SPHINX FINE ART

Jan Siberechts (Antwerp 1627 - London 1703)

A Wooded Landscape with Peasants in a Horse-Drawn Cart Travelling Down a Flooded Road

indistinctly signed and dated 'J. Si..rechts 16..' (lower left)
oil on canvas
111.6 x 158.5 cm (43⅞ x 62⅜ in)

A Wooded Landscape with Peasants in a Horse-Drawn Cart Travelling Down a Flooded Road is imbued with pastoral charm and slow-paced activity. The snaking road, only recently flooded, is filled with delightful details. Edged on one side by a steep bank dense with overgrowth, the opposite side of the road is flat and lined with trees with distinctive, brush-like leaves. The viewer's eye is immediately drawn to the horse-drawn cart as it tentatively makes its way through the shallow waters in the near left foreground. Atop a silvery-black horse a young boy, dressed in a red jacket, rides side saddle clutching a stick in his hand. Amongst the horse's load, a wooden cart overflowing with fresh, gleaming vegetables, a peasant woman stares out directly at the viewer.

Jan Siberechts has applied delicate detail to her appearance and costume, thus creating a micro-portrait within the landscape. One can just make out the line of the weave in her conical, wide brimmed hat while her shirt softly plumes beneath a bustier, the folds subtly catching the light. In her right hand she firmly clutches a side-handled metal jug, its mottled surface glistening in the fading light.

Surrounding the woman, an abundance of vegetables fill the cart and spill over into baskets attached to the sides. Cabbages, their leaves soft and pinkish mingle with several large squashes as well as long-stemmed branches tied in bunches that could possibly be celery and a covered basked crammed with artichokes, the outer leaves catching the creamy light. The fresh verdure is painted with detailed precision by Siberechts and once more offers up a miniature study within the larger composition. The variety of vegetables, painstakingly loaded, secured and tethered in the cart, perhaps suggests that the peasant woman and boy are travelling to sell their produce at market.

Behind the cart an ox is seen watering in the shallow flood waters, while along the right-hand side of the road a horse-mounted drover moves his cattle, both oxen and sheep, along the path. Behind the tree-line the peak of a church spire shoots up vertically and the far landscape expands into an empty wilderness.

A Wooded Landscape with Peasants in a Horse-Drawn Cart Travelling Down a Flooded Road, though the date is now unreadable, is an exceptional example characteristic of Siberechts' production during his Antwerp period. These paintings of noble peasants, completed between 1661 and 1672, drew strongly on the rustic way of life that he had observed in Flanders and are generally considered to represent his best works. The recurrence of scenes showing fords or flooded roads through which peasants wade with their cattle, hay wagons and carts laden with vegetables demonstrate Siberechts' predilection for portraying such motifs. These compositions not only display his great skill as a genre painter, but also enabled him to masterfully depict the iridescence of light on moving water. In the present work, the water is gently splashed about by the hooves of the horse and cart as it picks its way through the flood, the light catching the disturbed waters. A similar composition now in the Pushkin Museum, Moscow, shows an almost identical representation of the delicate splashes made by a slow-moving, heavily laden horse and its cart.

Siberechts developed an individual style during these years and his Antwerp paintings sought to synthesise genre and landscape into a single composition. The present work is a particularly successful fusion of the two. Furthermore, Siberechts frequently designed his pastoral scenes within a triangular format and where the bright whites, reds and yellows of the predominantly female figures' simple clothing form colourful contrasts against his cool green landscapes. In *A Wooded Landscape with Peasants in a Horse-Drawn Cart Travelling Down a Flooded Road* the colourful accent is found in the red jacket of the young boy and the composition is triangularly conceived by the flooded road; the overhanging trees lining the path accentuating the shape.

The Shepherdess is another excellent example from Siberechts' Antwerp period, displaying his careful, occasional use of bold colour and triangular design in composition.[1] *The Shepherdess,* as in *A Wooded Landscape with Peasants in a Horse-Drawn Cart Travelling Down a Flooded Road,* is dominated in the foreground by a primary genre figure, here a young shepherdess pensively seated as she catches lice on her clothing.

