

Antonius Leemans

The Hague 1631 - 1673 Amsterdam

A Vanitas Still Life Homage to Admiral Maerten Harpertszoon Tromp

Oil on canvas

84,5 x 67 cm (33 1/3 by 26 1/2 in.)

Signed and dated: ALeemans. F. 1655

Provenance:

Private Collection, U.S.A.

Sotheby's New York, October 21, 1988, lot 34

Private Collection, Paris

On account of its literary symbolism, often rather elaborate, the Vanitas¹ occupied a special place among the forms of Dutch still-life painting. It was intended to convey to the spectator a message of clearly moralizing import... Hope of resurrection may be included; symbols of transience also form components of the Vanitas.²

The Vanitas Still Life Homage to Admiral Maerten Harpertszoon Tromp by Antonius Leemans is a beautiful and complex example of this peculiarly Dutch form of still life painting.

Antonius Leemans was a still life painter born in The Hague in 1631. His work is relatively rare but of very high quality. Many of his paintings reveal the influence of the great Pieter Claesz, especially in their tendency toward the

monochromatic, although Leemans was never slavishly imitative. Even though there is no record that Leemans ever studied in Leiden, the influence of Rembrandt and his colleagues may be considered. The city of Leiden had become the centre of Dutch Vanitas-painting. *The most important reason was, no doubt, the fact that its university was the stronghold of Dutch Calvinism. Calvin laid very great stress on the moral aspects of life and vehemently condemned everything that could be called wordly.³ There was also its well known Faculty of Letters where philosophy was studied and emblems à la mode. From 1625 onwards the poet Jacob Cats was a governor of the university, where he found scholars and students who understood and approved his ingeniously chosen symbols.^{4 (5)} Although all earthly possessions and authority are declared as vain, the hypocritical spirit of Calvinism never leaves any doubt that their real substance remains undisputed and that political power is kept intact. Leemans' style is simple, quiet, and realistic, whether the subject is a compositions of papers, vessels, and musical instruments, or his occasional group and family portraits. His career was long and varied, as he is recorded as working at The Hague in 1657, and at Utrecht in 1663, he died in Amsterdam in 1673.*

- 1) The term *Vanitas* occurs already in inventories of the seventeenth century. K. Inv. gives numerous examples.
- 2) Bergström (1956) p.154
- 3) The main purpose of the university was to produce priests.
- 4) In this connection the famous *Theatrum anatomicum* in Leiden should not be forgotten; dissections were performed there, and excited the imagination of artists.
- 5) Bergström (1956) p.158



Den Vyerigen TRIUMPH-WAGEN van
Den Droomen
MARTEN HERPERTS. TROMP

Ridder, in zijn leven L. Admiraal van Hollandt en West-Vriesslaucht, door
een vyerige Copel opgenomen, ont naelende de heffelicken Mantel, of Olyftack des Vredes.

Zijn E. isht. 1653. Gestorven. A. 1654. is Vrede met Engelandt versterven.

Ziet hier den grooten Triomf van Heel opghewen
Rijck op *Etha Kets* om heerliche te leven
Sou zegenpalt hien. *Nitronis Pelt* zijn
Die sterfend vrede haant, en ziet en alligiar
Hoe en *uere punit* die *Valuieren* *Reveren*
Niet wat nu hie *geklint* en zal nu wel *verderren*
Ik *in den wyl* geens, ik *werd* *in der hart*
Vermits al voor het Landt mij met en het *gehoert*
Dit *is de zout* dat *de d'lych* van *my geboort*
Dien nu, *meer en meer* *geu* *Aplos* *in de heere*
En in *te magen* *geu*, *dat hie* *lych* *lych* *lych*
Ik *heer* *gehoert* *el my*, *al* *heer* *duer* *we* *geu*
Diet *ge* *lych* *geu* *geu*, *en* *Elixens* *niet* *beslaven*
Hie *gehoert* *lych* *geu* *lych* *lych* *lych* *lych*
Diet *en* *keu* *lych* *geu* *lych* *lych*
Niet *duer* *en* *lych* *geu* *lych* *lych*
Diet *geu* *lych* *geu* *lych* *lych* *lych*
En *lych* *geu* *lych* *geu* *lych* *lych*
En *lych* *geu* *lych* *geu* *lych* *lych*
Wat *heer* *lych* *geu* *lych* *lych* *lych*
A *lych* *geu* *lych* *geu* *lych* *lych*

