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EST. 1817

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Willem van Nijmegen

Zaltbommel 1635/6-1698 Haarlem

Trompe l'oeil with engravings and a printed text pasted to a pine board

Signed and dated 'Willem van Nijmegen / fecit et pinxit / Ao. 1688. / 12-2.' (centre right on the left print); and signed 'Willem van Nymegen fecit et pinxit.' (lower centre on the printed sheet)

Oil on canvas, unframed

35 7/8 x 44 7/8 in. (91 x 114 cm.)



Provenance

Anonymous sale; Sotheby's, London, 3 July 1997, lot 44, where acquired by the previous owner.

Literature

A. Tummers, 'The Painter Versus his Critics: Willem van Nijmegen's Defense of his Art', in *Aemulatio: imitation, emulation and invention in Netherlandish art from 1500 to 1800: Essays in honor of Eric Jan Sluiter*, A. Boschloo, et al., eds., pp. 429-434, fig. 1.

Hardly anything is known about Willem van Nijmegen as an artist and, perhaps on account of the rarity of his works, he has generally not been discussed in the literature on Dutch art. He is known today by a small body of work that includes four *trompe-l'oeil* paintings of prints attached to wooden boards, grisaille and illusionistic decorations for the ceilings at Van Amerongen Castle in the province of Utrecht, a pen drawing of a woman reading and a painting of a perpetual almanac which he donated to the regents of the Old Men's Home in Haarlem (now the Frans Hals Museum). Despite this small corpus, van Nijmegen's *trompe-l'oeil* paintings 'comprise some of the most personal and direct seventeenth-century explanations of a painting' and 'provide us with a very vivid picture of the artist and his intentions (Tummers, *op. cit.*, p. 430).

The present painting is perhaps van Nijmegen's most overt statement about his intentions as an artist. In this exceptional image, the artist included below two full-scale engravings of Harpocrates, God of Silence, and the Spartan philosopher, Chilon, by Jan Harmensz. Muller an extended commentary on his art which warrants translating in full:

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‘The Philosopher Harpocrates, God of Silence, with his saying *Put your finger to your lips*, and the Spartan Philosopher Chilon, with his heavenly *Know Thyself*, defend the art of *Willem van Nymegen*, who is being slandered and made suspect, for this effect, [that his art looks] as if it were imprinted engravings, and not painted in oils. If this were true, this master could rightly be held for a hack, a dauber, an inferior painter, by his accusers: However, aware of the opposite, he comforts himself with Cicero, *If an accusation would suffice to make one guilty, who would be innocent?* Furthermore, they rumour that they have seen such a painting a long time ago in Italy and that it was created there. However, the undersigned requests that it be demonstrated if someone before him has created [such a painting], and if this were proven, he would offer this painting and ten golden ducats: And if not, he advises these Batavians to be silent and mindful of the fable of Esopus, *Here in Rhodus, here Jump!*, and that they do not loathe before they can show something superior. As to sticking prints [onto a surface] and removing the paper, the Author is known enough, and those who [would] fraudulently present such works as oil paintings are deemed hacks by him. Never was his art auctioned, and displayed publicly, But now [his art] shows herself to the world, in order to be judged by capable connoisseurs, and to reveal a different deceit; which is why Mr. van Vollenhove says in her honour:

Here art competes with nature, Art is not what it seems

This is painting, drawing and writing, but painted

Therefore the Author lends his name as follows, truthfully and reasonable (contrary to some others). Made and painted by Willem van Nijmegen.

He who does not know how to keep quiet will not know how to speak.’

Van Nijmegen, therefore, defends himself against two accusations questioning the originality of his work: first that he merely copies prints by others in oils without them even appearing to have been painted and second, rather preposterously, that his paintings are derivative of and inferior to similar images produced previously in Italy. The artist addressed the first of these criticisms not simply through the addition of the text below the engravings but through subtle changes he made to the engravings themselves, omitting the original signatures and dates and instead appending his own signature to the portrait of Harpocrates, thereby emphasizing that these illusionistic images are his own designs. Similarly, Tummers has argued that

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the use of 'fecit', which conveys a degree of incompleteness, as opposed to 'faciebat' suggests that van Nijmegen believed this painting was one of his finest works (*op. cit.*, pp. 431-432).

The artist's subsequent claim that 'Never was his art auctioned, and displayed publicly' has been interpreted by Tummers as an indication that the present painting may have been created for such an event (*op. cit.*, p. 434). In the context of an auction, the painting would have been on display and therefore accessible to connoisseurs who might then (knowledgeably) discuss it. In an effort to guide the viewer's response, van Nijmegen appended to the end of the sheet a laudatory couplet said to have been penned by one 'Mr. Van Vollenhove'. This is almost assuredly the famous contemporary writer and preacher Johannes van Vollenhove.