

*A Musical Company*

By

THEODOOR ROMBOUTS

(1597-1637)

Oil on canvas

49 ½ x 42 ¼ inches (125.7 x 107.3 cm)

## THE ARTIST:

Theodoor Rombouts was born in Antwerp in the Spanish Netherlands in 1597.<sup>1</sup> In 1608, he registered with that city's Guild of St. Luke as a pupil of a certain Francois van Lanckvelt (active 1597-1638), who is largely forgotten today. Shortly after his initial training with Van Lanckvelt ended, the young Rombouts most likely entered the studio of Abraham Janssens (1575-1632), a prominent Antwerp master who had lived in Rome between 1598-1602.<sup>2</sup> Like Janssens before him, Rombouts too would embark upon a prolonged and decisive stay in Italy. The opportunities in Italy, especially Rome, were simply irresistible, what with its sizeable collections of antiquities, Renaissance art, and during the early seventeenth century, the powerful lure of paintings by the internationally renowned Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610) and his immediate followers, not to mention the potential prospects of patronage from members of the enormous Roman Curia.<sup>3</sup> Artists from the Low Countries in particular were captivated by Italy, and they journeyed there in large numbers both for artistic and spiritual reasons.

Rombouts reached in Italy in 1616 and would remain there for nine years, until 1625.<sup>4</sup> The Flemish painter would spend much of his extended Italian period in Rome, but during the early 1620's he also sojourned in Florence (1621-24) where he may have worked for Cosimo II de Medici, the Grand Duke of Tuscany.<sup>5</sup> Rombouts could not have arrived in Rome at a more fortuitous time. By 1616, the Eternal City's population exceeded 100,000 inhabitants. It was a truly bustling cosmopolitan metropolis, whose surging commerce and wealth owed much to the rejuvenated Catholic Church in general, and to ambitious papal campaigns to renovate existing churches and initiate new construction projects.

The decade of Rombouts's arrival in Rome was also a decisive one artistically. Caravaggio's death in 1610 had paradoxically facilitated the formation of a 'school' of followers of many different nationalities. In some respects, this school (for lack of a better term) centered on the achievements of the Spanish émigré, Jusepe de Ribera (1591-1652) and the Ostianese painter, Bartolomeo Manfredi (1582-1622). The period 1610 to 1620 therefore witnessed the apogee of Caravaggism in Rome, owing to the sheer popularity of the style, both among collectors and the vast influx of foreign artists who practiced it, including Ribera, Manfredi, the Frenchman Valentin de Boulogne (1591-1632), Rombouts and his fellow Fleming, Gerard Seghers (1591-1651) as well as the Dutch painters Dirck van Baburen (ca. 1592/3-1624), Gerrit van Honthorst (1592-1656), and Hendrick ter Brugghen (1588-1629).

Rombouts's stay in Italy was highly successful. For example, he had several prestigious clients in Rome, including the Marchese Vincenzo Giustiniani and



Cardinal Scipione Borghese. Under the spell of many of the aforementioned masters, Rombouts produced altarpieces, as well as large-scale genre scenes (especially scenes of music-making) often in a horizontal format. Many of these pictures feature dramatic Caravaggesque lighting, spirited figures who (along with their garments) are emphatically modeled, and palettes consisting of vivid local colors. Initially, after his return to Antwerp in 1625, Rombouts continued to paint in his Italian-period style. Yet gradually its pronounced Caravaggesque elements diminished, particularly after 1630, under the decisive influence of such renowned Flemish painters as Anthony van Dyck (1599-1641) and especially Pieter Paul Rubens (1577-1640), with whom Rombouts would collaborate on a large-scale project in 1635.<sup>6</sup> As a result, Rombouts's last pictures are generally brighter, more diffusely lit and more fluid in technique. Our painter passed away in Antwerp at the age of forty, in 1637.

#### THE PAINTING:

**Provenance:** European Private Collection; Sale, Christie's, London, 8 December 2015, lot 23.

**Literature:** Unpublished.<sup>7</sup>

#### Further Comments:

*The Musicians* by Theodoor Rombouts, hitherto unknown, constitutes an exciting and significant discovery that helps to shed light on the renowned master's late period of activity in Antwerp. Unlike so many of Rombouts's other genre paintings, this impressive canvas is oriented vertically. Among the precious few comparable vertical-format pictures in his *oeuvre* is one depicting two musicians, presently in the collection of the Spencer Museum of Art in Lawrence, Kansas. Though linked to our picture by its subject matter, performers, and its verticality, the Spencer Museum canvas, with its unarticulated background and diagonal shaft of light, *trompe l'oeil* musical scores and instrument on the ledge below, and generic figures dressed in Italian costume all indicate an origin in the master's Italian period, dominated as it was by the influence of the work of Caravaggio and his followers.<sup>8</sup>

By comparison, *The Musicians* belongs to Rombouts's late Antwerp period and hence shares few features with his earlier style. Here, we see a standing man in the background playing a recorder, a woman strumming a lute and another man,



turned to engage the viewer, who bows his violin. As has been noted, Rombouts took particular care in his paintings to render musical instruments accurately as well as the manner in which they are played and our picture provides no exception.<sup>9</sup> Here, each of the performers is striking for the vivacious individuality with which they are characterized; hence a far cry from those of the Spencer Museum canvas. Moreover, the brighter, more diffuse lighting and fluid execution of *The Musicians* testify to its Antwerp origins. The elegant pictorial effects on display in our picture tie it to other contemporary works by Rombouts, among them, *Backgammon Players* of 1634 (Raleigh, North Carolina Museum of Art) and *Card Players with a Musician* of circa 1636 (Warsaw, National Museum).<sup>10</sup> These connections confirm the authenticity of *The Musicians* and suggest a date of circa 1635-37 for its inception. The conspicuously Flemish—as opposed to Caravaggesque--style of our picture are also readily discernible in pictures by Rombouts's Flemish colleagues.

