

FINANCIAL TIMES

Pieter Brueghel the Younger: 'The Census at Bethlehem'

Johnny Van Haefen will be showing something very unusual at Frieze Masters

By Jan Dalley
October 11, 2013

"I can tell you, it nearly blew my socks off," Johnny Van Haefen laughed. "In my – what is it? – almost 44 years in the art world I've never known an experience like this."

Van Haefen, one of London's most respected dealers in Old Masters, sounded almost breathless as he told his story. Speaking from his Mayfair gallery, he was describing his first sight of a painting by Pieter Brueghel the Younger that has for the 400 years since its creation been completely unknown to the world.

It has been continuously in the possession of the same English family since a distant ancestor bought it, direct from the artist's studio, in Antwerp in 1611.



The Census at Bethlehem' (c1611)
by Pieter Brueghel the Younger

The owners had never publicised their precious possession, although they were well aware of its pedigree. Until the 1950s they even had among the family papers the original receipt, Van Haefen tells me, made out in Antwerp in 1611 for the purchase price of 200 florints. (If that mislaid piece of paper ever comes to light, it will in itself be a fascinating object for art historians.)

After its purchase the work simply disappeared from public view into quiet domesticity, and for four centuries its very existence has remained unknown even to the most assiduous of Brueghel scholars. And of all the extraordinary circumstances of this remarkable story, the oddest – perhaps – is that Van Haefen discovered it in Africa. Taken to east Africa together with other family possessions in the 1940s, the picture was for many years on loan to the family of Lord Delamere in the Rift Valley, and is now owned by offshore trustees of the Delamere family.

"As soon as I saw it, there was no doubt," Van Haefen tells me. "And literally no outsider had seen it before."

It shows a relatively obscure Biblical subject, "The Census at Bethlehem", which is mentioned in the Gospel according to Luke, Chapter Two. But if it's hardly one of the best known of Bible stories, it's a subject very well known to connoisseurs and enthusiasts of Flemish painting of the period, because Brueghel's father, Pieter the Elder, made the first version of the painting in 1566, three years before his death. It is one of the best and most characteristic of the master's works, and has long been housed in the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts in Brussels.



Pieter Bruegel senior (who used no “h” in his name) had a stellar reputation, even in his lifetime; today, every one of the 35 works of his that we know are in museums and other institutions, and obviously nothing comes or will ever come to the market. Even when he was alive and actively working, it would have been difficult to obtain a picture – his reputation was such that most went straight to the royal houses of Europe.

His son Pieter, who was born in 1564 and could therefore barely have remembered his father, continued the legacy, slavishly following in his famous father’s footsteps and devoting many of the resources of his own substantial and successful studio to creating versions of the earlier masterworks.

There are, in fact, 13 versions of “The Census at Bethlehem”, nine of them in museums. This newly discovered painting therefore counts as the 14th “Census”.

But it is an exceptional one, says Van Haeften. “None of the others have so much of the character of Pieter the Elder as this one. There’s a detail – a young man tying on his skates at the edge of the pond – which appears here; it’s in the original but in none of the other versions.

“And there are some other details – above the tax collector’s house, in the picture, is the Hapsburg coat-of-arms, a little dig at the authorities of the time, a bit of fun.”

But is this painting, in his expert opinion, by the hand of Pieter the Younger himself?

“All the versions of the subject have some degree of studio participation,” Van Haeften replies, “but the quality of workmanship even in many of the smaller details in this one is so high that we do think it was by him. There is really exceptional quality here.”

The story of a lost masterpiece mouldering in the African climate conjures up a romantic but frightening image of decay and depredation. (Van Haeften had already told me that when the picture was first moved from the dining room wall in its east African home, a long-dead and desiccated gecko fell out of the back.)

In fact, he says, the condition was “amazingly good”. The mild climate of the Rift Valley – which must have contrasted interestingly with the snowy scene depicted in the painting – meant that neither extremes of damp or heat affected it much. “It’s on canvas,” Van Haeften adds, “so there was no problem with the shrinkage of wooden panels. It had only been cleaned about twice in its whole life – extraordinarily unusual for a work of this age. There was a bit of termite infestation, but not in the picture itself, only in the frame – and anyway that was a 19th-century frame, not the original.”

Only one other art-world authority has seen the work since its return to Europe. Christina Currie, an Antwerp-based author and expert on the Bruegels, was as overwhelmed as Van Haeften by the discovery – and as certain that what she saw was beyond question the work of the younger Brueghel. Because it is of such unusual interest, the painting will be going to Currie’s laboratory in Belgium for a full technical analysis in due course.

But before that will come the moment of drama. The painting will make its first appearance to the wider world next week at Frieze Masters. Cleaned, relined, restored and reframed in an appropriate fashion, “The Census at Bethlehem” will be the highlight of Van Haeften’s stand. It will be the first time the gallerist has exhibited at Frieze Masters; in fact he declared himself not to be an enthusiast of art fairs, the only other one that tempts him now being Tefaf at Maastricht, of which he is an Executive Committee member.

“I said I’d never do another,” he declares, “after [the demise of] the Grosvenor House fair. But then I have never before found a picture that has been unknown for 400 years.”

And the price for this unique painting, with its romantic backstory and its immaculate provenance? £6m.