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FRANS FRANCKEN THE YOUNGER
(Antwerp 1581-1642)

DEATH AND THE MISER

oil on copper
15 x 13 cm; 6 x 5 1/8 in.

Provenance

With De Jonckheere, Paris, 1985;
Private collection, France.

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This striking work on copper appears to be a very fine version of a well-known composition of which at least nineteen versions exist.¹ These are all on panel or copper, feature almost identical compositions, and are all unsigned save for the prime version which sold at Christie's on 27 January 2023, lot 201, for \$157,500. The prime version has been dated to a later period in Francken's career, based on the panel maker's mark of François de Bont, who was only active from 1637. Previously, Harting had dated it to around 1625. Of the versions recorded in Harting's catalogue, only one other copper is listed, that in the Historisches Museum, Frankfurt (Fig. 1).²

At the centre of the scene, a bearded elderly man is seated at a draped table surrounded by symbols of his wealth: coins, papers, and a pair of spectacles. In his right hand, he holds a second pair of glasses, whilst looking up upwards at Death personified as a skeleton. Death plays the violin and appears to invite the man to participate in his 'final dance', yet the man points to his right foot resting on a stool, as if to indicate an affliction which is preventing him from joining. Death, in turn, rests his right foot on an hourglass, an indication that the man's time is nearly up. In the lower left foreground, a money bag rests against a chest, further underscoring the theme of material wealth. Beyond the room's arched opening, another figure of Death is seen, this time confronting a younger man, set against the backdrop of an Italianate landscape.

In addition to these near-identical compositions, several variations exist. For example, in a painting which sold at auction in Vienna in 2022,³ the cabinet along the back wall of the front room has been removed, the corbel of an angel has been replaced by a plain one, a sculpture replaces the landscape above the doorway, the poses of the two figures of Death have been altered slightly and the young man in the back room now stands (Fig. 2). This variant appears to have subsequently provided the model for four prints, two by Jacob Gole and one each by Pieter Schenk and Bernard Lens II (Fig. 3). A second, signed variant in a horizontal format is in the collection of the National Bank of Belgium in Brussels (Fig. 4),

¹ U. Härting, *Frans Francken der Jüngere (1581-1642): Die Gemälde mit kritischem Œuvrekatalog*, Freren, 1989, pp. 358-59, nos 397-403, 404a.

² Härting 1989, p. 359, cat. no. 403.

³ Härting 1989, p. 358, cat. no. 401.

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while six further versions by Francken and his workshop – four in horizontal format – replace Death's violin with a lute.⁴

The pictorial tradition of Death and the Miser ultimately derives from Hans Holbein the Younger's woodcut from his Dance of Death series, which was first published in Lyon in 1538 (Fig. 5). Several details from Holbein's print recur in Francken's composition, among them the money bags leaning against the chest, the vaulted interior space and the barred window. Like Holbein's woodcut, Francken's paintings belong to the tradition of the *memento mori* and remind the viewer of earthly transience. The paintings are also a warning against greed and avarice because earthly riches are of no use upon one's death. The old man's gesture to his ailing foot may also allude to the Dutch proverb 'De dans ontspringen' or 'to get away with something'.

Despite the popularity of these paintings, as seen by the numerous versions produced by Francken and his workshop, it only seems to appear once, in 1671, in Antwerp inventories of the seventeenth century. This has led Härting to perceptively suggest that these paintings may have been set into harpsichords made by the famed Ruckers family in Antwerp.⁵ Indeed, the Ruckers family coat-of-arms includes an angel playing a harp, very much like that which features on the corbel of this painting. Moreover, the average size of these paintings accords with a fitting spot in these instruments. While no such *memento mori* scenes are known on harpsichords, their subject fits well with the fleeting nature of music.

This work has a certificate of authentication from De Jonckheere, dated 14 May 1985.⁶

⁴ Härting 1989, p. 359, cat. no. 404.

⁵ U. Härting, 'Der Geigende Tod: zu einer Anzahl kleinformatigen Gemälde des Antwerpener Kleinfigurenmalers Frans Francken II (1581-1642)', in *Musikalische Ikonographie*, eds. H. Heckmann, M. Holl and H.J. Marx, Laaber, 1994, pp. 121-132.

⁶ In this certificate, De Jonckheere erroneously identifies the picture as being published in Ursula Härting's catalogue (1983), cat. no. 306b.

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Fig. 1. Frans Francken the Younger, *Death and the Miser*, c. 1637.
Oil on copper, 16.5 x 13 cm.
Frankfurt am Main, Historisches Museum Frankfurt

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Fig. 2. Frans Francken the Younger, *Death and the Miser*, c. 1637.
Oil on panel, 19 x 15 cm.
Sold at imKinsky, 28 June 2022, lot 105

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Fig. 3. Bernard Lens II, *Death, a Miser, and the Prodigal Son*, undated.
Mezzotint, 23 × 18.4 cm

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Fig. 4. Frans Francken the Younger, *Allegory of Richness*, c. 1637.
Oil on panel
Brussels, National Bank of Belgium.

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Fig. 5. Hans Holbein the Younger Dance of Death: The Miser, c. 1526.
Woodcut, 6.5 x 5 cm