London, National Gallery). Vrancx's trees are taller and less clumsy than before.

In 1610 Vrancx became a member of the Fraternity of SS Peter and Paul, a select society whose members included Peter Paul Rubens. In the guild year 1611–12 he was an associate dean and in the following year chief dean of Antwerp's Guild of St Luke. In 1612 he married Maria Pamphi, daughter of an art dealer and sister-in-law of the painter Tobias Verhaecht, who later became his daughter's godfather.

Not until the next stage in Vrancx's stylistic development, c. 1611–25, did his landscapes and the figures in them show the clear-cut and determined handling of form characteristic of his mature style. He achieved greater control of the representation of space and of large and more complex groups of figures. In this respect, such paintings as the *Siege of Ostend Seen from the Spanish Camp* (1618; ex-Lord Aldenham private colletcion see Vlaamse kunst uit Brits bezit, exh. cat., Bruges, 1956, fig. 41) and the *Festival of the 'Hail-cross' at Ekeren* (1622; Munich, Alte Pinacoteca) are high-points in his oeuvre.

Vrancx's subjects also encompass allegorical scenes, such as the *Months and the Seasons*, and religious and mythological subjects, which he presented as genre scenes with the emphasis on narrative detail. He was a member of the Antwerp chamber of rhetoricians, the Violieren (stocks), which had ties with the Guild of St Luke, and produced paintings for them in addition to his literary involvement. From c. 1625 to 1647 Vrancx gave greater emphasis to the space than the figures in his paintings. A refinement, which originated c. 1620 in the 'aristocratic' characterization of horses, became a feature of the whole image, while the painting of trees became more 'woolly'. Vrancx continued painting until the end of his life; his final works exchange strength for gracefulness.

Vrancx often collaborated with other painters, providing staffage for Josse de Momper (e.g. *Wild Boar Hunt*, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum), Jan Breughel I (e.g. *Raid on a Convoy*, Vienna, Kunsthistoriches Museum), Tobias Verhaecht (e.g. *Hunting Adventure of Emperor Maximilian I*, Brussels), Alexander Keirinck (e.g. *Landscape with Chasing Horsemen*, Darmstadt), Jan van Balen (1611–54) and Frans Francken II together (e.g. *Rebus Arms for the Violieren*, 1618; Antwerp) and Pieter Neeffs (e.g. *Church Interior*, 1613; Brussels). Whenever he worked with other artists, Vrancx provided the figures. However, he usually painted the landscapes in his own works himself, with typically decorative foliage.

Collections

Vrancx is represented in the following collections: Hermitage, St Petersburg; Kunsthistorisches

Museum, Vienna; Louvre, Paris; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; Courtauld Institute of Art, London; Harvard University Art Museums, Massachusetts; Museum Bredius, Netherlands; National Gallery of Victoria, Australia; Royal Museums of Fine Arts, Brussels, amongst others.