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Melchior d'Hondecoeter
Landscape with Birds (The Fable of the Raven), ca. 1670–1680

MELCHIOR D'HONDECOETER
(Utrecht 1636 – Amsterdam 1695)

LANDSCAPE WITH BIRDS (THE FABLE OF THE RAVEN), CA. 1670–1680

Partially signed lower left: '*D. Hondecoeter*'

Oil on canvas
124 x 197 cm
48 ⅞ x 77 ½ in.

Provenance

Possibly Richard Cosway, R.A. (1742–1821), 20 Stratford Place, London;
Possibly his sale, Mr Stanley, London, 20 Stratford Place, 17–19 May 1821 (third day, 19 May), lot 52, as 'Hondekoeter – A Cock attacking a Peacock' (Lugt 10041);
Private collection, England, nineteenth century (oval brass inventory plaque numbered 195 on the lower rail of the frame);
Private collection.

Literature

Monreal y Tejada, L., *Casa Bertran en San Gervasio*, exh. cat., 1985, pp. 70–72.

Comparative literature

Houbraken, A., *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen*, vol. III, Amsterdam, 1721.
Kearney, J., 'Melchior de Hondecoeter in the Service of William III — Royal Taste and Patronage in the Dutch Golden Age', in Bracken, S. et al. (eds.), *Collecting and the Princely Apartment*, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2011.
Rikken, M., *Melchior d'Hondecoeter: Bird Painter*, Rijksmuseum Dossiers, Amsterdam, 2008.
Wepler, L., 'Fabulous Birds. Melchior d'Hondecoeter as Storyteller', in Rooij, W. de and Meyer-Krahmer, B. (eds.), *Melchior d'Hondecoeter 1636–1695* (*Intolerance*, vol. 2), exh. cat., Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, Düsseldorf, 2010.



Across the centre of the canvas, a pale crested cock of the Padovana or Polish type, its plumage a mosaic of cream and chestnut, hurls itself downward with wings flung wide, head driven forward, beak agape and one scaled leg extended, talons spread. Beneath it, pressed to the earth and all but lost in shadow, lies a large black corvid: its wings are spread flat on the ground, its body flattened under the cock's foot, and its head is thrown back with the heavy straight bill gaping in a scream (fig. 1). Behind the pair a blue peacock rears to its full height, neck arched back and beak open in full cry, the vermiculated cream-and-black coverts and chestnut primaries of its folded wing catching the light; the ocellated feathers of its train fall loose and disordered across the raven's back. The ground on every side is strewn with plucked feathers, white, buff, brown and black, several of them lying downy base uppermost, and at the lower right a buff bantam stoops with her bill open over one of them. A bronze turkey, its caruncles engorged to scarlet and a broad white band across its folded wing, lunges in from the right, head lowered. At the lower left a mallard bolts in panic. Directly below the struggle a Eurasian jay scrambles with wings half open beside a crouching chick, and a red-billed chough stands on the bare earth at the foreground centre, bill parted. Around them are a pheasant with crimson wattles and a black crested hen at the left edge, a red-eyed pigeon and a finch on the wing above, a magpie and a pair of sparrows in the lower corner, and a blue-grey rock pigeon at the lower right. At the right a domestic goose stands beside a peahen that cranes steeply down toward the commotion; behind them the picture opens onto a pond with a grey crowned crane, swimming ducks and geese, a distant villa and trees, under a sky flushing pink in the evening light.

The scene depicted in this picture is not a barnyard brawl typical of the time but the Aesopic fable of the vain corvid who decked himself in plumage not his own and was in turn stripped of it, known in the eighteenth-century London salerooms simply as the *Fable of the Raven* (*de raaf in pauwenveren*). The birds whose feathers the raven has taken have fallen upon him to reclaim them, each carrying its own away in its beak, and he lies pinned beneath the cock's talons while the peacock, the principal victim of the theft, rears behind him. The sprawled feathers in the foreground, of every colour rather than that of a single bird, are less the debris of the fight than the disguise being undone, further evinced by the bantam at the lower right, stooping to retrieve one (fig. 2).

