



Rommel Pot Player

Jacob van Toorenvliet
(Leiden 1640 – 1719 Leiden)

1679

oil on copper

17.8 x 13.8 cm

JT-101



How To Cite

Aono, Junko. "Rommel Pot Player." In *The Leiden Collection Catalogue*. Edited by Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. New York, 2017.

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Wearing a wide-brimmed hat and tattered clothing with visible patchwork, an old man sings and plays a rommel pot. He turns his head toward the left, in the direction of the light source, as if addressing someone outside the pictorial space. Light illuminates his wrinkled face and gray beard, while subtle shadows along his left shoulder and the brim of his hat silhouette his form against an undefined background. Jacob van Toorenvliet painted this lifelike depiction of an old musician in 1679, the year in which he returned to his native Leiden after a long stay in Vienna.^[1] Whether he painted this small copper panel in Leiden or Vienna, the painting is thematically, compositionally and technically reminiscent of his works from the late 1670s.^[2] For example, in 1678 he had used a similar bearded model in two comparable half-length depictions of a hurdy-gurdy player.^[3]

The rommel pot was a crude musical instrument made of an earthenware jar covered with a pig's bladder. The stick that punctures the bladder agitates the air inside, producing sounds that mimic the low grunting of a pig. Though this handmade instrument could be played throughout the year, rommel pot playing was particularly associated with the energetic celebration of Shrove Tuesday (*Vastenavond*), when children went from door to door singing and dancing in exchange for money or sweets.^[4] In seventeenth-century paintings and prints of such joyful festivities, the rommel pot player was often accompanied by children or other street musicians. He was often depicted with the attributes of a fool, recalling the folly of Carnival itself, which concludes on Shrove Tuesday. In *The Rommel Pot Player* (fig 1), attributed to Frans Hals (1582/83–1666), for example, the player, surrounded by a crowd of children, wears a hat with a foxtail, a traditional attribute of the fool.^[5] A print by Jan van de Velde shows a rommel pot player with a similar hat, and it bears an inscription that reveals his role: “At Shrovetide, many fools walk about / For farthings [they] grunt on a rommel pot.”^[6]

The figure in this picture is depicted neither as a fool nor accompanied by festive children, and thus it is unlikely that Toorenvliet conceived his work within this well-established iconographic tradition. Other traditions, however, did exist for depictions of rommel pot players, and Toorenvliet's painting may belong to one of those. For example, a print by J. Dubois after J. Matham (fig 2), which depicts a half-length old man playing a rommel pot, makes it quite clear that this musician's motivation for playing

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Frans Hals, *Rommel Pot Player*, ca. 1618–22, oil on canvas, 106 x 80.3 cm, Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas, ACF 1951.01



Fig 2. J. Dubois after J. Matham, *Rommel-Pot Player*, engraving, 24.7 x 19 cm, Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, RP-P-BI-1959



was financial gain: coins lie on the table before him and the inscription on the print reads “I play a fool for the profit from this pot.”^[7] However, as no coins are seen in Toorenvliet’s painting, it is unlikely that he conceived his work in the same vein. More probable is that this copper panel formed part of a now lost series of the five senses, with this work depicting the sense of hearing. Toorenvliet did, in fact, paint such a series in the late 1670s, in which he depicted the sense of hearing as a man singing and playing the lute.^[8] The rommel pot would also have been an appropriate attribute for the sense of hearing, perhaps for a group of lower-class personifications of the senses. Whether as an individual painting or part of a series, Toorenvliet’s lively depiction of a rommel pot player still has the power to make the spectator vividly recall the ear-splitting sounds of this folksy instrument.

