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EST. 1817

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Theodoor Rombouts
(Antwerp 1597–1637 Antwerp)

Card Players in an Interior

Signed lower right: T. ROMBOVTS

Oil on canvas

57⁷/₈ x 73¹/₄ in. (147 x 186 cm.)



Provenance

Baron Corneille Osy de Zegwart (1757–1831); and by descent to Jean Osy de Zegwart (1792–1866).

And my descent to Baron Edouard Osy de Zegwart (1832–1900), governor of Antwerp.

And by descent to Baroness Osy de Zegwart and by descent in her family until 2014.

Theodoor Rombouts was the primary exponent of Flemish Caravaggism, a brief but important artistic phenomenon that peaked in the 1620s. Born in Antwerp in 1597, the history and genre painter is best known for his large-scale secular works depicting merry companies, music scenes and card-playing characters in compact compositions. His half-length figures, firmly modelled and always lively, wear theatrical costumes and are set in chiaroscuro lighting typical of the Flemish Caravaggisti, also known as the Antwerp Tenebroosi. The artist began as a pupil of François van Lanckvelt in 1608 and then studied under Abraham Janssens (c.1575–1632), whose influence is evident throughout his career. Sometime after drafting his last will and testament in 1616 Rombouts left for Rome where he quickly embraced the style of Caravaggio (1571–1610) and Bartolomeo Manfredi (1582–1622). There is little known about his time in Italy but the documentation that does exist places the artist in the Roman parish of Sant'Andrea delle Fratte in 1620, which means that Dirck van Baburen (c.1592/93–1624), David de Haen (1585–1622)

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and Manfredi were living nearby. Enticed by the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Rombouts also probably worked in Florence.

Rombouts returned to his native city in 1625; he became a master in the painters' guild and a dean of the guild from 1629 to 1630. In 1627 he married Anna van Thielen, the sister of one of his pupils, flower painter Jan Philip van Thielen (1618–1667). The couple welcomed the birth of their daughter, Anna Maria, the following year. The successful artist painted mostly for private clients and for the open market but he also executed some altarpieces, with most commissions coming from Ghent. Though best known for his work in the Caravaggesque idiom, Rombouts's artistic development after returning to Antwerp followed popular taste. As the fashionable interest in Caravaggism began to wane after 1630, the savvy artist moved in the direction of Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) and Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641), towards greater refinement in his palette and surfaces. According to Leonard J. Slatkes, Rombouts's works were always only superficially Caravaggesque and were more profoundly shaped by the influences of his many Flemish baroque contemporaries.¹ Little is known of his Antwerp workshop but his pupils included Nicolaas van Eyck (1617–1679), Jan Philip van Thielen and Paulus Robyns. Near the end of his life he attempted to replicate a house and studio in imitation of Rubens. The costly endeavour apparently incurred heavy debts, which he never had the opportunity to resolve due to his untimely death in 1637.

The present work, *Card Players in an Interior*, belongs among the finest and most representative works of Rombouts's Caravaggesque genre scenes. Recalling Manfredi's merry company pictures, there is a marked sense of monumentality to the five figures that are arranged around a carpeted table, engaged in a game of cards. The individuals are realistic and expressive; the scene appears convincingly spontaneous and natural. Rombouts introduces *repoussoir* figures that confront the viewer and direct attention to the central bearded figure who stares down at his hand of cards, presumably a self-portrait. Rombouts also included a portrait of his wife, Anna, in the hatted figure seated beside him. The inclusion of self-portraits and portraits of family

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members was not unusual in Dutch and Flemish genre painting, despite the potentially negative associations of moralising subjects. Card playing was perceived as a time-waster at best and, at worst, was associated with any number of disreputable behaviours. Though no alcohol is depicted, coins are strewn about the table: a reference to the 'unwholesome' activity of gambling. Portraits of Rombouts, his wife and even his young daughter can be seen in another of his works, *The Backgammon Players*, at the North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh (fig. 1), in which the lavishly dressed soldier bears the artist's likeness. This comparison not only confirms the identities of the Theodoor and Anna in our picture but also helps to date it. *The Backgammon Players*, painted in 1634, demonstrates Rombouts's move away from Caravaggism towards the prevailing baroque style as it evolved in Antwerp. Unlike our picture, the Raleigh composition is set in a deeper space with vaguely classicising figures. The palette is brighter, the lighting more diffuse and the costumes more sophisticated. The luxurious shimmering fabrics speak of the direct influence of Rubens and Van Dyck. Our *Card Players* was certainly produced earlier when Rombouts was still painting under the influence of Roman Caravaggism, adeptly applying chiaroscuro and local colour to his rustically expressive scenes.

1. Guy C. Bauman and Walter A. Liedtke, *Flemish Paintings in America: A Survey of Early Netherlandish and Flemish Paintings in Public Collections of North America*, Antwerp, 1992, p. 240.



Fig. 1: Theodoor Rombouts, *The Backgammon Players*, signed and dated on the edge of backgammon board: *T Rombouts f 1634*, oil on canvas, 61¼ x 92 7/16 in., North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh