



CHRISTIAAN LUYCKX

(1623 Antwerp after 1658)

Memento Mori still life with musical instruments, books, sheet music, skeleton, skull and armour.

Oil on canvas.

73.5 x 92.5 cm.

Provenance: Swiss private collection. We are grateful to Dr. Jürg Meier, for his thorough analysis of the painting as well as Dr. Fred G. Meijer who has confirmed the authenticity of the work on the basis of a photograph. This painting, recently rediscovered in a Swiss private collection, has been positively identified by Dr Fred G. Meijer as a major work by the painter Carstian Luyckx, who worked in Antwerp and later in France. Until the rediscovery of this painting,

Luyckx was mainly known for still lifes with relatively few elements. A large body of his work had been attributed to the French artist Simon Renard de Saint-André (ca. 1613-1677), which Dr Meijer has been able to reattribute with certainty to Luyckx. The present still life holds an important place within the oeuvre of this fascinating artist, and is an important addition to it. It differs from the hitherto known vanitas still lifes by the artist in its compositional variety as well as its intention, and provides new insights into Luyckx's artistic activity. This painting strongly criticizes Louis XIV's politics of military conquest, and documents the artist's personal dismay at the turmoil caused by the French invasion of the Spanish Netherlands in 1667/68. Dr Jurg Meier outlines the historic background which helped to inspire the painting as follows: "After King Louis XIV's full assumption of power in 1661, his first opportunity to enlarge the French territory came in 1665, through a war with Spain. After the death of King Philip IV on 17 September 1665, Louis XIV – who was married to Philip's oldest daughter, Maria Theresia (1638-1683) – laid claim to a portion of the Spanish Netherlands, including the margraviat of Antwerp. As grounds for his claim, he cited the dowry of 500,000 gold écus which had been promised him by Spain upon his marriage and was never paid, as well as the Brabantian right of devolution, according to which the daughters of the first marriage took precedence in matters of inheritance. At the head of three armies totaling approximately 82,000 men, the king marched on the Spanish Netherlands on 24 May 1667, and later also took possession of the Franche Comté. Spain was not in a position to resist the onslaught. The sudden French expansion worried the Dutch United Provinces, however, and in 1668 they formed an alliance with England and Sweden, in order to force Louis XIV to return a substantial part of the conquered territories to Spain, formalized by the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1668. "Although the French advance against his native Antwerp under Marshal Turenne was unsuccessful, the events of the war appear to have had such a deep effect on Carstian Luyckx that he painted a memento mori still life in 1668/69 which was directly related to the conflict." The full-figure representation of Death as a skeleton snuffs a candle (as a symbol of life) with its left hand, and in

its right holds a sheet of parchment with the inscription: "Statutum est omnibus hominibus semel mori" ("It is appointed unto men once to die"). This stands as a reminder of the inevitability of death for all men, starkly underlined by the presence of three skulls. The book at the skeleton's feet admonishes us with fiery scenes of hell and purgatory. In the centre of the composition is a stone pedestal which bears the inscription: "Pallida mors aequo pulsat pede pauperum tabernas regumque turres" ("Pale death strikes in similar fashion in the huts of the poor and in the palaces of kings"). Further Latin phrases on the pedestal belong to the same vanitas theme, and point to the deeper meaning of this still life, supported by various attributes of war and other symbols of the military might of Louis XIV. On top of the pedestal lies a French royal crown adorned with the fleur-de-lys, as well as a sceptre. Above hangs a French cavalry standard from a royal guard unit, with the royal double coat of arms of Bourbon-Navarre framed by the orders of Saint Michel and the Saint Esprit, and the motto "Homo natus de muliere brevis vivens" ("Man that is born of woman is of few days"). The military trumpet with banner depicted in the lower centre of the painting also belongs to the equipment of a French royal horse guard. The officer's suit of armour placed to the right of the composition is accurately depicted, and was likely painted from an existing model. The armour, trumpet, crown and standard all refer to the French invasion of 1667/68, as do the three prominently displayed skulls, presumably representing the victims of the war. Vanitas paintings of this type depicting an hourglass as well as a luxurious carriage clock with key are rather rare. These symbols are meant to remind the viewer of the fleeting nature of time. The artist also includes various other symbolic objects which refer to different classes of people, but which in the end all point to their common fate of suffering during wartime. A flail, a shepherd's crook and a wooden bowl stand not so much for the peasantry, but in a wider sense, the general population. The bishop's mitre and crozier are there as reminders that in times of war, even the church can be in distress. Finally, musical instruments such as a lute, a violin and flute, as well as sheet music and playing cards, are a reminder of the earthly pleasures which are swept away by the

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war, ultimately ending in death.

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