



David Vinckboons (Mechelen 1576 - Amsterdam 1632)

The Feast of the Five Senses

Circa: dated 1607 on the base of the fountain

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24.1 x 38.3 cm (9 1/4 x 15 1/4 inches)

N.B. - More extensive cataloguing for this painting available on request

David Vinckboons' newly discovered Feast of the Five Senses is the earliest known *buitenpartij*, or outdoor merry company, in Dutch art. The theme was popularized in the 1610s and 1620s by painters like Vinckboons, Esaias van de Velde and Dirck Hals, and is the forerunner of seventeenth century genre painting. Artists working in the Southern Netherlands in the second half of the sixteenth century first popularized depictions of lavishly dressed young people in outdoor settings through portrayals of the Prodigal Son wasting his inheritance, but it was Vinckboons who took the critical step of secularizing these images. The first *buitenpartijen* were heretofore thought to have been two paintings by Vinckboons, one of which is dated 1610, in Vienna and Amsterdam (Figs. 1 and 2). The present, exceptionally well-preserved picture, dated 1607 on the pedestal of the fountain, further pushes back the birth of this quintessential Dutch genre.

Five elegantly dressed couples are gathered in a secluded clearing that is almost completely walled off by a screen of oak trees and rose bushes. At the far left, a woman points at her reflection in a fountain while holding up a small mirror to her stubbled, buffoonish looking partner, who reaches out as if in shock at what he sees. The other eight guests are gathered around a heavily laden table. A seated woman tunes her lute as her guitar-playing companion gazes at her longingly. Behind them, a more impertinent suitor grabs and kisses the woman next to him; judging by the expression on her face, the affection may not be mutual. Continuing clockwise around the table, a standing man presents a bouquet of flowers to the woman standing beside him. She is already holding another bouquet, which she reaches to place on the table as petals drop from it. The last, most sumptuously dressed couple are partaking of the feast, the woman peeling an orange while the man, posed languidly in the grass, holds an orange in his right hand and reaches his left arm across her lap, beckoning for a glass of wine. Two servants complete the scene: a young boy pouring wine at lower left, and a woman approaching the table carrying a large pie topped with stag horns. Throughout, the figures and their opulent costumes are enlivened by Vinckboons' vibrant, silvery brushwork.

The gathering and the setting have their roots in late medieval imagery of gardens of love, but the more immediate precursor was sixteenth century Southern Netherlandish depictions of the parable of the Prodigal Son. Around 1550, artists developed a standard repertoire of motifs to show the Prodigal Son

wasting his inheritance: he is usually shown feasting at a table with other revelers, while a female innkeeper tallies the bill on a slate. Often, a jester and a peddler join the festivities, while a vignette in the distance shows the Prodigal Son being chased out of the inn for being unable to pay. Hans Bol, who, like Vinckboons, emigrated from the southern Netherlands to Amsterdam, did more than any other artist to popularize this iconography through a series of drawings and prints in the 1560s and 1570s (Figs. 3 and 4). Some of these are close enough to Vinckboons' merry companies that they must have been known to him, but Vinckboons was the first to remove the revelers from a biblical setting, thereby turning a historical subject into a present-day genre scene. Karel van Mander described the characters in Vinckboons' early works as "modern figures", their contemporary fashion distinguishing them from historical or mythological subjects. It is logical that Vinckboons, who was born in Mechelen in 1576 and lived in Antwerp and Middelburg before settling with his family in Amsterdam in 1591, was the originator of the *buitenpartij*. His only master, according to van Mander, was his father, Philip, but through him David became well versed in the Southern Netherlandish traditions of the Brueghel family and their successors, including Hans Bol. Several of his earliest surviving paintings are large, Brueghelian kermesses, some of which incorporate fashionably dressed townspeople observing the antics of the peasantry. A c. 1602-04 drawing by Vinckboons maintains the teeming composition and birds-eye perspective of Flemish kermesses, but shifts the scene into a lavish palace garden, where hundreds of elegant young people dance, make music, and observe a boating spectacle (Fig. 5). In 1608 he made a series of four drawings of the parable of the Prodigal Son; the one showing the Prodigal Son wasting his inheritance demonstrates a close knowledge of Hans Bol's work, and Vinckboons re-used many of its motifs in the aforementioned Amsterdam and Vienna paintings (Fig. 6). The Feast of the Five Senses, which was executed a year earlier, also shares certain elements with the drawing, such as the kissing couple at the far end of the table.