Lisanne Wepler, in the only sustained study of Hondecoeter's narrative pictures, isolates precisely this motif of small birds picking feathers from the ground, absent, from Gheeraerts's illustrations and therefore the painter's own addition, as "a constitutive element of the fable, without which this work would be merely one more

among d'Hondecoeter's many representations of bird-fights."[1] A Copenhagen sale of 1784, describing another version of the composition, spells out virtually an identical scene to ours: the raven, having adorned himself with the feathers of various birds, has war declared on him by them, "and each comes to take back its feather, which they carry off in their beaks. The raven is left beneath the claws of the cock, who throws him down and ends by stripping him of the rest of his crown."[2]

The cock, however, is d'Hondecoeter's own contribution. In *Phaedrus*, the jackdaw gathers moulted peacock feathers and is set upon by the peacocks; in the Greek Aesopic version the birds simply recognise their own plumage and tear it away; and in the Dutch reception, given by Vondel's *Vorstelijke Warande der Dieren* (1617), with etchings by Marcus Gheeraerts (1561–1636), the peacocks remain the executors throughout. As Wepler observes, "in none of the texts does a cock assume the task of exacting punishment." D'Hondecoeter rather imports him, and him alone, for the violence, leaving the peacock to preside.[3] The substitution is what gives the present picture its particular charge and accounts for the peacock's restraint. Here, it does not open its wings, the gesture it would make in triumph, but stands erect and calling behind a punishment it has not had to administer. From Horace onward, the fable served as the standard figure for taking credit for another's work, a resonance a painter who owned and studied Snyders would have recognised at once.[4]

D'Hondecoeter built up a stock of oil studies of individual birds which he reused across paintings as *aide-mémoire*, so that the same bird recurs in an identical pose in canvases painted years apart; his estate inventory of 1695 records the gibbet-like device on which dead birds could be posed, together with the paintings by Frans Snyders (1579–1657) that he owned and studied.[5] The rearing peacock, the lunging turkey or the fleeing mallard could be summoned from the studio's stock and recombined, and the same confrontation restaged at different scales and for different rooms. At nearly two metres the present canvas is unusually wide for the artist, whose large decorative pieces tend to the square or stand upright. The additional width is

[1] Wepler, L., 'Fabulous Birds. Melchior d'Hondecoeter as Storyteller', in Rooij, W. de and Meyer-Krahmer, B. (eds.), *Melchior d'Hondecoeter 1636–1695* (*Intolerance*, vol. 2), exh. cat., Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, Düsseldorf, 2010, pp. 33–59, p. 41.
[2] Sale, Copenhagen, 10 January 1784, lot 116 (Lugt 3658): "*Encore un précieux tableau de vollatilles, representant une histoire de la fable. C'est le Corbeau qui s'étant paré de plumes des differens Oiseaux, ceux-ci lui déclarent la guerre; et chacun vient lui enlever sa plume qu'ils emportent dans leur bec. Le corbeau reste sous les griffes du cocq qui le terrasse et finit par lui ôter le reste de sa couronne*"; 32 Danish rigsdaler. That picture measured 40 by 51 *pouces* (c. 105 by 133 cm) and is not the present canvas.
[3] Wepler 2010, p. 41.
[4] Horace, *Epistles* I.3, 18–20, where the plagiarist is the crow stripped of its stolen colours, *furtivis nudata coloribus*.
[5] Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, *Birds on a Balustrade*, inv. no. SK-A-4917: "D'Hondecoeter made studies in oil, which he could repeatedly use in his workshop as an aide-mémoire while painting. The birds occur in identical poses in other pictures."

spent on a vista of air, water and evening light at the right, against which the tumult at the centre is measured.

The fable was Hondecoeter's most frequently repeated narrative subject. Wepler identifies four autograph versions: the picture in the Mauritshuis, inscribed on the tomb *M d hondecoeter / A° 1671* and catalogued by the museum as 1677 (fig. 3); *The Crow Exposed* in the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; a version formerly in the August Heckscher collection, New York; and a canvas in Museum Arnhem, signed and dated 1678, which similarly depicts a cock diving on a black crow pressed to the ground with spread wings, a greylag goose, a pheasant and a golden eagle looking on, and, *achter het duo*, behind the pair, a blue peacock. A nineteenth-century steel engraving suggests a fifth.[6] Against these, the present canvas is by a wide margin the largest: at 124 x 197 cm, it opens the composition sideways where the Mauritshuis picture (176 by 189 cm) is nearly square, and the room so gained is given to the landscape.

