

Le Nain Brothers: Peasant Children (35-578), ?mid-1640s



Provenance

Bought by WB at Crews sale, London, 1915, £162.15/-.

WB bought another LN at the Coats sale, London, 1927, £100; later gave it to Berwick/Tweed Museum: almost exact replica.

Attribution

Certainly by one of the three Le Nain brothers - but which?:

Antoine, b. ?Laon (Picardie, N. France), c.1599/1600, buried Paris, 26 May 1648.

Louis, b. ?Laon, c. 1600/01, buried Paris, 24 May 1648.

Matthieu, b. Laon, c.1607, buried Paris, 26 April 1677.

- Lived & worked together in their Paris studio
- Louis known to have headed studio, so sometimes assumed that he was eldest
- Reputation rests on a number of paintings signed 'Le Nain', on basis of which other paintings (but no drawings) also have been attributed to them
- Outstanding feature of their work - on which their reputation has rested since the mid-C19th - is their sympathetic treatment of the poor

Only 16 signed works, none with first name.

Only ten dated works, but all from 1641-47.

No documented work survives/ identified, and none documented at all after 1648.

No secure way of attributing works to individual brothers, though often attempted:

- Since 1900s, habitual to ascribe small paintings on copper to Antoine, and larger, austere peasant scenes to Louis - but no evidence at all to support this.

Biographies

Sources: archival documents & early C18th manuscript by Claude Leleu, canon of Laon Cathedral.

- Sons of Isaac Le Nain (d. 1636), Sergent Royal au Granier a Sel, Laon
- Modestly prosperous family, more so after 1615, when acquired local vineyards & farms
- Brothers taught by an 'artiste etranger': ?=artist from outside Laon, or a non-Frenchman? Possibly Claude Vignon?
- No works survive in Laon - all works of art in area destroyed during Revolution

- Brothers in Paris by 1629, settling in St German-des-Pres (Left Bank), probably to avoid guild regulations in Paris proper
- Successful studio - received commissions & took on apprentices
- Especially renowned for portraits, & praised by writers in 1640s - but only evidence now is portrait visible by x-ray in National Gallery, London painting + record of one sold in 1950

Du Bail: *Galanteries de la Cour*, Paris, 1644:

- Antoine: 'miniatures and portraits in small'
- Louis: 'little pictures in which a thousand different attitudes which he copies from nature attract the eye'
- Matthieu: 'portraits and big pictures'

Louis:

- hardly mentioned individually

Antoine:

- 1629, master in Corporation of Painters of St Germain des Pres
- 1632, group portrait commissioned by Bureau de la Ville de Paris (untraced)

Matthieu:

- 1633, commissioned to paint three religious paintings in vaults of Lady Chapel of StGdP (destroyed)
- 1633, appointed painter to City of Paris
- 1633, lieutenant in a Paris militia company
- 1635, paid for conservation work for City of Paris
- 1648, all three at first meeting & became founder members of Academie Royale
- 1648, Antoine & Louis dead within two months: buried at St Sulpice

Matthieu

- 1649, presented portrait of Mazarin to Academy (untraced)
- 1650s, accumulated much property in Paris & Laon
- 1658, styled himself 'Lord of La Jumelle' (after a small farm near Laon): indication of growing pretensions
- 1662, given Collar of Order of St-Michel by Louis XIV: shows rapid rise in status - honour usually reserved for noble-born, & remarkable for a mere painter - but, in fact, probably for work as a military engineer
- 1663, struck from order [because failed to prove noble birth?]
- 1666, imprisoned for continuing to wear collar: strange sequence of events, which indicates he had both friends and enemies in high places
- 1667, d. & buried at St Sulpice

Style

- No evidence that they went to Italy, but one C18th source refers to Louis as 'Le Romain', and several works attributed to them show an awareness of contemporary Italian painting that would have been hard to acquire in France
- Stylistic progression not discernable among surviving paintings, but (according to Rosenberg & Cuzin) possible to make three groupings of works by distinguishable hands, to which most of accepted oeuvre can be allocated:

Matthieu:

- animated pictures (s. works in Dublin, Cardiff, Louvre)

Louis:

- celebrated peasant scenes (s. works in Louvre [4], Reims)

Antoine:

- small, multi-figure paintings, on copper or panel (s. works in Louvre [2], NG, London, Detroit IA, Los Angeles CMA, Clark AI)
- share: supports; awkwardness of scale; brilliant colours; looseness of handling - surprising for small dimensions; genre subjects, but little animation or drama
- naive treatment, stiffly-posed figures in a row, like an early photo
- other paintings on copper may be added, also Pontifical Mass (Louvre), Artist in Studio (UK pc)
- group has little in common with other LNB paintings - habitually ascribed to ALN, but nothing to justify this

NB: some works probably collaborative; others reworked from earlier compositions

Why & for whom was it painted?

