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SOME REMARKS ON A LITTLE-KNOWN
MASTERPIECE BY ROELANT SAVERY

The National Gallery in Prague has a good collection of works by Roelant Savery. No less than seven pictures by this prominent painter deserve to be permanently exhibited here to show the various trends of late-renaissance and early-baroque painting explored by his personal achievement. In particular one excellent piece — signed but not dated — calls for our attention in order to locate it as near as possible to the probable date when it was painted. It has been in the collection since 1945 bearing the unfortunately misleading title "Horses".¹ On the other hand it is just this somewhat vague title that stimulates the student to penetrate deeper into the meaning of this work of art.

Closer observation of the represented animals reveals beyond any doubt that the group of five spirited animals in the foreground consists exclusively of stallions of different breed. Their sex organs are clearly visible and stress the fact that several males are just having here a really rough meeting. By no means do we look at some tame horses deprived of sex, on the contrary we experience the nervous tension of racy individuals whose behaviour obviously seems to be the very result of their sex. They are biting one another in an attempt to drive away or maybe even to kill the resisting partner. Handsome males are rearing, kicking, biting, getting ready to fight or escaping from the battlefield. Such behaviour can be explained basically from two different points of view, one being realistic, the other one romantic. It is only too tempting to accept as explanation the realistic point of view and classify the picture as an early example of Dutch realistic approach towards nature in accordance with the seemingly most prevailing tendencies of the Dutch 17th century painting. In that case it would be rather easy to explain the meaning of our picture by believing that the represented stallions are fighting over a mare who is having just her mating-time. But we find no mare around. Later on we hope to prove that the motive of sex in the picture is completely absent. The real cause of the fight must be therefore, we think, lie outside the limits of a realistic view describing nature and exploring natural forces. We shall look for it then in the less realistic and more romantic trends of 17th-century art in search of hidden symbolism.

As a starting point for necessary stylistic comparison in attempt to classify this painting we choose again a picture from our Savery collection, called "Paradise",² fully signed and dated 1618. This outstanding work of art must have been painted — according to the given date — by Savery in Holland, though it is not quite certain whether it occurred still in Amsterdam or already in Utrecht, where the artist found his final residence. Its meaning is quite obvious. All kinds of living creatures known to the artist are assembled in the landscape in such a charming way that we feel the secret longing to be invited to join this big happy family. Nobody is in need of food, nobody has to fight for it, nor to kill anyone because every animal represents here a member of its own kind protected by a fully accepted supreme law of immunity. The idea of ever-lasting peace called for serene calm of this festival party void of any change. The late-renaissance dream of a safe world ruled by principles of mutual tolerance comes to the most noble expression. Ovid's nostalgic verses "Aurea prima sata est aetas . . ." celebrate here a splendid revival in pointer's work. Let us remember that "Paradise" was painted in the period of Twelve years Truce and thus reflects the optimistic and hopeful atmosphere — needless to stress more seriously by artists than by politicians. The dream of "Paradise", meaning a harmonious world, haunted at this time more than one creative spirit.

A further step of Savery's artistic development can be traced in a picture called "Landscape with Birds",³ again fully signed, dated 1622. It was certainly painted in Utrecht and may be meant to form a counterpart to the preceding piece. Though only a relatively short space of four years separates both works of art, their difference is visible enough. In "Paradise" we found the artist's striving for balance between classical and anti-classical elements achieved to such a degree that poise and calm are prevailing. It is not quite so in the "Landscape with Birds", since the first impression we experience is one of dramatic tension and expectation of movement. We find ourselves no more in a timeless landscape untouched by any changes as in the previous case, but among ruins of an ancient city which lost its tragic battle against time and forces of nature. Slowly crumbling walls are constantly being dissolved by ruthless vegetation of various kind. Even this dynamic and sturdy world of trees has its stronger and weaker members, some of them are noticeably mutilated by violence of weather. A dead tree-trunk showing its skeleton against the sky makes a pathetic figure.

