

SEBASTIAN VRANCX

(Antwerp 1573 - Antwerp 1647)

Cavaliers Attacking Travellers in a Wooded Plain

signed with monogram 'SV' ('SV' ligated, lower centre to the side of a horse)
oil on canvas
99 x 164 cm (39 x 64 ½ in)

CAVALIERS ATTACKING TRAVELLERS IN A WOODED Plain is a highly engaging and energetic large-scale work. It documents the moment a group of travellers have come under attack by a unit of cavaliers. The resulting chaos presents a dramatic scene as the travellers flee in panic across the extensive landscape, seeking refuge in the woods that edge onto the plain.

A caravan of carts discernible in the middle distance marks the source of the attack and from it, a surge of movement flows towards the viewer as dynamic figures dash towards the woods that occupy the foreground of the painting. As the figures advance, their features become clearer. Colour, expression and form emerge as Sebastian Vrancx delights in anecdotal detail, imbuing the work with character and interest.

Cavaliers on soaring horses, wielding swords attack the travellers brutally and indiscriminately. In the right-hand side of the painting a woman in a pink dress and black hat looks back in horror at two charging cavaliers; by her feet a man, fallen to the ground, has an expression of terror as the cavaliers bear down on him. In the centre of the painting, a horse carrying an armoured soldier rears into the air and tramples figures underfoot. To their left, travellers scramble wildly for shelter in the woods. The overall scene is one of utter devastation. Bodies and horses lie strewn across the plain in awkward positions, particularly around the caravan;



Sebastian Vrancx, *Cavaliers Attacking Travellers in a Wooded Plain* (Detail)



Circle of Sebastian Vrancx, *Attack Upon a Cart*, c.1610s,
The Hermitage, St. Petersburg; acquired before 1916 (Figure 1)

muskets, spears and armour litter the ground. The outlines of a windmill and church steeples on the horizon are the only signs of regularity and civility against this otherwise extraordinary scene.

The expansive setting of *Cavaliers Attacking Travellers in a Wooded Plain* accentuates the drama and scale of the painting. The faint horizontal line of the background hills conveys a strong feeling of distance and space. This allows for the inclusion of many figures, heightening the energetic activity which characterises the painting. While proportion is not exact, a sense of perspective is achieved by the diminishing figures as the space recedes. A careful attention to colour, employing bold tones in the foreground which fade into the background, similarly adds to the illusion of depth.

Light filters through an overcast sky and illuminates the open space of the foreground, which contrasts with the shadowed woods. Focus is therefore placed on the figures nearing the edge of the woods, drawing the viewer into the action, which is intensified by their wildly gesticulating movements. Decorative trees, characteristic of Vrancx's style, bright dashes of colour and an urgent sense of movement in the thrusting and wailing figures combine to create an engrossing and dynamic composition.

The painting also serves as a historical record of a turbulent period in Dutch, and more widespread, European history. The Netherlands in the seventeenth century was a time of much unrest and conflict as the





Sebastian Vrancx, *Ambush*, c.1630, National Gallery, Prague (Figure 2)

region struggled to resolve political and religious tensions, largely initiated by Spanish imperial ambitions. In a factionalized state with competing ideologies and local militia, attacks of the nature depicted in the present painting were not an uncommon occurrence. Such subjects became a popular theme for many Dutch artists, particularly Vrancx, who was best known for his depiction of battle scenes.

He started painting small-scale cavalry scenes early in his career and they earned him particular renown. Of special note is his untraced *Battle between Officers Lekkerbeetje and Bréauté on the Heath of Vught* (1601), of which numerous versions survive, including an incorrectly attributed copy. Over half of Vrancx's *oeuvre* is devoted to this subject matter. Apart from Jan Snellinck (1544/49-1638), he was the first artist to attempt the subject of cavalry battles and thus one of its principal exponents in the Netherlands. He was followed in the southern Netherlands by Pieter Meulener (1602-1654) and Jacques van der Wijhen (b. c.1588) and in France by Adam-Frans van der Meulen (1632-1690), who was a pupil of Pieter Snayers (1592-1667), himself a pupil of Vrancx. In the northern Netherlands, Vrancx's influence is clearly evident in the work of Esaias van de Velde



Sebastian Vrancx, *Cavaliers Attacking Travellers in a Wooded Plain* (Detail)

(1587-1630) (see inventory) and Pauwels van Hillegaert (1595/96-1640). The conservativeness of Vrancx's cavalry scenes often draw him parallels with Antonio Tempesta (1555-1630) (see inventory). Tempesta was a Florentine painter and printmaker, chiefly remembered for his hunting and battle scenes. A great number of his prints were widely circulated across Europe with which Vrancx may well have come into contact.

Of a similar subject to the present painting is *Attack Upon a Cart* belonging to the circle of Vrancx, now housed in the Hermitage, St. Petersburg (fig. 1). Once again, a scene of brutality is presented as soldiers attack a cart. Set similarly within an expansive yet conventional landscape, a large battle wages in the background while the foreground details reveal the consequences of the attack. A group of cavaliers in the right-hand side of the painting casually survey the scene as figures flee, bodies are pillaged and the remnants of war are strewn across the landscape. While the painting represents the horrors of battle, it lacks the vibrancy and dynamism of *Cavaliers Attacking Travellers in a Wooded Plain*. Bolder colour and a freer, more decorative approach taken in the present painting lends the work greater character and expression, embodied in the personal attention accorded to individual figures - their gesticulating and expressive qualities allowing for a greater sense of identification in the viewer. The result is a more accomplished and engaging painting.

