

BEAUTY, SEDUCTION AND SHARING

EN

ARTWORKS FROM
GAUDIUM MAGNUM FOUNDATION

Maria and João Cortez de Lobão

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As things stand today, it is impossible to flesh out Jacques des Rousseaux's biographical profile any further than with what little we can glean about the painter's life from Bredius's pioneering monographical essay, still the only work devoted to this fascinating artist to date.

Hailing originally from Tourcoing in northern France, the Rousseaux family moved to Leyden like so many other families from French-speaking regions then under Spanish rule, who relocated to the Dutch city to enjoy religious freedom and ended up forming a sizeable community in the region.

Unfortunately, his actual date of birth is unknown since his birth certificate has yet to be found. Abraham Bredius, however, suggests that he must have been born some time around 1600, basing his argument on the presumed age of the sitter in a *Portrait of a Man* formerly in the Wanamaker collection in Philadelphia, dated 1635 and initialled with the painter's monogram, which Bredius considers to be a self-portrait. What little we do know of Des Rousseaux's life is based on documentary evidence drafted before French notaries public in the city and discovered by Bredius. We can be fairly sure, for example, that the painter must have maintained reasonably close relations with his homeland, if we consider that he dwelt there in 1627 on his return from a trip to Italy that had lasted several years, presumably a study trip similar to many such journeys conducted by northern European artists in the Italian peninsula. We also know that he married Cataryn van Biervlit of Rotterdam in Leyden on 16 November 1636, and that their daughter Jacomuntge was christened there on 10 September 1637. The next we hear of the family is in an entry dated 5 March 1638, when Jacques' brother Pierre des Rousseaux was appointed guardian to Jacomyntge, who is said



Jacques des Rousseaux
(Tourcoing, c. 1600 — Leiden,
1636/1638)

*Lute player accompanying an old
man holding a musical score*

Monogrammed and dated on the lute:
«JR f. A. 1631»
1631
Oil on panel
122 × 101,4 cm

Gaudium Magnum Foundation
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to be «about six months' old» and described as the orphan of the deceased Jacques de Rousseaux and Cataryn van Biervliet, who are therefore likely to have died some time between the end of 1637 and March 1638.

Though we have no documentary evidence to confirm the fact, Des Rousseaux is almost certain to have frequented the workshop that Rembrandt ran in Leyden from 1628 until his move to Amsterdam in 1631. In addition to such a supposition tallying with the dates in which Rembrandt worked in Leyden, it is also clear from the paintings known to be by Des Rousseaux's hand, which so closely echo Rembrandt's style that some of them have even been attributed to the master himself in the past. Most of the paintings by Des Rousseaux that have emerged to date, many of them initialed by him, fall into the category known as «Tronies», in other words, heads of a typically Dutch nature that originated precisely in Rembrandt's circle.

It is also worth pointing out that Des Rousseaux must have enjoyed considerable success in the course of his short life and artistic career, if we consider that many of his works figured in prestigious collections in Leyden, for example in that of Gerard van Hoogeveen, the city's mayor, in whose collection in 1665 we hear of a painting by «Jacques Rousseau» hanging alongside work by Rembrandt and by other painters far better-known today, such as Carel Fabritius and Willem Drost.

The painting in the Gaudium Magnum collection, which Werner Sumowski initially attributed to Gerrit Willemsz Horst, was recently reassigned to Des Rousseaux by Sumowski

himself, and his attribution has been confirmed by the subsequent rediscovery of the painter's monogram alongside the date 1631.

The painting is part of a corpus of other works, depicting small concerts with two or more figures, that play an important role in Des Rousseaux's output, confirming his place as one of the most fascinating members of Rembrandt's circle. This, because while such compositions have a precedent in Rembrandt's youthful *Musical Allegory* now in the Rijksmuseum, they are unusual in this artistic context and need to be seen in connection with Des Rousseaux's singular personal background. While, as has been suggested, Jan Lievens unquestionably played a major role in Des Rousseaux's definition of such scenes, and in particular, through his mediation (given that he is highly likely to have visited Utrecht), in familiarising Honthorst, Baburen and ter Brugghen with the style of Caravaggio in the musical scenes that they produced on their return from Italy, we cannot rule out the possibility that Des Rousseaux's own stay in the Italian Peninsula may have contributed to his choice of such themes. If we consider the period in which Des Rousseaux spent time in Italy, we must of necessity countenance the possibility of a familiarity on his part with the later examples of Caravaggesque naturalism. Nor can we rule out the possibility that he may have been in direct contact with such fellow French painters as Nicolas Tournier or, even more probably, with Trophime Bigot who, without any regard for the now ubiquitous Baroque style, continued to produce work still heavily marked by the influence of Bartolomeo Manfredi well into the middle of the 1630s.