Adjacent to the fable stands the group of pure bird-fights with which it has often been confused. The earliest dated example is the *Fight between a Cock and a Turkey* of 1668 in the Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Kassel (fig. 4), in which the cock defends a hen and her chicks against an intruding turkey while a peacock turns haughtily away from the low affair; the same pairing was restaged at least twice more, in the canvas of about 1680 in the Cleveland Museum of Art (fig. 5), where the birds are set before classical architecture and a pond, and in the *Hahnenkampf* of about 1670–1680 in the Rau Collection for UNICEF at the Arp Museum Bahnhof Rolandseck, Remagen (fig. 6). Closest of all in handling is the *Páva-és kakasviadal* in the Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest (fig. 7), an upright canvas of 142 by 174.5 cm which the museum dates after 1668 on the strength of the Kassel picture. What separates the present work from all of these is its narrative apparatus: the fallen bird is a corvid and not a fowl, the feathers on the ground belong to several species, and the bystanders are engaged in retrieving them rather than merely witnessing.

The subject carried a commercial identity of its own. Between 1743 and 1833 at least eleven lots in the British and Continental salerooms are catalogued under the names "The Fable of the Raven," "The Fable of the Crow," "The fable of the Jack-Daw stripp'd of his borrow'd plumes" as among the most expensive Hondecoeters on the market. In Lord Orford's sale of 1748, the Walpole version, bought by the painter and connoisseur John Ellys, made £18 18s, notably more than every Rubens in the sale, as well as more than the Veronese, the Guercino and both Watteaus. The same sale carried a pair of "large piece[s] of Birds, hieroglyphical" by Hondecoeter, which went

[6] Wepler 2010, pp. 41–45. The Arnhem picture is Museum Arnhem, inv. GM 06600, signed and dated *M. d'Hondecoeter 1678*; the Houston picture belongs to the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

to the dealer Robert Bragge at £17 17s and £16 16s. The adjective is the English equivalent of the Dutch "*zinnebeeldig*," ("emblematic"), the same word used of a pair of *kapitaale Stukken, zinnebeeldige Vogel Gevegten* by Hondecoeter sold in Amsterdam in 1739.[7]

Against that background, the description under which a picture of this subject passed at the Cosway sale in 1821, "A Cock attacking a Peacock," reads as precisely the misreading a darkened canvas invites. The cock is the brightest passage in the composition and the peacock the most conspicuous, while the raven, black on a dark ground beneath a yellowed varnish, disappears altogether. This misreading is reflected in the pricing, where it was sold for £2 12s, a fraction of what the subject commanded when it was legible and recognised.

Melchior d'Hondecoeter was born into the trade. His grandfather Gillis, a Flemish émigré, painted landscapes in the manner of Roelant Savery, while his father Gijsbert specialised in poultry. After Gijsbert's death in 1653 the young artist's training passed to his uncle by marriage, Jan Baptist Weenix (1621–1659), from whom he acquired an Italianate breadth that his father had never possessed.[8] He is recorded in The Hague in 1659 as a member of the Confrerie Pictura and settled in Amsterdam in 1663, where he remained for the rest of his life, supplying large bird pieces to the patrician houses of the city and ultimately to the Stadtholder-King William III of England (1650–1702), for whom he painted the great menagerie canvases for Het Loo.[9] Arnold Houbraken, writing a generation after the painter's death and drawing on the testimony of his cousin Jan Weenix (1640–1719) and his pupil Willem van Royen (1645–1723), called him "the Phoenix in his art" and preserved the story that he had trained a cock to hold whatever pose he arranged it in with his mahlstick until