-Junko Aono

Endnotes

1. For biographic information on Toorenvliet's life, see Piet Bakker's biography of the artist in this catalogue.
2. In particular, the depiction of a man in half-length close to the picture plane, the refined rendering of light and texture, and the brownish palette with grey tones enlivened by white and red accents echo his paintings from earlier in the decade.
3. Susanne H. Karau, *Leben und Werk des Leidener Malers Jacob Toorenvliet (1640–1719)* (Ph.D. diss., Universität Berlin, 2002), no. A89, A90; Annegret Laabs, *De Leidse Fijnschilders uit Dresden* (Exh. cat. Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden; Leiden, Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal) (Zwolle, 2001), 123–25.
4. Seymour Slive, *Frans Hals* (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; Haarlem, Frans Hals Museum) (London and Munich, 1989), 148–51; James A. Welu and Pieter Biesboer, eds., *Judith Leyster: A Dutch Master and Her World* (Exh. cat. Haarlem, Frans Hals Museum; Worcester, Worcester Art Museum) (Zwolle, 1993), 358–60; and Karel Moens and Iris Kockelbergh, *Muziek & Grafiek: Burgermoraal en muziek in de 16de- en 17de-eeuwse Nederlanden* (Exh. cat. Antwerp, Hessenhuis) (Antwerp, 1994), 125, 130–31, figs. 87c, 88.
5. Seymour Slive, *Frans Hals* (London, 1974), no. L3-1; idem, ed., *Frans Hals* (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; Haarlem, Frans Hals Museum) (London and Munich, 1989), no. 8.
6. “Op Vasten-avond Loopt menich Sotje / Om duyjtjes gnorren op 't Rommel-potje.” F. W. H. Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts, ca. 1450–1700* (Roosendaal, 1989), 33, 34, no. 132. See also Seymour Slive, *Frans Hals* (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; Haarlem, Frans Hals Museum) (London and Munich, 1989), 150–51, fig. 8c; James A. Welu and Pieter Biesboer, eds., *Judith Leyster: A Dutch Master and Her World* (Exh. cat. Haarlem, Frans Hals Museum; Worcester, Worcester Art Museum) (Zwolle, 1993), 358–59. The pictorial tradition of rommel pot players such as these must have been familiar to Toorenvliet, as the 1692 inventory of the collection amassed by his father Abraham Toorenvliet included a painting by Dirck Druyf described as “one [picture of a] Shrove Tuesday fool.” For the inventory of Abraham, see Bakker's biography on Toorenvliet in this catalogue.
7. “K' speel voor Sot, om 't genot van dees Pot.” F. W. H. Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts, ca. 1450–1700* (Roosendaal, 1989), 6:6, no. 2; James A. Welu and Pieter Biesboer, eds., *Judith Leyster: A Dutch Master and Her World* (Exh. cat. Haarlem, Frans Hals Museum; Worcester, Worcester Art Museum) (Zwolle, 1993),

358, 360, fig. 40d.

8. Susanne H. Karau, *Leben und Werk des Leidener Malers Jacob Toorenvliet (1640–1719)* (Ph.D. diss., Universität Berlin, 2002), nos. A70–72, B116–120.

Provenance

- Possibly collection of Mrs Stanley, Tavistock.
- (Sale, Bonhams, London, 20 April 2005, no. 1; [Johnny van Haefen, Ltd., London, 2005]).
- From whom acquired by the present owner.

Technical Summary

The support, a rectangular sheet of copper with minor undulations, has substantial weight and does not flex when handled.^[1] All four sides of the support bow outward toward the midpoints, and the corner angles are greater than 90 degrees. There are two layers of oxidation products, a continuous brown layer and mottled black spots. A rectangular patch of adhesive residue suggests the location of a previous label, and a numerical inscription is visible under infrared, but there are no wax collection seals, stencils or maker's marks.

A light gray ground has been thinly and evenly applied predominantly with long vertical strokes. The paint has been extremely smoothly applied with delicate modeling and small flecks of white highlights along the figure's proper right cuff and sleeve.

The painting is signed and dated in light paint along the upper right corner.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers. A few compositional changes visible in the images and as pentimenti include a modification to the figure's gaze. In the images, the figure's proper right pupil and iris appear rounder and more similar to those of his left eye and his gaze appears more symmetrical. The figure's proper left ear was added during the paint stage and the top of his hat has been widened along the left to create a more square, flat top.

The painting was cleaned and restored in 2005 and remains in a good state of preservation.

Technical Summary Endnotes



1. According to Isabel Horovitz, *Copper as Canvas* (Exh. cat. Phoenix Art Museum) (Phoenix, 1999), 67–68, “a highly worked sheet of copper will be less flexible than one that is not highly worked, and this is why quite thin (0.5 mm) sheets of copper can provide such excellent rigid supports for paint films.”