An explanation for what had transpired is provided by none other than Gerard Seghers (1591-1651), whose sojourn in Italy had overlapped with that of Rombouts. The German painter and biographer, Joachim von Sandrart (1606-88), had met Seghers in Amsterdam in 1645 (in other words, eight years after Rombouts's death). As he later recorded in his biography of Seghers, published in 1675, the Fleming had confided to him that he had altered his manner of painting upon his return to the city because of the work of Rubens and Van Dyck.<sup>11</sup> His adaptation of their styles would guarantee him, as he relayed to Von Sandrart, considerable income. Rombout's gradual stylistic shift once he returned to Antwerp was likely motivated by similar commercial grounds.

Irene Schaudies has observed that Caravaggesque elements continued to linger in Rombouts's work after he returned to Antwerp, even in paintings that are "Rubens-inflected,"<sup>12</sup> but this seems to be less the case with *The Musicians*. Our picture is thoroughly Flemish in its broad brushwork and color scheme. And what makes it so important compared to so many other contemporary genre paintings by his colleagues is the sheer monumentality of its figures, an impression conveyed by their poses and close proximity to the picture plane; the man's elbow actually punctures that plane. *The Musicians* therefore underscores Rombout's importance for the development of genre painting in Flanders. The clever fusion in these works of musical subjects linked to the artist's Italian years with the bright, painterly and elegant style of Rubens and Van Dyck would be appropriated by a younger generation of Flemish painters, among them, David Teniers the Younger (1610-90) and Joos van Craesbeeck (ca. 1605/06-ca. 1660).

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Wayne Franits', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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1. For a recent overview of Rombout's life and career, see Irene Baldriga, "Theodoor Rombouts (Anversa 1597-1637)," in: *I Caravaggeschi; percorsi e protagonisti*, 2 vols., ed. by Alessandro Zuccari, Milan 2010, vol. 2, pp. 621-29.
  2. Christine Braet, "Theodoor Rombouts (1597-1637): Een monografie," thesis, RU Gent, 1987, p. 4, states that it is uncertain as to whether Janssens taught Rombouts before he departed for Rome.
  3. For Rome in the seventeenth century, see Peter van Kessel and Elisja Schulte, eds., *Rome \* Amsterdam: Two Growing Cities in Seventeenth-Century Europe*, Amsterdam 1997. For the Roman art market, see Patrizia Cavazzini, *Painting as Business in Early Seventeenth-Century Rome*, University Park 2008; and Richard E. Spear, "Rome: Setting the Stage," in: *Painting for Profit. The Economic Lives of Seventeenth-Century Italian Painters*, ed. by Richard E. Spear and Philip Sohm, New Haven - London 2010, pp. 33-113.
  4. The first secure documentation for Rombout's Roman years is only dated 1620. For this reason, among others, Leonard J. Slatkes, writing in *Flemish Paintings in America*, ed. Walter Liedtke, Antwerp 1992, p. 236, argued that Rombouts did not arrive in Italy until shortly before that date. Scholars have generally not accepted his hypothesis.
  5. For Rombout's stay in Florence, see Gianni Papi, "Sul soggiorno fiorentino di Theodor Rombouts," *Paragone* 49 no. 566 (1998): 38.
  6. Namely, the decorations for the *Pompa Introitus Ferdinandi* of 1635.
  7. The present writer is assuming that the painting is unpublished because he did not have access to the thesis by Braet, cited in note 2 above.
  8. This picture is generally thought to date to Rombout's Italian period though Dennis P. Weller, writing in Raleigh, North Carolina Museum of Art, *Sinners & Saints, Darkness and Light, Caravaggio and His Dutch and Flemish Followers* (cat. by Dennis P. Weller et al.), 1998, pp. 181-82, proposes a date

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of circa 1625-30. In this regard, Weller follows the earlier opinion of Slatkes *op cit.* (note 4), p. 238. For musical imagery among the Caravaggisti, see A. P. de Mirimonde, "Les sujets de musique chez les Caravagistes flamands," *Jaarboek van het Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen* (1965), pp. 113-70, esp. pp. 126-42; Frankfurt am Main, Städel Museum, *Caravaggio in Holland: Musik und Genre bei Caravaggio und den Utrechter Caravagisten* (cat. by Jochen Sander *et al.*), 2009.

9. See A. P. de Mirimonde, "The Musicians by Theodor Rombouts," *The Register of the Spencer Museum of Art* 3 nos.3-4 (1965), pp. 2-9.

10. For the painting in Raleigh, see Dennis P. Weller, *Seventeenth-Century Dutch and Flemish Paintings* (North Carolina Museum of Art), Raleigh 2009, pp. 287-90, cat. no. 60; for the one in Warsaw, see Hannah Benesz, *Early Netherlandish, dutch, Flemish and Belgian Paintings 1494-1983 in the Collections of the National Museum in Warsaw...*, 2 vols., Warsaw 2016, vol. 1, pp. 510-11.

11. Joachim von Sandrart, *Teutsche Academie der edlen Bau- Bild- und Mahlereykünste*, 3 vols., Nuremburg (1675-1680), intro. by Christian Klemm, Nördlingen 1994, vol. 1, p. 301.

12. Irene Schaudies, "Trimming Rubens' Shadow: New Light on the Mediation of Caravaggio in the Southern Netherlands," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 55 (2004), p. 358.