[7] Getty Provenance Index, Sales Catalogs: Br-A380, lot 0117 (Lugt 552; Ford, 3 March 1743, "A Large Landskip, with the Fable of the Crow," £15 15s); Br-A418, lot 0071 (Lugt 681; Cock & Langford, 10 February 1747/8, the posthumous sale of the dealer John van Spangen, £18 10s); Br-A415, lots 0054–0055 and [A]0057 (Lugt 692a; Lord Orford's sale, 1748); Br-A740, lot 0037 (Lugt 1503; 1766); Br-A1101, lot 0033 (Lugt 2656; Christie's, 8 March 1777, 9½ guineas); Br-A1181, lot 0067 (Lugt 2926; Christie's, 15 December 1778, withdrawn and struck through in the annotated copy) and Br-A1184, lot 0095 (Lugt 2944; Christie's, 23 January 1779, £16 5s 6d to C. Conway), evidently the same picture re-offered six weeks later; Br-3643, lot 0099 (Lugt 12584; 1831, £16 16s) and Br-3698, lot 0198 (Lugt 12679; 1831); Br-4099, lot 0173 (1833). For the Amsterdam pair, N-A146, lot 0022 (Lugt 506; 9 August 1739): "*Twee kapitaale Stukken, zinnebeeldige Vogel Gevegten, door Melchior de Hondekoeter, op een ongemeene manier gevonden*," 205 guilders.

[8] Houbraken, A., *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen*, vol. III, Amsterdam, 1721, pp. 68–75 (Gillis "*bootste … de handeling van R. Savry, en Dav. Vinkeboons na*," p. 69; Gijsbert "*schilderde allerhande soort van levendig gevogelte, inzonderheid Hanen en Hennen*," died 1653, p. 71; Weenix as guide after the father's death, p. 72).

[9] Rikken, M., *Melchior d'Hondecoeter: Bird Painter*, Rijksmuseum Dossiers, Amsterdam, 2008; Kearney, J., 'Melchior de Hondecoeter in the Service of William III — Royal Taste and Patronage in the Dutch Golden Age', in Bracken, S. et al. (eds.), *Collecting and the Princely Apartment*, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2011; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, *The Menagerie*, inv. no. SK-A-173, "destined for Het Loo, the palace of William III."

he rose from the easel.[10] The tale is surely embroidered, but it confirms that his birds were studied in movement rather than stuffed.

[10] Houbraken 1721, vol. III, p. 72 (the cock "*die dan in zulken gedaante stokstil bleef staan, tot dat het opstaan van zyn meester te kenne gaf, dat hy voor dien tyd met dus te staan uitgediend had*"); p. 74 (Willem van Royen "die de Konst by hem geleerd heeft"); p. 75 ("de Fenix in zyn Konst").



Fig. 1: Detail of the present work. The raven thrown down beneath the cock, wings spread flat on the ground and the heavy straight bill gaping; the peacock's ocellated train feathers fall loose across its back.



Fig. 2: Detail of the present work. A bantam stoops with open bill over a fallen feather, the constitutive motif of the fable. Plucked feathers of several species lie strewn across the foreground.



Fig. 3: Melchior d'Hondecoeter, *The Raven Robbed of the Feathers He Wore to Adorn Himself*, 1677, oil on canvas, 176 x 189 cm (69 ¼ x 74 ⅜ in.), Mauritshuis, The Hague, inv. no. 59



Fig. 4: Melchior d'Hondecoeter, *Fight between a Cock and a Turkey*, 1668, oil on canvas, 128.5 x 159.5 cm (50 ⅝ x 62 ¾ in.), Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Kassel, inv. no. GK 380



Fig. 5: Melchior d'Hondecoeter, *A Rooster and Turkey Fighting*, ca. 1680, oil on canvas, 137.2 x 166.4 cm (54 x 65 ½ in.), The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, inv. no. 1986.59



Fig. 6: Melchior d'Hondecoeter, *Hahnenkampf*, ca. 1670–1680, oil on canvas, Arp Museum Bahnhof Rolandseck, Remagen, Rau Collection for UNICEF



Fig. 7: Melchior d'Hondecoeter, *A Peacock Attacking a Rooster* (*Páva- és kakasviadal*), after 1668, oil on canvas, 142 x 174.5 cm (55 ⅞ x 68 ¾ in.), Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest, inv. no. 242

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