Although our painting represents a meaningful evolution from the crowded compositions of Flemish peasant festivals and the biblical subject matter of Prodigal Son scenes, it is by no means free of allegorical or moralizing overtones. The five couples are unmistakably engaged in activities that represent the five senses. The couple at the fountain depict sight; the music-making pair, sound; the couple embracing, touch; the man offering flowers to a woman, smell; and the feasting couple, taste.

Each is accompanied by an animal that is emblematic of that sense: an eagle for sight, a deer for sound, a bird (baked in a pie on a table in front of the kissing couple) for touch, a dog (tucked under the standing woman's arm) for smell, and a monkey for taste. Vinckboons also seems to be warning the viewer against the excesses he portrays, such as the vanity of the couple gazing at their reflections, or the lust of the man kissing the shocked woman next to him. The man lying on the ground, sprawling across his companion's lap to reach for a glass of wine, is reminiscent of the Prodigal Son in Bol's prints and drawings, and is surely intended as a caution against the dangers of overindulgence.

Despite his substantial oeuvre, only nine other autograph outdoor merry company paintings by Vinckboons are known, all of which date from the second decade of the seventeenth century; a few other lost pictures are known from old copies. The paintings can be grouped into three types: musical parties, banquets featuring a lowered vantage point and a table parallel to the picture plane, and, like the present painting, banquets with a seated music-making couple and a table diagonal to the picture plane.

The composition Vinckboons invented for the Feast of the Five Senses was one he would return to on several occasions over the next dozen years. In the painting sold at Sotheby's in 2014, which can be dated stylistically to c. 1614-16 (Fig. 7), he extended the composition to the right, showing a castle and its gardens, while making a few small changes to the figures. The couple representing sight are different and no longer have an eagle next to them, and the man seated on the grass is fatter and much more obviously an embodiment of gluttony. In the painting sold at Christie's in 2007, dated 1619 (Fig. 8), the fountain and the couple representing sight are omitted altogether, leaving only an eagle. The background has been opened up to show a large pergola and a castle in the distance, and the man on the grass is more caricatured than the elegant gentleman in our painting. The costumes in both of these later paintings are more simplified and monochromatic. Discussing the two pictures in her unpublished 1999 PhD dissertation, Sara Wages presciently wrote "A possible explanation of the relationship between these two works is that they are both derived from an earlier composition of the Feast of the Five Senses which did not have the extension to the right with the garden and palaces". Our picture is that prototype whose existence Wages theorized.

Vinckboons has long been recognized as the first Dutch artist to paint a *buitenpartij*, but prior to the discovery of the *Feast of the Five Senses*, his earliest example was believed to be the *Music-Making Company in the Open*, in Vienna, which is dated 1610. The Amsterdam painting, with its close stylistic similarity to the Vienna picture, is also generally dated circa 1610. Other practitioners of the genre made their first efforts in the second decade of the century. Esaias vande Velde's earliest dated *buitenpartijen*, which show Vinckboons' strong influence, are from 1614 (Fig. 9). Willem Buytewech's only undisputed outdoor merry company is generally dated to c. 1616-17 (Fig. 10). The *Elegant Company in a Landscape* that was destroyed in the Flakturm Friedrichshain fire in 1945, often attributed to a young Frans Hals – and also clearly influenced by Vinckboons – is thought to have been painted in or shortly after 1610 (Fig. 11), while Frans' younger brother Dirck, the most prolific painter in this genre, did not produce his first works until 1621 (Fig. 12).

The *Feast of the Five Senses* is therefore the only known outdoor merry company to have been painted before 1610, and its discovery reinforces Vinckboons' status as the inventor of the *buitenpartij*. As we have seen, its existence had been hypothesized, but it remained unknown to scholars, having hung in a Breton château since at least the nineteenth century. In depicting the young bourgeoisie, elegantly dressed in contemporary clothing and removed from a religious or historical setting, David Vinckboons was a true innovator in Dutch art, laying a foundation that would be built upon in succeeding generations by artists such as Gerard Ter Borch, Frans van Mieris, and Johannes Vermeer.