The artist shifted the mutual relation of classical and anti-classical elements definitely towards the side of the anti-classical ones. From late-renaissance esthetic demands we merge suddenly into early-baroque feeling for expressive form. The intricate play of various contrasts can be found all over the picture. Some places are flooded by light, others stay in semi-darkness. Lace-like silhouettes of birds and of a dead tree standing against the almost lightning-lit sky dominate the center-part. It is worth noting that the artist this time did not put together

all the variety of animals he was able to display but limited his choice to birds. Their reunion is still a peaceful-one, but the former charming naive touch of Paradise heralding the many "Sunday painters" is gone.

When we return after this necessary excursion to the picture we first concentrated on — now let us call it "Fighting Stallions" — in order to place it chronologically in its proper place, we grow convinced already by mere guess, that it was painted later than the above discussed paintings. We feel by looking at it and by trying to understand its content that we have left the late-renaissance artistic trend given to the passion of organizing nature in a park-like way according to the idealistic conception of peaceful coexistence of living creatures. Instead of it we find here the early-baroque wilderness with its eternal struggle, competition, uncertainty and disquiet. The basic feeling of life is very different now since the nervous tension forces on an all-embracing tune. This new approach toward nature, no doubt less idealistic than the former one, calls for new means of artistic expression. The rough play of many contrasts takes on the leading part. The artist left the traditional stage-like organizing of space in premeditated brown, green and blue planes reducing above all noticeably the colour-scheme. Various hues of brown and gray prevail and allow at the same time the greenish and yellowish sharp spotlights to come to their full value. Reduced is also the range of view because we do not look at the scene from a safe and comfortable distance, but suddenly come dangerously close to the fighting muscles. Thus we fully face a living wall of agitated forms and only by a few narrow passes can penetrate into the more distant corners of the pasture.

All these stylistic elements make us believe that the picture in question was painted by Savery not sooner than the late twenties or even more probably shortly after the year 1630, as these very elements correspond absolutely with the prevailing tendencies of Dutch painting of that time. If we find among scholars general accord with our hypothetical dating, we dare go on still a little further to throw some light on the proper meaning of our picture. Let us try to find the motive of the fight taking place in front of us: Or speaking more broadly let us try to answer what made the artist turn his attention from paradise to battle-field. Was it mainly Savery's personal artistic problem or was he rather involved in some far reaching spiritual tide? Although we are far from underestimating the originality of Savery we still hesitate to place him right among those who were the very first ones to broaden the horizon of artistic expression in a daring way.

Behind the above mentioned change of style we feel the contribution of two potent artistic personalities to whom Savery seems to be slightly indebted: Petrus Paulus Rubens and Herkules Seghers. Did he come in touch with either of them? The contact with Rubens is very probable. It is well known that the great painter-diplomat visited Holland on three occasions (1613, 1627, 1631). Indeed the visit in 1627 is important in connection with our particular problem because in that

year Rubens concentrated his attention mainly on the artists residing in Utrecht. It means that Savery could have hardly escaped the impression of tremendous dynamic force emanating from recent works of Rubens. The contact with Herkules Seghers can stand even closer scrutiny due to some remarkable facts. In 1631 Seghers left Amsterdam heading for the southern provinces and made his first stop just in Utrecht.⁴ He was anxious to see the precious sketch-books of Savery containing Alpine landscapes made by the artist from first-hand experience some 25 years ago. Seghers gained from these sketches by no means little help and it is likely to suppose that the personal meeting of the two artists worked both ways. If we accept the authority of Leo C. Collins in dating prints made by Seghers we learn from the scholar that the famous and breath-taking print called "Rearing Horse" was done just in 1631.⁵ It means that Savery came in direct touch not only with the actual print by Seghers but also with some burning problems of this complicated artistic personality. There is little doubt that the print by Seghers and the picture in question by Savery have something most essential in common.