Meaning uncertain:

- Lack of condescension for poor: very rare in C17th
- ?Link with emerging middle-class urban landowners: urged in contemporary manuals to treat farm workers with greatest respect
- ?LNBs depict deepening impoverishment of agricultural workers in this period
- NB proper **treatment of poor** was a subject of intense debate across Europe in C17th, but especially among pious Catholic movement in Paris & of **clergy at St Sulpice**.
- Large market for LNB's paintings in their own day - evidenced by many copies - but yet no resonance in next generation: so went out of fashion?
- No owners for LNB paintings recorded till 1740: odd for paintings by members of the Academy
- Declining interest during C17th in LNB's paintings because of increase in hardening of attitudes towards the poor?

Critical Fortune/ Later Interpretations:

- Popular in C18th: engravings after them from 1700s; in sale catalogues (from 1740), and at good prices
- Real revival with Revolution & Champfleury in 1850s & 1860s, when became part of debate regarding Realism, & influenced Manet (e.g., Old Musician, 1862)
- Mid-C19th: lefty writers like Champfleury attached socio-political message: LNBs were anti-academic & protesting vs bitter lot of C 17th French peasant
- Late C19th/ early C20th: French writers rejected this, but linked LNBs with 'national' school - i.e. realism associated with Chardin, Millet, etc; humanity especially praised
- Jacques Thuillier: LNBs painted people of region as saw them - i.e. not exploited for picturesque effect - but among better-off peasantry, albeit in region that had suffered in 30 Years War
- Neil MacGregor: **images are of fermiers, or relatively well-off, resident peasant farm managers, as employed by urban middle class landowners - robust, healthy; clothing in good repair; wear shoes (costly);** farm- management treatises of time had vision of ideal fermier- tough, decent, honest & hard-working, to be treated with respect and trust & familiarity

Martha Kellog Smith (PhD, University of Washington, 1989):

- peasant children depicted are surprisingly chubby - nb 30-50% of all peasant babies died within 12 months; children worked from 8; only 50% reached adulthood; life expectancy averaged at 25; burden as much as blessing - many abandoned by rural poor
- those depicted are more idealised than as proposed by MacGregor: images became a formula, appealing to upper-class patrons
- [on the other hand, how much 'better off?': some wear ragged clothes and not all have shoes - cf MacGregor]
- main audience: middling bourgeoisie, urban, literate & especially thoughtful & pious
- the expansion of lucrative positions in royal & judicial bureaucracies from the time of Henri IV (c. 1600) onwards made possible the attainment by the bourgeoisie of noble status - but, for this, owning land was an important prerequisite:
- increasing rural lower class destitution - urban bourgeoisie were acquiring the rural domains of the peasantry - so images of virtuous, quiescent peasantry & poor were an expression of denial of social change, i.e. nostalgic vision
- veneration of rustic life found especially in Gallican Catholicism: in Counter- Reformation France, poor & peasantry associated with the poverty, simplicity & peace chosen by Christ in his earthly incarnation & by his Apostles
- function of paintings:
- (1) images of 'little' virtues of patience, humility, etc, attributed to poor & thought worthy of emulation by all Christians;
- (2) reminder to rich of obligations to poor

Conclusion:

- LNB paintings indebted to Flemish & Dutch painting in style and subject matter in general sense, but a unique treatment of that subject matter
- - none of the brutality or coarse humour of Flemish or Dutch genre painting
- - humble subjects treated with utmost respect
- By avoiding more sophisticated devices, artist seeks more rigorous truthful likenesses, without rhetoric or sentimentality
- - the simple facts without condescension or contempt

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