While the main body of the landscape is bathed in a cool, greenish light the dress of the young shepherdess provides the only bold colour in the composition. Her sky blue skirt, lined with a golden coloured thread and red shirt immediately draws the eye of the viewer. As in the present work, Siberechts has added particular detail to the primary genre scene - here, light reflecting off her crisp white shirt, the hem of her dress and the folds of the fabric - creating a meticulous study within the more general Flemish landscape. It is also interesting to note the metallic jug and urn that are placed alongside the shepherdess. Also included in the present work, round metallic jugs were a favourite motif of Siberechts and were painted with painstaking detail as if to make them almost tangible. In the paintings from this period peasant women are frequently shown surrounded by, holding or carrying such urns and jugs.[2]

By placing the young shepherdess in the right-hand corner, the triangular composition of *The*

Shepherdess is carefully constructed by the angled branches of the overhanging willowy tree and the placement of the seated cows behind and beyond the girl. Until 1665, Siberechts was primarily concerned with light effects but thereafter his focus shifted towards the representation of volume and shape. This was achieved through the sparing placement of dominant figures in the foreground, as utilised in both *A Wooded Landscape with Peasants in a Horse-Drawn Cart Travelling Down a Flooded Road* and *The Shepherdess.*

Trees begin to take on a more individual role. Having once been used merely for thick, curtain foliage the trunks and branches now stand out as distinctive features. In *A Wooded Landscape with Peasants in a Horse-Drawn Cart Travelling Down a Flooded Road* Siberechts has applied great detail in precisely depicting the leaves of the trees that line the flooded path. Equally in *The Shepherdess,* the soaring tree behind the seated girl is carefully modelled and painted, in particular the light catching the delicate leaves and tangible bark surface. Bearing these features in mind, although the present work is undated, the work could perhaps be dated to after 1665.[3]

Jan Siberechts was born in Antwerp, the son of a sculptor. He was first apprenticed to the Flemish painter Adrian de Bie (1594-1661) and he became a master of the Guild of St. Luke in the city in 1648. His earliest dated works reveal the influence of the Dutch Italianates, for example Jan Both (c.1610-1652) and Nicholaes Berchem (c.1620-1683). As the Dutch Italianates were active primarily in Rome, it is most likely that Siberechts would have seen their work in Antwerp, though it is possible that he may have visited Italy during the 1640s. By 1661, however, Siberechts had moved away from the work of the Dutch Italianates and developed his own personal style combining genre with landscape painting.

Siberechts' growing reputation in Antwerp led him, in 1670, to receive a commission from George Villiers, 2nd Duke of Buckingham (1628-1687) who had seen the artist's work during a visit to the southern Netherlands. Siberechts was invited to England to decorate the Duke's Berkshire residence at Cliveden which he completed between 1672 and 1673. Like many other Dutch and Flemish artist émigrés during the seventeenth century, he travelled widely around England during the later 1670s and 1680s completing numerous commissions for aristocratic clients.

He was favoured for his English landscapes which he painted in his own inimitable Flemish style. He was interested in portraying impressive trees with soft light on the horizon, but now relegated the importance of figures in favour of the wider landscape.[4] He did not fully abandon his earlier style of painting, however, and still continued to occasionally complete rural genre scenes, see for example *A Horse-Drawn Cart with Two Women Travelling down a Flooded Road at the Edge of a Wood.*

However, it was his reputation for painting country house portraits, a new fad amongst the rural aristocracy, that secured him the most impressive commissions in England and for which he is perhaps best known. His depiction of Longleat House, completed in 1675 and still in situ is particularly notable, as well as Chevely in 1681, Chatsworth in 1694 and Wollaton in 1695. These formal topographical landscapes are more sombre than his earlier works and employ a more muted colour palette, though still reflect his Flemish background.

Historically, these scenes are highly significant as they are amongst the earliest representations of the English landscape. Siberechts led the way for later topographical artists such as Richard Wilson (1713-

1782) (see inventory) and Canaletto (1697-1768) who developed the genre to its sophisticated apex in the eighteenth century. Siberechts remained in England until his death in 1703. This picture was authenticated by Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, July 1928.

