



MELCHIOR de HONDECOETER
(Utrecht 1636-1695 Amsterdam)

“The Bird concert, a family of ducks near a pond with a farm in the background”

Oil on canvas: 102,5 x 87,5 cm

Traces of signature at lower right: M., datable to c. 1666



Expertise:

We are grateful to Dr Fred Meijer who wrote a certificate for the work on 09 August 2024 confirming the authenticity of the artwork.

Provenance

Sale collection Konstantin Tifoxilos, Vienna, Wawra, 28 November 1904, lot 75, b&w ill. opposite title page

Galerie Arnot, London 1919

Heirs to Minister Dr. H. Sulzer, Winterthur

Gebr. Douwes Fine Art, Amsterdam, nr. 8377, 1968 shown at the Delftse Antique Fair.

Private collection, The Netherlands

Thence by descent to the current owners

Exhibited:

Kunstmuseum Winterthur, Der unbekante Winterthurer Privatbesitz 1500-1900, September-Oktober 1942 (Kunstverein Winterthur), cat. no. 145

Notes

Ducks by a pond in a landscape. In the centre is a white female tufted duck, flanked on either side by a standing male. At front left sits a black duck. In the pond, at lower right, are two ducklings, at front centre floats a white feather. To the right is a tree and in the left and centre background are farm houses, with to the left a farmer in a doorway and woman doing laundry by a basin, surrounded by chickens.

Melchior d'Hondecoeter or de Hondecoeter was a Dutch painter who was one of the first in the market of still lifes and nature painting to focus on painting all kinds of birds and poultry animals in a sophisticated, sometimes dramatic composition.

The specialty of d'Hondecoeter - painting poultry - was not something the painter acquired from a stranger. His father and grandfather painted animals, and an aunt of his was married to the painter Jan Baptist Weenix, an Italianate painter. After being taught by his father, d'Hondecoeter apprenticed with his uncle Weenix. This allowed him to optimally develop his technique and use of color. In addition to scenes with birds in realistic positions, d'Hondecoeter also painted wallpapers with views of buildings and parks. Birds often played a role here too. The artist was born in Utrecht and died in Amsterdam. From 1659 to 1663 he worked in The Hague.

He liked to study religion and the Bible. Arnold Houbraken, who wrote down the story he heard from Jan Weenix, mentions that D'Hondecoeter always prayed aloud before going to sleep. He did so with such seriousness and ecstasy that his mother and uncle stood silently at the stairs, listening, doubting whether he should be trained as a painter or a preacher. and harmony of colour along with an accurate rendering of objects: flowers, in all their variety; European and tropical fruits; lobsters and oysters; butterflies and moths; stone and metal; snails and sea shells. His still lifes included fruit pieces, vanitas still lifes and flower pieces, but he is best known for his ornate or sumptuous still lifes, the so-called 'pronkstillevens'. Such as the one shown here.



Since Melchior d'Hondecoeter rarely dated his works and was rather consistent in his style and handling once his work had matured in the course of the 1660s, it is difficult to date his works after 1670 accurately. The present painting, however, must be a relatively early work, most probably from the mid-1660s. Several paintings by Hondecoeter are dated before 1670, but often the date is not distinct.⁴ The first reliable date, 1658, is found on a painting of a barking dog and game in Le Havre.⁵ A date with an indistinct last digit is found on a painting of a dog and chickens (see expertise fig. 7) which must date from the early 1660s.⁶ In the course of the 1660s, Melchior d'Hondecoeter improved his technique and attention to detail, paying meticulous attention to the plumage of the birds he portrayed. This is very clear in the present painting and in the next known dated work, from 1668 (see expertise fig. 8). His composition in that painting has become more monumental and crowded, which places the present painting before 1668, feasibly in or around 1666.

Museums with Hondecoeter paintings in their collections:

- Rijksmuseum Amsterdam,
- Louvre Museum,
- Centraal Museum Utrecht,
- Museum Boijmans van Beuningen,
- The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
- Maritshuis Den Haag,
- Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza,
- Museo del Prado,
- The Wallace Collection,
- KMSK Antwerp,
- KMSK Brussels,
- Städel Museum,
- MSK Gent,
- Te Papa Museum of New Zealand



Fred G. Meijer – Expertise – 09 Augustus 2024



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Oil on canvas, 102.5 x 87.5 cm

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opposite title page
With Arnot Galleries, London, 1919
Private collection, Winterthur, by 1942
With Kunsthandel Gebr. Douwes, Amsterdam, 1968 (exhibited at Oude Kunst en Antiekbeurs, Delft)

Exhibited: Kunstmuseum Winterthur, *Der unbekannte Winterthurer Privatbesitz 1500-1900*, September-
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Melchoir d'Hondecoeter was the son of Gijsbert Gillisz. de Hondecoeter (1603/04-1653), who was one of the first Dutch artists to specialize in painting live birds in a landscape. Melchior was born in Utrecht, where he was taught by his father and after the latter's death in 1653, by his uncle, Jan Baptist Weenix, an important and innovative painter of landscape and still life, among other subjects. Hondecoeter moved to The Hague in August 1658, initially working in the house of the art collector Philemon Lissant. The local guild urged the 'landscape painter N. Hondecoote' to join, which he did in October of 1659.¹ He was still working in The Hague in the summer of 1663, in which year he married Susanna Tradel from Amsterdam, settling in that town before September 1664. He remained in Amsterdam until his death 31 years later.

