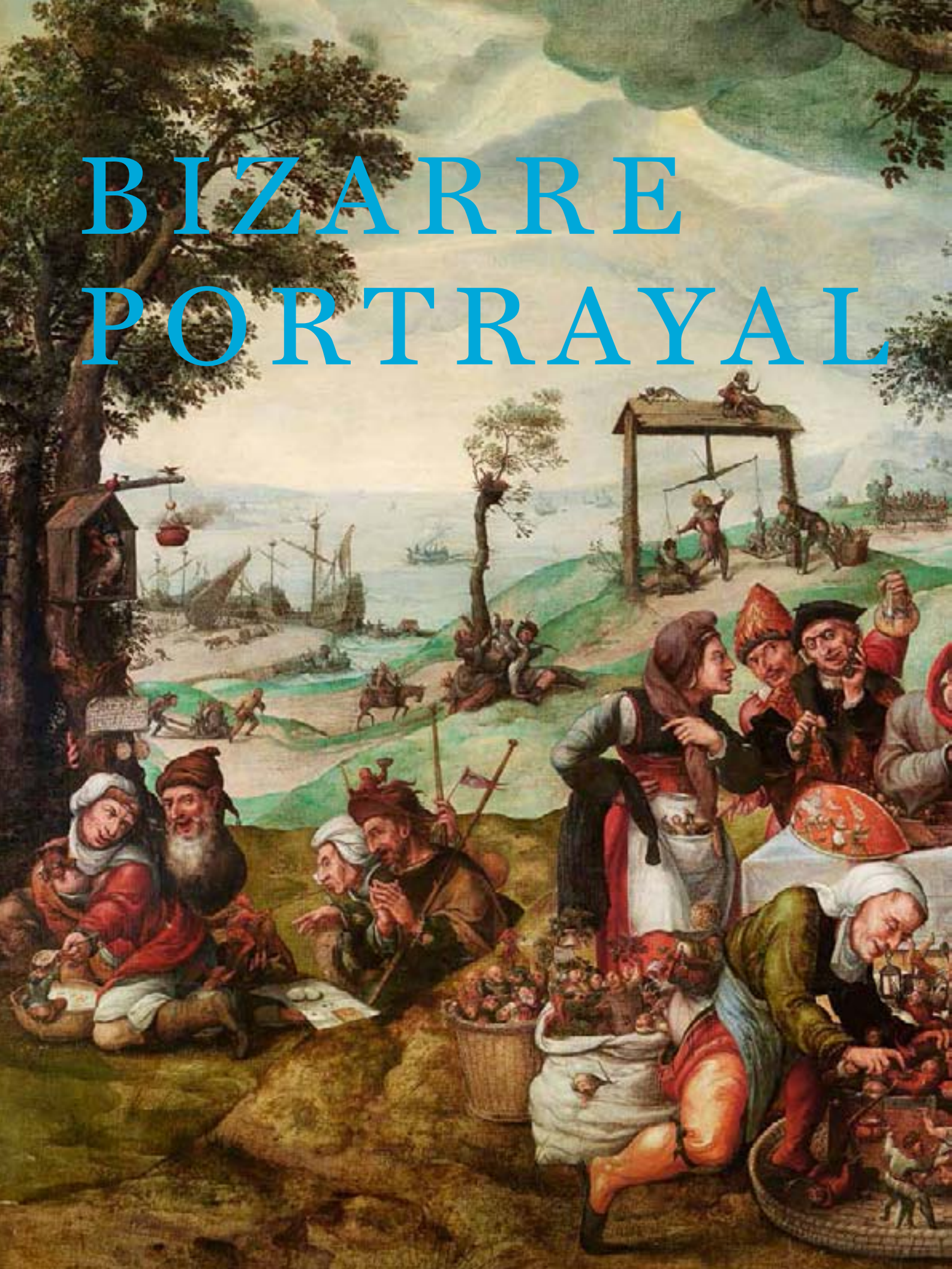


BIZARRE PORTRAYAL



OF HUMAN FOLLY

Frans Verbeeck (Malines c. 1510 – 1570)
The Mocking of Human Follies
Oil on canvas, 135 x 188 cm
Estimate € 900,000 – 1,200,000
Old Master Paintings auction, 21 October 2014

Dorotheum's Old Master Paintings auction in October
brings a rare oil painting by Frans Verbeeck –
a masterpiece in which he humorously pokes fun
at human folly – under the hammer.