Want zoic Helden-deet, een Hagen voor haar Zelen
Dicharten Hesel voert met wonder sels-wielen
Zie een Zege kout die Triomf was toebereit
En die hem na het Ruyck van zijnen Vader leut
God woud hem, nu de doot in hoeg gebove Zelen
Met onbegrepen vrucht, en heren lust onthalen
Dus fchencken zoete Vre, en inwon van genucht
Ziet en v'keer heit hi Ze, noch Doet gevlucht
Nu dien hi lang den Inank des Hemels hie gekregen
Soust hem ook de twif en al de werlt legen
De Vrede was zyn lust den Hemel was sin zin
O *Alte* *Helden* *Reem*! hoe groot is u *Geu*!
Gelijc de zoete frus quam van den stercken Eter
Geluck den honing zoet quam vande dode Wreter
Ten tijden van dien Helt die Israel verlost
Zou kom nu zote Vre naer uwe doot te post
God geue dat de Vre der Eueren noit en sterue
God geue dat de Vre der Broeders noit verduie
O *lych* *lych* *lych* *lych* *lych* *lych*
Met stale Vrede Eant na I Christ geboorte bleit

CASPARUS de CAEPENTIER.

1722

This particular picture is an example of Leeman's finest, most carefully composed work. A beautiful still life in its own right, it is also an ingenious tribute to the Admiral Maerten Harpertsz. Tromp, a famous naval leader whose brilliant maritime strategies helped to expand Dutch seapower. Tromp had greatly increased his country's naval forces at a time when it was most crucial; Holland and England were engaged in an ongoing struggle for control of the English Channel, an advantage that Holland finally gained, when Tromp defeated Robert Blake at the Battle of Dungeness in 1652. One year later, however, they lost this control again, this time when Tromp was defeated by a much larger English fleet at Gobbard's Shoal; and at the battle of Scheveningen Tromp was killed on the bridge of his boat *Aemilia*⁶ in the attempt to break the English blockade of the Dutch navy. The poem depicted in this still life praises Tromp's valor and his achievements and commemorates his courageous death in the service of his country.

Besides being a memorial to a specific person however, the work is also a beautifully painted vanitas still life. It is intended as a reminder to the viewer that life in this world is fleeting, and the objects depicted are imbued with symbolic meanings along these lines. The violin and sheets of music symbolize human learning and artistic striving, the deed with the official seal represents worldly wealth and power, and the goblet of wine reflects bodily pleasures. The skull, which had become a recurring iconographic component in a large number of paintings, is present in the midst of all these good things as a symbol of transience; the snuffed-out candle represents both the end of a particular human life (here that of Admiral Tromp) and the fact of death in general.

The work is beautifully painted in a delicate, monochromatic color scheme, accented by the reds of the seal and the wine. In this respect Leemans' work coincides also with the development of the Vanitas still life in Leiden. Under the influence of Rembrandt the grey was soon replaced by a warmer brown tone.⁷ Compositionally the strongly marked horizontals and verticals are offset by the diagonal of the violin, which seems to project out of the picture plane. Blending two compositional principles Leemans marks the period of execution of this painting, where the diagonal composition is abandoned for the main constructional line in order to satisfy the new popularity of upright panels towards the middle of the century.

Another still life by Leemans of similar composition and tonality can be found in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam (pl.1). The subject is similar as well; it is a *Vanitas* with a copy of De Waere Mercurius, a broadsheet with the news of Tromp's victory over three English ships on 28 June 1639, and a poem telling the story of *Apelles and the cobbler*. Leemans painted the Rijksmuseum's Vanitas in the same year as our still life and his historical recourse to the life of the victorious Dutch admiral shows the dialectical character of these still life paintings. Like the violin, which usually denotes which taste and pleasure, here *the instrument has to be regarded as a warning against a lazy and sinful life*.⁸ Wealth and power of the ruling parties are often the target of Vanitas still lives, but here we find a homage to a tool of politics.

6) Bol (1973) p. 19

7) Bergström (1956) p.159

8) Bergström (1956) p.156



Pl.1 Anthony Leemans, *Vanitas*, oil on canvas 78 x 72 cm
 signed and dated: Anthonius Leemans Fecit 1655
 Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv.no. A 752