The larger part of his oeuvre, mostly signed, but rarely dated, consists of scenes with live birds in landscapes, examples of which can be found in many museums and private collections, and a few landscapes with other animals. Particularly early in his career, he painted a number of still lifes, usually of small game. By 1670, Hondecoeter's style had fully matured and his work had become very popular, both in Amsterdam and elsewhere, also abroad. An early biographer claimed that Melchior d'Hondecoeter had trained a rooster to stand up for him in any required pose. This is very unlikely to be true, but it is a fact that Hondecoeter keenly studied the poses and behaviour of the birds he portrayed. Probably on the basis of a few painted or drawn studies, he was able to vary the poses of his subjects in his compositions. The fact that quite a few birds appear virtually identically in various compositions by Hondecoeter indicates that, like many of his contemporaries, he composed his scenes with the aid of individual studies. Many of these will have been drawings. Very few such drawings appear to survive, but a sheet in the collection of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, is considered as such.² Moreover, two studies are known in oil paint, one of a chicks, the other of ducklings (fig. 1 and 2).³ Many of the little birds from these studies can be found in larger compositions by Melchior d'Hondecoeter, compare figures 3 and 4. The two ducklings at lower right in the excellent painting discussed here do not appear in the study in figure 2, but most likely derive from a similar study, as they also appear in other work by Hondecoeter (cf. fig. 5). Interestingly, they also appear in two early paintings by the Zeeland painter Adriaen Coorte, from 1683 (cf. fig. 6). Coorte most probably knew the painting in figure 5, which thus must have originated before 1683. The adult ducks portrayed in the painting discussed here do not seem to appear in any other work by Hondecoeter.

Since Melchior d'Hondecoeter rarely dated his works and was rather consistent in his style and handling once his work had matured in the course of the 1660s, it is difficult to date his works after 1670 accurately. The present painting, however, must be a relatively early work, most probably from the mid-1660s. Several paintings by Hondecoeter are dated before 1670, but often the date is not distinct.⁴ The first reliable date, 1658, is found on a painting of a barking dog and game in Le Havre.⁵ A date with an indistinct last digit is

* * * Fred G. Meijer Art History report 060 – 9 August 2024 * * *



found on a painting of a dog and chickens (fig. 7) which must date from the early 1660s.⁶ In the course of the 1660s, Melchior d'Hondecoeter improved his technique and attention to detail, paying meticulous attention to the plumage of the birds he portrayed. This is very clear in the present painting and in the next known dated work, from 1668 (fig. 8). His composition in that painting has become more monumental and crowded, which places the present painting before 1668, feasibly in or around 1666. In his earlier work, Hondecoeter tended to include domestic backgrounds, like the farm houses in the present painting. An indistinctly dated scene with chickens in a barnyard must date from around the same time as the painting discussed here or slightly earlier (fig. 9). Soon, the artist switched to mountain landscapes and elegant park settings, probably in order to appeal to a wealthier audience.

Melchoir d'Hondecoeter painted ducks throughout his career, but mainly in combination with other kinds of fowl. The few known paintings of ducks only, appear to belong exclusively to his earlier output. An example that was with Gebroeders Douwes Kunsthandel in 1989 (fig. 10) was probably painted slightly later than the present work, while an example auctioned in 1959 (fig. 11) is probably contemporary with it, or slightly earlier. A later example, probably from the 1670s, with ducks combined with other fowl illustrates the later development in the art of Melchoir d'Hondecoeter (fig. 12), moving to more complex compositions and elegant park settings.



1 Melchior d'Hondecoeter, oil on canvas, 32 x 38 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. SK-A-5023

2 Melchior d'Hondecoeter, oil on canvas, 32 x 40 cm. Location unknown



3 Melchior d'Hondecoeter, oil on canvas, detail. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. SK-C 146



4 Melchior d'Hondecoeter, oil on canvas, detail. The Hague, Mauritshuis, inv. no. 61



5 Melchior d'Hondecoeter, oil on canvas, 115 x 136 cm. Private collection.



6 Adriaen Coorte, signed and dated 1683, oil on canvas, 39 x 48 cm. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum inv. no. A 813

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7 Melchior d'Hondecoeter, signed and dated 166(2), oil on canvas, 70 x 86 cm. Art market, 2000



8 Melchior d'Hondecoeter, signed and dated 1668, oil on canvas, 88.5 x 110.8 cm. Karlsruhe, Staatliche Kunsthalle



9 Melchior d'Hondecoeter, signed and dated 16.., oil on canvas, 81.5 x 105.2 cm. Art market, 2007



10 Melchior d'Hondecoeter, signed, oil on canvas, 80 x 64 cm. Art market, 1989



11 Melchior d'Hondecoeter, signed, oil on canvas, 72 x 101 cm. Art market, 1959



12 Melchior d'Hondecoeter, oil on canvas, 100.3 x 92.7 cm. Private collection, 2011

NOTES

¹ 'N' stands for first name unknown.

² The vast majority of drawings attributed to Melchior d'Hondecoeter, whether considered as studies or as larger compositions, are copies by later hands after paintings by Melchior d'Hondecoeter.

³ The first was acquired by the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, in 2013, the second was auctioned by Koller Auktionen in Zürich, in March 1997.

⁴ What is thought to be the earliest example is a still life with a dead pheasant, formerly with Rafel Valls Gallery, London, which is dated 1651, or perhaps 1657. The date on a painting of a rooster and a chicken in the Michaelis collection in Cape Town was read as 1652, but is now illegible. It more likely originated in the later 1650s.

⁵ Oil on canvas, 131 x 171 cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts, inv. No. 82.

⁶ When with Johnny van Haeften, London, in 2000, the date, at upper right, was read as 1662.



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