Vrancx depicted similar scenes of banditry and surprise attacks throughout his career, another example being *Ambush* (fig. 2). In this work, similarly set on an isolated wooded track, the latter stages of the attack are depicted; captured women are led to one side whilst their male companions are marched into the darkness of the wood on the left-hand side. An escapee is about to be shot and a dead horse provides further evidence of the attackers' violence. Details, such as the pleading of the woman dressed in white or the fact that another of the victims is a monk, poignantly emphasise the cruelty depicted.

Vrancx was the son of Jan Vrancx and Barbara Coutereau. The biographer of Netherlandish artists Karel van Mander (1548-1606) claimed Vrancx trained as a painter with Adam van Noort (1561/62-1641), which is possible but unconfirmed. Vrancx's earliest known work, a drawing, is closely related to the Antwerp scrollwork decorations of Cornelis Floris (1514-1575) and Cornelis Bos (1506-c.1564). The next drawings and paintings were executed during Vrancx's stay in Italy (c.1596-1601) and



Sebastian Vrancx, *Orpheus and the Beasts*, c.1595, Galleria Borghese, Rome (Figure 3)



Joos de Momper II, *River Landscape with Boar Hunt*, c.1610, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (Figure 4)

reveal strong parallels with the early style of Paul Bril (1554-1626), who was working in Rome, and of Jan Brueghel I (1568-1625). They contain the hallmarks that distinguish Vrancx's work - a liking for anecdotal detail and colourful and gesticulating figures within a decorative landscape.

In 1610, Vrancx became a member of the Fraternity of Saint Peter and Saint Paul, a select society whose members included Sir Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640). In the Guild year 1611-1612 he was an associate dean and in the following year chief dean of Antwerp's Guild of St. Luke. In 1612, he married Maria Pamphi, daughter of an art dealer and sister-in-law of the painter Tobias Verhaecht (1561-1631), who later became his daughter's godfather.

Vrancx's *oeuvre* is not exclusively preoccupied with battle scenes; it includes many accomplished allegorical, mythological and religious subjects, which he presented as genre scenes with the emphasis on narrative detail. *Orpheus and the Beasts* is one example, which depicts Orpheus, chief among poets and musicians, taming wild animals with his music and singing (fig. 3). The mythological subject was popular among artists, which allowed for the depiction of many animals gathered together, thereby providing an opportunity for the artist to demonstrate his expertise.

Vrancx was also a member of the *Violieren* ('Stocks'), part of a larger literary movement known as the Antwerp chamber of rhetoricians, who played an important part in the literary scene in the Dutch Golden Age. Comprising various societies, they flourished in the Low Countries in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, experimenting in poetry and drama. In addition to his literary involvement, Vrancx also produced paintings for the *Violieren*, which had ties with the Antwerp Guild of St. Luke.

Vrancx collaborated with many other leading Dutch artists throughout his career. On several occasions he provided the staffage for Joos de Momper II's (1564-1635) (cat nos. 48 & 80) celebrated paintings, including *River Landscape with Boar Hunt*, currently in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (fig. 4). Similarly, Vrancx worked with Jan Brueghel I on subjects familiar to him, such as *Raid on a Convoy* in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. The artist also collaborated with Tobias Verhaecht (1561-1631) (e.g. *Hunting Adventure of Emperor Maximilian I*, Brussels), Alexander Keirinck (1600-1642) (e.g. *Landscape with Chasing Horsemen*, Darmstadt), Jan van Balen (1611-54) and Frans Francken II (1581-1642) (cat no. 36) (see *Rebus Arms for the Violieren*, 1618, Antwerp) and Pieter Neeffs (active 1605-1656/61) (cat. nos. 36 & 37) (see *Church Interior*, 1613, Brussels). Whenever Vrancx is recorded as working with other artists, it is he who provides the figures. In his own work, however, Vrancx usually painted the landscapes himself.

Vrancx's stylistic development c.1611-1625 reveals a more confident handling of form in his figures and landscapes, which came to characterise



Sebastian Vrancx, *Cavaliers Attacking Travellers in a Wooded Plain* (Detail)

his mature style. His representation of space, and large, complex groups within, was executed with far greater control and clarity. This developed to a new level in the latter part of his career, from c.1625 to 1647, when Vrancx gave greater emphasis to the space than the figures in his paintings. A refinement, which originated c.1620 in the 'aristocratic' characterisation of horses, became a feature of the whole image, while the painting of trees became more 'woolly'. Vrancx continued painting until the end of his life, with his final works exchanging strength for gracefulness.

Vrancx enjoyed a successful and diverse career, collaborating with leading contemporary Dutch artists and experimenting in a variety of genres as well as being an active member of the *Violieren*. It was for his paintings of battle scenes, however, which Vrancx introduced to the Netherlands, that he is best remembered. Scenes of war and pillage were the chief motifs for the artist and in their representations he was arguably unrivalled. Whilst pictorial documents of a turbulent period of Dutch history, they are also highly accomplished works in their own right. Vrancx's delight in detail, excellent employment of colour and space and most distinctly, superbly animated figures, lend his work a dynamism and energy. It is these qualities that underpin the success of his paintings, and which were to establish his reputation as a leading artist of his time, a proponent of battle scenes and a significant influence on future generations.



Sebastian Vrancx, *Cavaliers Attacking Travellers in a Wooded Plain* (Detail)