BY ALEXANDER WIED

Until now, the Verbeeck name has been familiar almost exclusively to art experts, but the October-scheduled sale of a highly impressive masterpiece from the Verbeeck family presents a good opportunity to get acquainted with the works of the important artist family. The Verbeeck family was creatively active in the 16th century in the town of Mechelen, not far from Leuven and the Province of Brabant's main cities, Brussels and Antwerp. At the time, Mechelen was a centre for watercolour on canvas painting, an affordable and easily tradable alternative to the expensive tapestries. However, the life expectancy of the resulting works was low and only very few have survived to this day. In the "Schilder-Boeck" (Haarlem 1604), Karel van Mander wrote in his portrayal of the painter Hans Bol that 150 studios existed in Mechelen alone in which watercolour on canvas painting was practiced. Hans Bol as

Detail:
A basket
of fools



well as Lucas and Marten van Valckenborch lived and worked in Mechelen; Pieter Brueghel the Elder also worked for a brief while in the city on an altar piece, which was never commissioned. And last but not least, the Verbeeck family lived and worked there.

This unique painting "The Mocking of Human Follies" has been attributed twice before in art historical journals, in 1980 and 2003, to Frans Verbeeck. Since Mechelen has fostered several painters by the names Frans and Jan Verbeeck, it requires a brief explanation to clarify this particular attribution. Imagine a family dynasty of artists who all produced their paintings within the same multi-branched workshop. And all the paintings, according to Paul Vandebroek (1981), "should be attributed to the "Verbeeck group", due to the close proximity in composition, style and iconographic language applied". Thus, "it seems meaningless for the time being to distinguish between Frans and Jan Verbeeck and attribute these paintings to one or the other artist".

Nevertheless, "The Mocking of Human Follies" was listed once again in 2003 in the exhibition catalogue "De Zotte Schilders" as a painting by Frans Verbeeck, this time with the addition "de Oude", which translates to "the Elder".

The painting's iconographic representations are highly complex: Under a large tree in an open, green meadow landscape, merchants are trading with a number of tiny men, some of which are recognizable by their hats and bells as jesters. The scene

¹ Jan Op de Beeck, De Familie Verbeeck. Een raar schildersgeslacht uit Mechelen, in: De Zotte Schilders, Mecheln 2003, p. 45–54; p. 51–53. The catalogue divides the works into two generations; including studio attributions, a total of 33 paintings and 37 sketches have been counted.

² 102 x 158 cm, provenance: the Hellberg Collection, Stockholm 1938



Detail: Love's follies

es and folly. The small inscription fields included in the painting may well contain short sentences from such "Rederijker" texts, but the words are no longer discernible. One clear example of this is visible in the cage, which hangs above the dancing group on the painting's right hand side. Inside the cage a jester sits atop a big, hatching egg, out of which slips another small jester. It's a reference to the Dutch saying "men mag geen zot eieren laten uitbroeden", which in English cautions "not to leave it to a fool to hatch eggs" – because the result will only be more fools.

can only be viewed as an allegory. It depicts the interminable existence and exercise of foolishness – a satirical take on human folly.

In the foreground, merchants at a table are in the process of weighing tiny jesters, while a travelling salesman and his wife are offering others out of baskets and a sack. Something similar to a bridle is attached to the salesman's head, on his forehead a tiny jester sits with a hammer in hand, alluding to the well-known "stone surgery". The surgical removal of a stone from the forehead is a pictorial theme which originates from Hieronymus Bosch and was much used in different variations in 16th and 17th century art. The message is short and simple: Stupidity cannot be surgically removed – the operation is futile, which makes the undertaking itself utterly foolish. Just as foolish appear the two pilgrims on the left hand side of the painting who kneel down in worship in front of two elderly jesters. The female jester is at the same time breastfeeding a jester baby and feeding it with porridge.

Verbeeck also depicts the clergy in an unfavourable light: The lovers depicted in the right hand side of the canvas are easily identified as a monk and a nun. They have escaped from the monastery and now indulge in the madness of love.

The motivation behind, or key to, many of the painting's allusive, rebuslike details can be traced to the satirical rhymed texts that came out of the so called chambers of rhetoric, or "Rederijkerskamers", whose members were poking elegantly fun at human vic-

In comparison to the other Verbeeck family "canvases" the extraordinarily large format of "The Mocking of Human Follies" really stands out, as does its use of oil paint as opposed to the otherwise preferred tempera paint.

A reduced and somewhat smaller workshop copy of the painting was sold at Dorotheum in October 16, 2007. Its technical quality was, however, inferior to that demonstrated in the present version, which can not only be considered the original rendition of this particular motif, but also as the ultimate masterpiece of the most masterly member of a large family of painters.

The individual style with the unique and rich iconography of the Verbeeck family's art holds up well and are easily discernable when viewed alongside works by the two great masters Bosch and Brueghel. In contrast to the works of Bosch-successors Pieter Huys and Jan Mandyn, the Verbeeck heritage, as Vandenbroeck has emphasized, has no direct links to Bosch or Brueghel. The Verbeeck family created their own world of imagery unparalleled in contemporary Netherlandish art; a world which continues to surprise and astound us to this day with its strangeness and sometimes bizarre, caricature-like and Flemish folklore-inspired renditions of the human race.

The well-preserved "The Mocking of Human Follies" demonstrates admirably the high quality of work that the largely ruined Verbeeck watercolours are merely able to suggest.