

The Creation of the World by Pieter Boel (Antwerp 1622-Paris 1674)

W: 244 cm H: 175 cm

Provenance: in the same aristocratic family for 250 years, this painting unknown to the art market

One of the artist's largest known paintings

Signature lower left under the turkey's feet.

Pieter Boel, or Peeter Boel, a name later Gallicized to Pierre Boel or Boule, was born on October 22, 1622, in Antwerp and died on September 3, 1674, in Paris. He was a Flemish painter and engraver of animals, still life, flowers, and fruit, associated with Flemish Baroque painting. He settled in Paris, where he worked at the Gobelins Manufactory and became a painter to the king. Pieter Boel revolutionized animal painting by drawing directly from live animals in their natural environment. In this way, he achieved representations of animals in their natural and characteristic poses. He had many followers in France.

Biography:

He was baptized in Antwerp on October 10, 1622, the son of Jan Boel and Anna van der Straeten. He came from a family of artists. His grandfather, Jeroom, was a painter registered as a master in the Antwerp Guild of Saint Luke in 1620. His father was an engraver, and his elder brother, Quirijn the Younger, also became an engraver. After studying drawing with his father, he became a pupil of Jan Fyt, a well-

known still-life and animal painter. Jan Fyt had studied under the great Flemish still-life and animal painter Frans Snyders.

It is believed that he traveled to Italy in the 1640s or 1651. His journey took him to Genoa and Rome. In Genoa, he stayed with the painter and art dealer Cornelis de Wael, a long-time resident of the city, whose niece he would later marry upon his return to Antwerp.

Back in Antwerp, in 1650-51 he joined the Antwerp Guild of Saint Luke as a *wijnmeester* (wine master) (a title reserved for the children of guild members). He married Maria Blanckaert, daughter of the painter Jan Blanckaert. His wife's mother was a sister of Cornelis de Wael (whom he had met in Genoa) and Lucas de Wael. Two of the couple's sons, Jan Baptist Boel the Younger and Balthasar-Lucas Boel, later became artists. Pieter's reputation grew, and commissions poured in.

Among his compositions from this period, authors unanimously cite *The Four Elements* as true masterpieces, life-size reproductions of animals, flowers, and fruits—colossal works that, at that time, belonged to a certain N. Bloemaerts, a maker of gilded leather for tapestries.

Weyerman states that Bloemaerts had them copied by the Antwerp painter Jacob Leyssens and that the copies were not without merit (17th century).

In 1668–1669, he settled in Paris, where he joined the group of Flemish artists gathered around Charles Le Brun who resided at the Hôtel Royal

des Gobelins. As First Painter to the King, Charles Le Brun was in charge of the Gobelins Manufactory, established in 1663, as well as the decoration of the various new buildings constructed for the king. To carry out these projects, Le Brun surrounded himself with a large group of artists, including several Flemish artists such as the sculptor Gerard van Opstal and the painters Adam Frans van der Meulen, Abraham Genoels, Adriaen Frans Boudewyns, and Pieter van Boucle. As a resident of the Hôtel Royal des Gobelins, Boel could practice his art without having to register with the local Guild of Saint Luke or the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture.

His name appears three times in the Accounts of the King's Buildings, notably for having provided designs for the Gobelins tapestries. Boel was closely associated with two Flemish artists who also lived at the Gobelins: Adam Frans van der Meulen and Gérard Scotin the Elder, an engraver. In 1671, he was a witness at Scotin's wedding. Van der Meulen's wife was the second witness. Scotin engraved a number of Boel's animal drawings and may also have been the publisher of engravings made by Boel himself.

Between 1669 and 1671, he produced eighty-one studies of animals and birds for the compositions entitled "The Twelve Months," based on drawings by Charles Le Brun. He drew inspiration from the birds and mammals in the menagerie at the Palace of Versailles. These works were dispersed, with the Louvre holding twenty. Abraham Genoels

designed the landscapes for the compositions. This collaboration continued for commissions from the Count of Monterey, Governor-General of the Netherlands.

He was appointed ordinary painter by King Louis XIV in 1674. As ordinary painter to the king, Boel was charged with producing "paintings of various animals intended to be used in the tapestries of the Gobelins Manufactory.

Pieter Boel meurt le 3 septembre 1674. Adam Frans van der Meulen est témoin de l'acte d'inhumation.

Il est le maître de ses fils et de David de Koninck.

## Work

Still life with dead game and songbirds in the snow.

Boel primarily painted still lifes, including flower still lifes, hunting still lifes, animal and fish still lifes, vanitas paintings, and still lifes of weapons. He also painted a few still lifes in landscapes. Because most of his works are undated, it is difficult to establish a chronology of his output. Boel achieved a very high level of quality in his work. It is believed that a number of his compositions may have been stripped of their signatures to pass for works by Frans Snyders or his teacher Jan Fyt. Only recently have several still lifes in museum collections, which had been attributed to Fyt, been reattributed to Pieter Boel.

Pieter Boel revolutionized animal painting. While previous artists were content to make static studies from stuffed animals, Boel drew and painted animals from life at the Versailles menagerie. He was thus able to depict animals in their natural poses, free from any symbolic notions or preconceived ideas about them. This contrasted sharply with the prevailing view of animals as mere machines or beasts. His naturalism influenced a long line of great animal artists, from the painter Jean-Baptiste Oudry to the sculptor Antoine-Louis Barye.

His animal studies served as models for the animals featured in the borders and foreground of a series of large tapestries, known as "The Months" or "The Royal Houses," produced at the Gobelins Manufactory. Recognizing the value of Boel's animal repertoire, the Gobelins Manufactory preserved all 81 of his painted and drawn studies. These depict mammals, birds, a tortoise, a lobster, and a lizard, painted on a red or pink background. He painted the animals' fur, plumage, paws, and eyes with a free brush. In some studies, the same animal is depicted in different poses. Species are mixed in the studies, but it is rare for fur-bearing and feathered animals to be included in the same study. The French painter François Desportes copied several of his studies. Consequently, the original drawings were believed to be by Desportes. It was only after it was confirmed that the originals had been made by Boel that Boel's reputation as an animal painter was restored. Charles Le Brun used Boel's studies for his own works.

## Works

- Allegory of the Vanities of the World, 1663, oil on canvas, 207 × 260 cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lille
- Studies of a Fox, 1669–1671, oil on canvas, 53 × 65 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris
- Study of a Camel, 1669–1671, oil on canvas, 68 × 68 cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nice
- The Eagle's Meal, in the Antwerp Museum, was long mistakenly attributed to Jan Fyt.
- Still Life, from the Van den Schrieck Collection in Leuven, also mistakenly catalogued as a work by Fyt.
- Dead Game in a Landscape, in the Prado Museum, Madrid.
- A Dog Guarding Dead Game, in the Munich Museum
- Heads of Geese and Ducks, held at the Comtadin-Duplessis Museum in Carpentras
- Still Life with Owl and Hunting Spoils, oil on canvas, 68 × 93 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent.
- Still Life with Hare, oil on canvas, 64 × 80.5 cm, Staatliche Museen, Berlin.

- Young Stag Reclining - Museum of Fine Arts, Agen
- Vanitas [archive], Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium
- Elephant of Louis XIV, circa 1668–1674, black chalk and pastel highlights, 28.6 x 43.8 cm, Louvre Museum.