SPHINX FINE ART



Kerstiaen de Keuninck the Elder (Courtrai 1560 - Antwerp 1632)

Jacob's Dream

stamped on the reverse with the brand of the city of Antwerp and a panel maker's mark
oil on panel
47 x 64.5 cm (18½ x 25⅜ in)

This intricately wrought scene combines the elements of the imaginative landscapes, for which Kerstiaen de Keuninck the Elder was best known, with a discernible Flemish realism. The figure dressed in a vivid red tunic presents a stark contrast to the otherwise muted and earthy colour palette deployed through the rest of the canvas. This fantastical landscape with its winding paths and striking curvature, is a backdrop for the story of Jacob's dream. A number of de Keuninck's other works depict religious anecdotes set within evocative landscapes such as *Tobias and the Angel* and a landscape featuring Saul on his way to Damascus (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam).

The young shepherd appears to be deep in sleep while his staff rests idly in his hand. Its perpendicularity creates a striking diagonal line, segregating the sleeping figure from the rest of the dream-like landscape. In keeping with the biblical story from the book of Genesis, the shepherd is represented sleeping on a slab of rock. Interestingly, the same reclining figure appears in a similar work by de Keuninck currently in the Bonnefantenmuseum, Mastricht (inv. no. 657).[1]

Whilst in terms of colouring, *Jacob's Dream* contrasts with de Keuninck's *Tobias and the Angel,* there are a number of remarkable similarities between the two: the artist's use of light in the latter is particularly startling with de Keuninck's trademark skilful rendition of light beams from a monochromatic sky. The same response to configuring light can be detected in the present work: a golden suffusion of evening light envelops the twisting rock formations lending a warmth and vitality to the scene. In contrast to the cooler, blue tones of Tobias and the Angel, this work is dominated more by ochre and orange hues that are in keeping with a summer dusk.

De Keuninck the Elder was a Flemish painter primarily of landscapes and vibrant disaster scenes from myths such as the burning of Troy and the fire of Sodom. Together with Joos de Momper II (1564-1635), he continued in the footsteps of the Flemish tradition established by Joachim Patenir (c.1480-1524) rendering imaginary mountain scenery.

The artist is first recorded as being active in Antwerp. In 1580 he was received into the Guild of St. Luke as a master and he took on Carel de Ferrara as an apprentice in 1599. His paintings are generally held to fall into one of two categories: the hilly landscapes which form some of his early output and wooded landscapes. Different moods can also be distinguished within the two types. Paintings that convey a sense of unrest and alienation such as *Tobias and the Angel* diverge from those which are characterised predominantly by a more realistic approach to nature. In these rough categories, *Jacob's Dream* is difficult to place yet arguably the work assimilates the best aspects of both types with its fantastical rocky outcrops but beautifully and realistically rendered leaves and distant townscape.

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[1] see Devisscher, H., *Kerstian de Keuninck 1560-1633,* (Freren 1987), p. 144, cat. no. A4, reproduced.

Artist description:

Kerstiaen de Keuninck the Elder was a Flemish painter who, although from Courtrai, lived in Antwerp from an early age. He was listed in 1577 as one of the recipients of the Poor-box (armenbus) of the Antwerp Guild of St Luke, where he was received as master in 1580. He married in 1585. De Keuninck took on Carel de Ferrara as an apprentice in 1599. His son Kerstiaen de Keuninck the younger (d 1642–3) became a master in 1613. In 1629 Engel Ergo started an apprenticeship with a Kerstiaen de Keuninck: it is not clear whether this refers to father or son.

De Keuninck the Elder's rather limited oeuvre consists solely of landscapes and disaster scenes. No drawings by him are known. In Keuninck's early works (e.g. Rocky Landscape, New York, Metropolitan Museum), the composition, structured along diagonal lines, is dominated by fantastic mountains and rock formations. The foreground and peripheral motifs merge into a dark border that frames the distant landscape view; precise details tend to disappear, as in another Rocky Landscape (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum). His later works, in which he abandoned panoramic views, fall into two categories: hilly landscapes and wooded landscapes. Two different moods can also be distinguished in these works: on the one hand are paintings that convey a sense of unrest and alienation and, on the other, works characterized by a more realistic approach to nature.

De Keuninck's paintings of catastrophes, consisting mainly of representations of the Burning of Troy and the Fire of Sodom, were produced throughout his career and not solely during his early years, as was previously thought (Raczynski, Fechner). These account for a third of his overall production. De Keuninck's work generally possesses some attractive qualities, although his constant repetition of certain compositions reveals his limitations. Individual features include the clearly delineated sunbeams that illuminate certain areas of his landscapes while leaving others in near obscurity.