CORNELIS SAFTLEVEN
Gorinchem c. 1607 – 1681 Rotterdam

The so-called “farmer's concert”; a self-portrait of the artist, and his brother Herman (b. 1609), as musicians, in a fantasy setting.

Oil on panel, 36 x 48.5 cm
Remnants of a signature, lower left.

Provenance: Private Collection, Germany.

Cornelis Saftleven hailed from a family of able artists. He presumably had training from his father Herman (c. 1580 – 1627), along with his brother Herman the Younger (1609 – 1685). Cornelis resided for some years in Utrecht with the latter, and the present composition (which includes depictions of Cornelis and Herman jr) appears, on stylistic grounds, to stem from that period in the middle 1630s.

After training in Rotterdam, about 1632, Cornelis is understood to have journeyed to Antwerp, where he rounded out his education. Indeed, Rubens is known to have added figures in paintings of Cornelis before 1637. In fact, in Rubens' estate inventory, no less than eight pictures by Saftleven are recorded, half of which contained Rubens' intervention. That Saftleven made an impression on Antwerp society can also be measured in the fact that Van Dyck included the precocious northern Nederlander in his famed Iconographie series, as a surviving print by Lucas Vorsterman attests for posterity.

Returned to the Northern Netherlands, Cornelis subsequently painted across a variety of genres, and he is especially renowned for his rural genre scenes – although his broad painted production also includes portraits, beach scenes, landscapes with cattle, animal painting, history paintings, scenes of Hell, allegories, satires and illustrations of proverbs. The present work appears to represent something of an amalgamation of the preoccupation with rural genre coupled with allegory and 'portraiture' (at least in the sense of rendering a convincing likeness).

In Cornelis' early works, such as our panel, one finds the unmistakable influence of the short-lived genre gamechanger, Adriaen Brouwer (1605 - 1638). Here, the background figures blowing smoke and raising a passglas aloft feel as if they could have leapt off the panel of Brouwer's iconic Smokers, c. 1636, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (fig.1). It is documented that Cornelis was in Utrecht by 1634, lodging with Herman jr, where the Saftleven brothers commenced depicting stable interiors (fig. 2) – a novel facet in the KOETSER GALLERY LTD. CHE-113.330.631

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conception of peasant scenes, and which seems to be incorporated into the 'fantasy' scene here that is at once reminiscent of a hard-drinking, tobacco-laden tavern and an out-of-doors stable filled with nature's beasts.

About this moment, Cornelis also painted the rightly-renowned, refined double-portrait of himself and his brother in the Two Musicians, c. 1633 (Akademie der bildenden Künste, Vienna), and our picture is rather a hybrid of the low genre of Brouwer's Smokers and the high(er) genre of the Two Musicians. From the Vorsterman print depicting Cornelis for the Iconographie and the Meyssen print depicting the portly, wide-headed Herman jr for De Bie's Het Gulden Cabinet (1662), there can be no doubt the figure playing violin is Cornelis, while Herman plays cello. The skill of music and the skill of painting, and the incisive intellect required for both endeavors, appears to contrast with the common ribaldry that one can associate with the indulgences of tobacco and drink, even if the allegorical intentions of this scene are unclear to the present writer (although the sleeping, faithful dog appears to turn his rear, indifferently, toward skilled and unskilled merrymaking alike – a potential clue at Cornelis' pictorial intent?)

By 1637 Cornelis had returned himself to Rotterdam, where he was eventually elected dean of the painter's guild. His pupils included Abraham Hondius, Ludolf de Jongh, and Egbert van der Poel, amongst others, and while Cornelis remained productive, it is an early work such as ours that captures the artist at the apex of his strength and painterly abilities (as the impeccably-rendered snoozing dog, draping textile, and the exacting portraits of the Saftleven brothers, with their respective musical instruments, make plain).

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