

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Melchior D'HONDECOETER (Utrecht 1636 - Amsterdam 1695)

A Peacock

Pen and black ink and grey wash, with framing lines in black ink.

Laid down on an old mount, inscribed Melchior, / HONDEKOTER within a cartouche.

205 x 315 mm. (8 1/8 x 12 3/8 in.)

Watermark: Two lions rampant flanking a coat of arms.

This is among the finest surviving drawings by Melchior d'Hondecoeter, by whom only a handful of autograph sheets are known. As the Hondecoeter scholar Joy Kearney points out, 'it may be assumed from his work that the artist painted from living birds as well as from dead specimens. The few known drawings which can reasonably be ascribed to him depict birds as if from life... That so few such drawings by the artist appear to have survived, or been identified, is regrettable, given that he must have made many sketches and watercolour drawings of living birds as studies for the lifelike birds in his oil paintings... The constant reappearance of certain birds, in the same pose though arranged in different groupings, must surely indicate a series of drawings of such prototypes which were then used repeatedly as reference material.' It has been suggested that Hondecoeter may have preferred to make small-scale studies of various birds in oil on canvas for later use in his larger painted works; fourteen of these oil sketches were noted in the posthumous inventory of his studio contents.

The Indian peafowl (*Pavo cristatus*) appears in many of Hondecoeter's paintings. Kearney notes that 'This bird was kept at the royal menageries and was viewed as the epitome of elegance and grace, often depicted by the artist perched on a classical plinth or urn in an Italianate garden... They were certainly painted for their beauty and elegance, apart from any literary or symbolic references and they appear on numerous occasions in de Hondecoeter's work.' This rare and exotic species – imported into Holland by the ships of the VOC, the Dutch East India Company - was particularly popular with wealthy Amsterdam citizens, serving to ornament the gardens of their country estates, where they were allowed to roam free. As Walter Liedtke has pointed out, 'Hondecoeter turned curiosities of nature into curiosities of art, and... into elements of interior decoration. However, contemporary interest in and knowledge of the variety of nature should not be underestimated. Even the peacock, which served as a symbol of pride in much earlier Netherlandish pictures, would have been recognized immediately as a creature from another continent, in this case southeastern Asia and the East Indies. In the confines of a room hung with paintings by Hondecoeter, it was easy to imagine not only the great outdoors of the Dutch countryside but also the entire world of Dutch overseas trade.'

This fine sheet is one of the very few drawings by Hondecoeter which appear to have been produced as a preparatory study for a painting. The same peacock seen in this drawing, striding to the left, is found in a signed painting by Hondecoeter of *A Monkey, Peacock and Other Birds*, datable to the decade of the 1660s, which appeared at auction in London in 1995. A very similar peacock is also found in a large painting of *Birds in a Park* of 1686, in the collection of the Hermitage in St. Petersburg.

Among the few other extant drawings of peacocks by Hondecoeter is a similar pen and wash study of a single bird in the collection of the British Museum. Peacocks also appear in a finished watercolour of *Two Peacocks, Five Chickens and a Parrot* in the Albertina in Vienna, and in a watercolour composition of a peacock with several other birds in the British Museum, of which two autograph variants are known; one in the Klassik Stiftung Weimar in Weimar and another, formerly in the Goll van Franckenstein collection, which was sold at auction in 2016. A red chalk study of two peacocks, in the collection of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, has long been regarded as autograph, but has recently been downgraded to the work of a pupil or follower of the artist.

Artist description:

Born into an illustrious family of landscape and animal painters of Flemish origins that included his great-grandfather, grandfather, father, uncle and cousin, Melchior d'Hondecoeter became the leading Dutch painter of birds in the second half of the 17th century. His work was renowned for its lifelike and colourful depictions of avian subjects - both common and exotic types - painted with considerable accuracy. He received his artistic training from his father Gijsbert Gillisz. d'Hondecoeter and his uncle Jan Baptist Weenix in the 1650s, and became a member of the 'Confrerie Pictura', the artist's association in Utrecht. By August 1658 he had moved to The Hague, joining the artist's guild there in 1659. (His original presentation piece was a seascape, but he withdrew it in favour of an animal painting.) In 1662 Hondecoeter became the head of the 'Confrerie Pictura' in The Hague. By the beginning of the following year, however, the newly-married artist had settled in Amsterdam, where he was to live and work for the remainder of his career, and where he gained citizenship in 1668.