[1] A similar composition showing a shepherdess catching lice on her clothing - though the background differs - is now held in the Louvre, Paris, and which was once owned by John Constable (1776-1837).

[2] See for example, Jan Siberechts, *Studies of Four Women,* seventeenth century, The Courtauld Gallery, London (D.1952.RW.2020)

[3] T. H. Fokker, *Jan Siberechts,* Brussels, 1931, p. 93 (illustrated as dated '1668')

[4] See for example, *Landscape with Rainbow,* Henley-on-Thames, c.1690, Tate Collection, London.

Provenance:

With J. Boehler, Munich, 1928;
Wigger, Garmisch-Partenkirchen;
with Dr. F. Rothmann, Berlin, 1932;
Bratten, Stockholm;
Anonymous sale, Lempertz, Cologne, 21-23 May 1981, lot 137.

Literature:

T.H. Fokker, *Jan Siberechts,* Brussels, 1931, p. 93, as signed and dated 1668 and possibly a workshop copy on the basis of photographs;

Julia Ward, *Jan Siberechts (1627-1703) - A 17th century Flemish Landscape Painter of Innovative English Estate Portraiture, Including Catalogue Raisonné*, Bucks, 2016, p. 359, no. 31.

Artist description:

Jan Siberechts was a Flemish painter who was active in England. He was the son of the sculptor of the same name and became a master in the Guild of St Luke in Antwerp by 1648. He married in 1652 and moved to England sometime between 1672 and 1674. About 100 landscape paintings by him are known, 65 of them dated.

Siberechts's earliest dated works, such as his *Italianate Landscape* (1653; Berlin, Gemäldegalerie), reveal the influence of the Dutch Italianates, some of whose works he probably saw in Antwerp, rather than in Rome where they were active. Between 1661 and 1672 he developed an individual style that took its inspiration from rustic life in Flanders. These compositions have a symmetrical triangular plan in which the bright whites, reds and yellows of the predominantly female figures' simple clothing form colourful accents against the cool green landscapes. Scenes with fords or flooded roads through which peasants wade with their cattle, hay wagons and carts laden with vegetables recur (e.g. *Ford with Hay Wagon*, Karlsruhe, Staatliche Kunsthalle), enabling Siberechts to depict the glittering of light on moving water. The backgrounds, generally cut off by an impenetrable, dull-coloured screen of foliage, emphasize the figures, animals and brightly lit road in the foreground. His works made until 1665 display an obvious interest in light effects. Thereafter, the representation of volume and shape became a predominant concern, expressed through, for example, more prominent figures, placed sparingly in the foreground. He opened up the curtain of trees characteristic of his earlier paintings, allowing trunks and branches to stand out as decorative features.

George Villiers, 2nd Duke of Buckingham (1628–87), became acquainted with Siberechts's work in 1670 during a visit to the southern Netherlands and invited him to England, where he helped decorate the Duke's residence at Cliveden, Bucks (1672–3). During the latter part of the 1670s and in the 1680s Siberechts travelled widely in England, establishing a reputation through numerous commissions from

aristocratic clients. He painted English landscapes in much the same style as he had used before, distinctly Flemish although quite independent of Peter Paul Rubens or the Brussels school. In these works and in Siberechts's few surviving watercolours he was particularly interested in portraying mighty trees and soft light on distant hills, making the figures less important than the landscape. The viewer's eye is drawn towards the broad, brightly lit vista in the background, while the foreground is kept relatively dark.

Siberechts was commissioned by his English patrons to paint hunting scenes and what were the first country house portraits, for example the *Viewof Longleat* (1675; Longleat House, Wiltshire). These were all constructed to the same design, the aristocrats as huntsmen and horsemen in the foreground of a naturalistic view of the stately home, set in a misty and atmospheric landscape. These scenes, though compositionally dull, have significant historic and topographical interest and, above all, exercised considerable influence on English landscape painting. Siberechts has a claim to be regarded as the 'father of British landscape' (Waterhouse).