



Jacob van Oost (Bruges 1601 - 1671)

A Young Man at a Stone Window Playing a Theorbo

Signed and dated on the ledge lower center :
I.V.OOST.F: 1646
Oil on canvas 35 1/16 x 29 5/8 in. (89 x 72.5 cm.)

A young man with shoulder length hair appears half length in a stone window. He turns to the viewer's left, and meets our gaze. His cape is dark green and his white lace collar and cuffs have a scalloped design. He plays a theorbo, a popular seventeenth century lute featuring two sets of strings and pegs, one above and somewhat to the side of the other. Mariagrazia Carlone identified it specifically as a 12-courses lute, which purportedly was invented by Jacques Gauthier about 1630 and enjoyed widespread popularity in the Low Countries. The man stands against a neutral dark background. The whole composition is framed by a gray architectural surround, on the bottom of which the man rests his left arm. His features are sufficiently individualized to suggest a portrait.

As Meulemeester observed in cataloging this picture (1984, pp. 270 – 71), half length, life-size figures playing a lute were first popularized by Caravaggio (see his Lute Player in the Hermitage, St Petersburg), and were produced in the South by artists like Lionella Spada, José de Ribera, Pietro Paolini and Antiveduto Grammatica, and in the North by Hendrick ter Brugghen, Gerrit van Honthorst, Dirck van Baburen, Jan Lievens, Jan van Bijlert, Theodoor Rombouts, Gerard Seghers and Ludovico Finsonius. Jacob van Oost was the leading artist of his day in Bruges and an accomplished portraitist, genre and history painter. His portraits are usually detached and impersonally reportorial, but occasionally have a disarming directness, even psychological subtlety, as for example in the Portrait of Boy Aged Eleven, Possibly Jacob van Oost the Younger of 1650 in the National Gallery, London (inv. 1137; Meulemeester 1984, no. A29), which seems to depict the artist's son, viewed three quarter length and lost in thought, holding a muff and wearing a fur-trimmed hat. The bust length painting of Two Boys

ascribed to van Oost, also in the National Gallery (inv. 3649; Meulemeester no. B69), is also memorably expressive. Here the figure stares out at the viewer with a pointed gaze, expressing something akin to longing, presumably inspired by his music. Van Oost's genre scenes can also evocatively capture the inner life of the figures, as in the surprisingly solemn and introspective *Young Man Receiving a Letter from an Old Woman*, Museum, Lyon (inv. A121; Meulemeester no. A22). These works share with the present painting the memory of Caravaggio in the use of pronounced contrasts of light and shade and a devotion to naturalism, but are tempered with a softer manner that attests to van Oost's Flemish roots.

At the very moment that he was producing these secular works, the versatile Van Oost was also executing large scale, iconographically complex and hieratic religious paintings; dated the same year, 1646, as the present painting, is his altarpiece of *Christ Presenting the Redeemed Universe to God the Father and the Holy Ghost in the St. Gillis-Kerk*, Bruges (Meulemeester no. A25, ill. no. 144), which testifies to the artist's profound devotion to the tenets of the Counter Reformation and the legend of St. Augustine. Van Oost returned to the musical theme in a large painting which is probably a group portrait in the *Musical Company of 1667*, now preserved in the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Brussels (inv. 4322; Meulemeester no. B64, ill. 116). There too the execution of still life details, as in the lovely record of the foreshortened neck and curling strings of the theorbo in the present work, is observed with special care. Compare also the *Two Musicians* attributed to van Oost in the Sale Marc-Arthur Kohn, Paris (Drouot), March 22, 2001, lot 1.

The frame that encircles the present work may indicate that it was originally designed to be installed in an architectural setting, which presumably would have enhanced the illusionism of the window motif. At least one other painting by van Oost features a painted frame, *The Portrait of Jean Baptiste Huyghe and Anne Pétronille Loschaert*, Sale Coutau-Bégarie, Paris (Drouot), November 24, 2006, lot 34 (rejected by Meulemeester, no. C57, who apparently had not seen the painting, which is fully signed and dated 1648).

The present work may have been trimmed by perhaps one half inch at the top, but is unlikely to have lost more because its craquelure indicates that the cross piece of the stretcher is almost exactly in the center of the canvas.

The provenance of the painting is of interest. It descended from about 1854 to the present in the family of Jean-François Michiels, who was a photographer and member of the Royal Academy of Fine Art in Bruges. He taught photography to the Crown Prince of Prussia (the future Emperor Frederick III) before traveling to St Petersburg to photograph many of the major paintings in the Hermitage. While there he acquired a number of paintings, including the present work and kermis scene by David Teniers the Younger. These appear in an inventory of the Michiels Collection, which was drawn up for insurance purposes in 1907.

Peter C. Sutton

Provenance:

Acquired by Jean-François Michiels in St Petersburg, Russia, c. 1854; by descent to his daughters, Coralie and Léonie Michiels, 1907; and thence by descent to owners who consigned it to the following, Sale, London (Bonhams), July 8, 2009, lot 67.

Literature:

Jean Luc Meulemeester, *Jacob van Oost de Oudere en het zeventiende-eeuwse Brugge* (Bruges, 1984), pp. 270 – 271, cat. no. A24