Hondecoeter came to specialize in highly realistic paintings of birds and fowl and, with his remarkable powers of observation and understanding of the behaviour of all manner of domestic and exotic birds, became indisputably the most renowned artist in this particular genre. He found a ready market for his accurate depictions of native European birds, as well as many unusual species from Asia, Africa and South America, all depicted in landscape settings. As the Hondecoeter scholar Joy Kearney has noted, 'The most remarkable aspect of his work is the ornithological accuracy with which he depicted his subjects...Such realistic interpretation of birds was unrivalled in seventeenth-century art and paved the way for a new genre in Dutch art of the period.'

It is thought that Hondecoeter painted over 250 works, ranging from game pieces, barnyard scenes with poultry, and still life compositions, as well as the occasional portrait and a number of allegorical subjects, notably two large canvases of fighting birds known as *The Lowland Wars of William III*, today at Holkham Hall in Norfolk. Only about twenty of his paintings are dated, however, which makes a chronology of his work difficult to establish with any degree of certainty. Hondecoeter's paintings are indebted to the example of the earlier Flemish artist Frans Snyders, some of whose works he owned, and, like Snyders, he sometimes based his compositions on Dutch proverbs or fables, creating a dramatic narrative. The artist also produced a number of grand park landscapes populated by exotic live birds, sometimes very large in scale. This was a particularly inventive genre that he created and developed, and which became especially popular in the form of decorations for town and country homes of such wealthy burghers as the merchant Adolf Visscher, who owned several works by Hondecoeter.

Among other important patrons was the King-Stattholder Willem III, Prince of Orange, who

commissioned several paintings from the artist – including depictions of birds and animals in the royal menagerie - for his palaces at Het Loo, Soestdijk and Honselersdijk from 1674 onwards. As Kearney has noted of Hondecoeter, 'His merit is that he raised the genre of painting birds and animals from a rural subject associated with peasantry to the sophistication and elegance of the Royal family and the landed gentry, thereby gaining considerable fame during his lifetime.' In 1674 Hondecoeter was taxed in the amount of 2,400 guilders, which suggests that he enjoyed a successful career, and indeed his paintings were immensely popular with collectors during his lifetime and for many years later. By the time of his death in 1695, however, he appears to have been in some financial difficulty, leaving behind a number of large debts.

Such was the reputation of Hondecoeter's work that his painted compositions were often copied or imitated, both during his lifetime and afterwards, and he was a great influence on later painters of animals and still life subjects, such as Aert Schouman. In the 18th and early 19th centuries, Hondecoeter's oeuvre became especially popular among collectors in England, where he was known as 'The Raphael of Birds', and his reputation as a painter of avian subjects has never dimmed. As one early 20th century writer opined, 'Melchior d'Hondecoeter...is the only painter who seems ever to have appreciated to the full the material of design before our eyes in the various shapes and gay plumage of birds. Before him these had been accessories to landscape. He made them the purpose of his picture; yet not their bodies only, as did his cousin Jan Weenix in his pictures of dead game, but their life, - habits and habitat. The result was the rich compositions representing a bit of landscape seen from among a group of domestic fowl...They impress at once by the sober strength of their glowing dark colors – perhaps sometimes too dark – and by their intelligent fidelity to the humble forms of life they depict.' And, as another scholar has noted, with reference to a painting of a barnyard scene, 'Hondecoeter learned from his teacher, [Jan Baptist] Weenix, who had studied in Italy, a fine decorative ease and breadth, to which he added a Dutch sense of life and character. The splendid vitality of these birds, the characteristic quick, nervous movements, the soft but glowing colors of various kinds of feathers...are studied with a Dutch painter's wonderful accuracy.'