

WILLEM KALF

(Rotterdam 1619 - Amsterdam 1693)

A Woman Pulling Water from a Well, a Pile of Vegetables at her Feet

oil on copper
26.6 x 22.2 cm (10½ x 8¾ in)

THE PRESENT WORK MOST PROBABLY RELATES to Willem Kalf's early Paris period when he characteristically painted rustic scenes, combining still lifes of pots, pans, vegetables and fruit with figures of peasants, set within an interior or outdoor surrounding, as seen in a very similar work, *Peasant Interior with Woman at a Well* (fig. 1). As is evident in Kalf's *A Woman Pulling Water from a Well, a Pile of Vegetables at her Feet*, the work is dominated by the still life arrangement in the foreground, as was typical of his rustic interiors. By comparing the present work with one of Kalf's still lifes, such as *Dessert*, in the Hermitage, see fig.2, many parallels can be drawn.



Willem Kalf, *Peasant Interior with Woman at a Well*, c.1642-1643, Saint Louis Art Museum, Missouri (Figure 1)

Compositionally, Kalf applies the same methodology to this rustic scene as he does to the still life. Each element is carefully arranged within the scene with considerable attention, and conceived in such a way as to create a harmonious balance. The use of a deep, dark background is also a common device which he employs in his still lifes, offsetting the main objects, and a well thought out colour scheme in both works helps to lead our eye from object to object.

However, it is in the depiction of the large copper pots and vegetables in the lower right of *A Woman Pulling Water from a Well, a Pile of Vegetables at her Feet*, that Kalf's mastery in rendering surface texture truly comes to the fore. Treating this area of the painting as though it were a still life, the

vegetables and pots are carefully positioned; Kalf captures the light in an instantly recognisable way, masterfully capturing the curved shapes of the copper pots, carefully observing their colour and the way the light gleams off their reflective surfaces, using tight brushstrokes to create the effect. By comparison, the brushstrokes applied to the figure of the woman are loose and appear to have been applied quickly.

Kalf was devoted to the still life genre, helping to raise the profile of still life painting to the same level as portraiture and figurative works, with G. de Lairese noting in 1707, 'in his still lifes, the famous Kalf surpassed all the others.' Born into a prosperous family in Rotterdam, his father was a cloth merchant. Between 1642 and 1645 Kalf sojourned in Paris, where he spent



Willem Kalf, *Dessert*, 1653/1654, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg (Figure 2)

time in the circle of the Flemish artists in Saint-Germain-des-Prés, and it is here that his artistic career began to take shape, with his work appealing greatly to both art dealers and collectors. Kalf developed the *banketje* 'little banquet pieces' into a new and popular form of sumptuous and ornate still lifes known as *pronkstilleven*, which in Dutch means 'opulent still life painting'. In 1645 Kalf returned to the Netherlands where he made a very comfortable living by selling his paintings to wealthy clients, and later on he made the transition into an art collecting and dealing.

We are grateful to Fred G. Meijer, who confirms the attribution of the present work to Kalf.



(Actual Size)