Before concluding our study let us make one more attempt to find out the cause of unrest of the handsome animals represented on our picture. We notice some kind of insect circling around their heads and molesting them to the degree of loosing natural poise and getting mad. Not sex but a mean, seemingly negligible devil-like force sets them fighting. More a nuisance than a real enemy is ever-present here and thus the full-blooded and strong males are actually tortured by some kind of drop-by-drop water method, which is after all the surest and most bestial way to decompose precisely the individual of high grade. We feel that vibrating air itself agitated by the flying insect and birds spoil the peace of pasture. The former dream of paradise the artist repeatedly brought to panel and canvas is definitely lost. Shall we then conclude by reminding the reader that the somewhat strange bachelor Roelant Savery died insane? Can we dare see in this picture a kind of mirror reflecting the artist's state of mind showing signs of beginning mental disorder?

The art historian himself is unable to provide a sufficient answer and has to call for the psychologist's help. Nevertheless there is enough here to be held for certain. We are sure that Savery's approach to reality represented in our picture was a complicated one. The artist made no direct statement nor painter-like translation based on firsthand experience. On the contrary by expressed here his feeling of life troubled by some ever-present mean forces by an allegory which still calls for further iconological explanation. This allegory is so free and non-academic that somebody can mistake it for genre-painting of animal life. We believe, however, that there is still a romantic fabulation — nurtured probably by literature — behind it to such a degree that we can safely label our picture by the well-known Dutch expression "Geestig". It means that the artist saw reality not as a 17th-century naturalist but as a member of a traditionalist group of

artists who tried not to separate science from the humanistic literary heritage. In accordance with that basic principal the artist expressed himself in idioms. For the feeling of harmony he used the happy image of Paradise, for the disturbing nervous tension of his days he found adequate Rearing Stallions.

NOTES

- ¹ Inv. No. O 2623. Pan. 47×80. Signed: Roelandt Savery fe. Bibl.: Th. v. Frimmel; Galerie Jos. V. Novák in Prag (1899) Nr. 76. Katalog Národní galerie v Praze, Sběrka starého umění (1949) č. 507.
- ² Inv. No. DO 4245. Pan. 55×107. Signed: Roelandt Savery, fec 1618. Bibl.: P. Bergner; Verz. der Gräfl. Nostitzschen Gemäldegalerie zu Prag (1905), Nr. 152. Th. v. Frimmel; Blätter für Gemäldekunde V. (1910), 7; Kurt Erasmus; Roelant Savery, (1908) Nr. 117; Katalog Národní galerie v Praze, Sběrka starého umění (1949) č. 510; Jan Bialostocki; Les bêtes et les humains de Roelant Savery (Brusel 1958) repr. 2; J. Síp—O. J. Blažiček; Flämische Meister des 17. Jahr. (Artia 1963) Nr. 34.
- ³ Inv. No. DO 4246. Pan. 54×108. Signed: Roelant Savery. fe. 1622. Bibl.: The same as concerning preceding picture.
- ⁴ Leo C. Collins; Herkules Seghers (Chicago 1953), 60.
- ⁵ Ibid., 100.

POZNÁMKY K MÁLO ZNÁMÉMU DÍLU R. SAVERYHO

Slohovým rozbořem nedatovaného obrazu Národní galerie v Praze, nepřesně dosud označeného tradičním názvem Koně, docházíme k závěru, že dílo vzniklo patrně kolem roku 1630 nebo ještě spíše, krátce po tomto datu. Jeho autor, Roelant Savery, sídlil v té době v Utrechtu, kde přišel do styku se dvěma osobnostmi, které podle našeho soudu přispěly k citelné změně umělcova výtvarného nazírání. Jak P. P. Rubens, tak především Herkules Seghers urychlili jeho rozchod s estetikou pozdně renezančních vidin neměnného ráje a uvedl jej do sféry raně barokní exprese. Roelant Savery se však neodvrátil od onoho pojetí obrazu, pro něž platí přílehlavý holandský název „Geestig“, neboť jeho znázornění zvířat nepřestalo být zásadně alegorií a nestalo se žánrovou scénou.

