



PHILIPS WOUWERMAN

The Riding School

44.3 x 50.5 cm (17 1/4 x 19 7/8 inches)

signed in monogram lower left on a rock: PHILS W

ENGRAVED

In reverse for Jean Moyreau (1690–1762), as *L'Ecuyer du Manège*, in the *Cabinet Crozat de Thiers*, published 1756.

Described by Hofstede de Groot as one of the finest pictures of the artist's maturity, this painting of a riding school shows to brilliant effect Philips Wouwerman's consummate skill in depicting equestrian subjects. Signed with Wouwerman's monogram, it once belonged to the French financier and celebrated connoisseur Pierre Crozat (1665–1740), who also owned a dozen other paintings and numerous drawings by the artist.¹ The provenance of this painting increased in prestige when in 1772 it was acquired en bloc with the entire Crozat collection by Catherine the Great of Russia (1729–1796). There it remained in imperial possession, first at the palace of Tsarskoe-Selo and later at the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg, until the collections were dispersed by the Soviet Government. Birgit Schumacher in her catalogue raisonné devoted to the artist assigns the painting a date at the end of the 1650s.

The composition centres round a broad circle trampled into the earth by the horses broken-in at the post. Three horses mark the extent of this informal arena: a freshly broken-in bay ridden by a man in yellow, who is about to strike it with a whip; a saddled grey horse that rears as a groom tries to control it; and beside it his own mount, a chestnut horse that appears restless, deftly painted in sharp foreshortening. The spectators include a well-dressed lady and gentleman in profile, standing in confident pose, and other figures in their entourage. Wouwerman introduces humorous touches to the scene: in the foreground a child guides the reins of a goat, while at the far left a dog defecates. The placement of a bone in such close proximity to both dog and cripple – whose slow progress on all fours is interrupted as he doffs his hat – may also be tongue-in-cheek. To the right a flight of steps leads up to the entrance of a grand yet crumbling house. A woman with a small child in her arms and other

spectators on the steps, including someone half-hidden by vegetation peering over the balustrade, are all skilfully observed, so too the secondary figures at the far left. They include a horseman pointing into the distance, while his servant adjusts a stirrup. Further away a shepherd tends his flock on a river bank. The painting is as refined in the details as it is coherent in structure. Minutiae such as the sharp points of the rider's spurs, details of dress such as fur and feathers, and the torn clothes of the beggar – in stark contrast to the elegance of the company – all bring the scene into sharp focus.

As the most accomplished and successful seventeenth-century Dutch painter of equestrian subjects, Wouwerman was adept at depicting horses in many different contexts and settings. Scenes such as this, featuring richly attired figures attended by pages, grooms and dogs, provided the artist with a favourite source of subject matter during the 1650s and '60s. It is not surprising therefore that on numerous occasions Wouwerman was drawn to paint the theme of the riding school, appealing as it did to his talents as a painter of horses and people. Here he does not miss the opportunity to give prominence to the horses, to convey their nervous energy and to show them in differing degrees of spirited movement. Schumacher lists some twenty paintings that treat the subject of the riding school made over a period of nearly two decades. Closest to this in date and not dissimilar in composition is *The Riding School* at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.² Both compositions are similarly structured with a building on the right, a wide expanse of sky, a landscape extending into the distance to the left, and horses and spectators positioned round a central post (two posts in the case of the Amsterdam painting). Schumacher dates the latter to around 1660. A large proportion of the riding school pictures date from the 1660s, exploring the theme in varied ways.

One other riding school painting merits attention in this context. In 1770, two years before purchasing the present work as part of Crozat's collection, Catherine the Great bought the earliest known treatment of the theme, *Riding School between Ruins of a Castle*, a work dated by Schumacher to around or shortly before 1650, still in the collections at the Hermitage today.³ Albeit of a similar subject, the Hermitage canvas and the present painting differ in setting, mood, and colouring, as well as date. The Hermitage *Riding School* is heavily influenced by Pieter van Laer (1599–1642[?]), while the present picture shows the shift that occurs in the late 1650s when Wouwerman's work becomes more elegant and refined.

Wouwerman's reputation continued to grow throughout the eighteenth century and his work was avidly collected by connoisseurs who appreciated his technical perfection and elegant subject matter. His pictures were particularly prized in France, where many of his compositions, including this one, were engraved. Indeed, one indication of his popularity is attested by the successful publication of a series of prints after Wouwerman by the Frenchman Jean Moyreau (1690–1762), whose celebrated book of engravings includes the earliest known record of *The Riding School*, published almost a century after it was painted. The financier Pierre Crozat was one of the greatest private collectors of the 18th Century, and the principal patron of Antoine Watteau. He had an enormous collection of Old Master Drawings, most of which, catalogued by Pierre-Jean Mariette, were dispersed at auction in Paris in 1741, an occasion described by Michael Jaffé as "the greatest public sale of drawings held in the dix-huitième."

Most of the rest of Crozat's collection was divided between his nephews: in the case of this picture, Louis Antoine Crozat. Following his death in 1770 Denis Diderot negotiated the sale of his collection en bloc to Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia.

1 M. Stuffmann, 'Les Tableaux de la collection de Pierre Crozat', *Gazette des beaux-arts*, vol. 72, 1968, pp. 11–144; see also H. Meyer, 'La collection de Louis-Antoine Crozat, baron de Thiers', in *L'Age d'or flamand et hollandais: Collections de Catherine II, Musée de l'Ermitage, Saint-Pétersbourg, exh. cat., Musée des Beaux-Arts de Dijon*, 1993, pp. 49–56.

2 SK-A-477; oil on canvas, 48 x 62 cm. Schumacher 2006, p. 169, A1, reproduced vol. II, pl. 1.

3 Inv. no. 1737; oil on canvas, 61.5 x 77 cm. Schumacher 2006, p. 173, A10, reproduced in colour vol. II, pl. 10.

Exhibitions

London, Richard Green Gallery, Exhibition of Old Master and Impressionist Paintings, 1986, no. 8, reproduced in color.

Literature:

J. Moyreau, Œuvres de Ph. pe Wouvermens [sic], hollandois: gravées d'après ses meilleurs tableaux qui sont dans les plus beaux cabinets de Paris et ailleurs, Paris 1737–62 (1756), pl. 82;

J. Smith, A Catalogue Raisonné..., vol. I, London 1829, p. 303, no. 359;

J. Smith, A Catalogue Raisonné..., Supplement, vol. IX, London 1842, p. 159, no. 61 (as 'Showing-off Horses... excellent picture... Worth 450 gs.');

Hermitage Palace, Catalogue, Saint Petersburg 1901, no. 996;

C. Hofstede de Groot, A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century, vol. II, London 1909, p. 271, no. 55;

B. Schumacher, Studien zu Werk und Wirkung Philips Wouermans, diss., Munich 1989, pp. 104, 287, no. 148;

B. Schumacher, Pferde, Meisterwerke des Pferde- und Reiterbildes, Stuttgart 1994, reproduced in colour on pp. 146 and 141 (detail);

B. Schumacher, Philips Wouerman (1619–1668). The Horse Painter of the Golden Age, 2 vols, Doornspijk 2006, vol. I, p. 176, A 18, reproduced in colour, vol. II, plate 7 and in black and white plate 17.