

Jan Brueghel the Younger

(Antwerp 1601–1678 Antwerp)

Allegory of Law and Violence (Allegory on King Charles I of England),
late 1660s
oil on panel, 53.5 x 80 cm

Provenance

Christie's London, 15 December 1989, lot 147;
collection Erna Weidinger (1923–2021)¹

Certificate by Dr. Klaus Ertz, Lingen, September 2022, is enclosed.

Estimate: 25.000–50.000 €

The painting on hand is an allegory of the history of England in the mid-17th century – a constant struggle defining war and peace, between Protestants and Catholics, monarchy and republic, the rule of law and the exercise of power. It is therefore not surprising that the main features of the painting take up an earlier composition by Jan Brueghel the Younger, which can generally be interpreted as an „allegory of law and violence“ (cf. Klaus Ertz, Jan Brueghel der Jüngere, 1979, p. 384, No. 220, ill. p. 385). Signed and dated 1647, the work shows a related composition with the burning ruins surrounded by demonic beasts on the left and the opening vista in the right half of the picture. The central group, showing Mars dragging a mother by the hair and thus symbolizing the horrors of war, appears almost identical.

However, the present painting specifies the subject matter and explicitly refers to various terrible events that afflicted England in the mid-17th century. The execution of King Charles I (1600–1649) in front of the Banqueting Hall in London, which took place in 1649, is shown on the right edge of the painting as a retrospective “scene within the scene”. King Charles I was held responsible for two civil wars by the Parliament and therefore tried and convicted for high treason. After his death, England was ruled as a republic by Thomas Cromwell (1599–1658) until the Stuart monarchy was restored in 1660 under King Charles II (1630–1685).

Two figures – a masked fox depicted as an executioner and a drooling dog sitting next to him – observe the beheading scene. This could be a reference to Charles' parliamentary opponent Thomas Fairfax (1612–1671), who was illustrated as Oliver Cromwell's „bloodhound“ in Dutch engravings (cf. interpretation of a copy of the composition executed on canvas, „Allegory on the Consequences of the Execution of King Charles I“, in Petworth House and Park, West Sussex, National Trust Inventory Number: 486249).

Beneath them are skulls and an hourglass as symbols of vanity, as well as scripts by Luther and Calvin. A fox puffs the words “Hic Adoperamur” across the panel, while on the left edge of the painting a skeleton blows “Via adoperare” out of a trumpet. Demonic creatures in the manner of Hieronymus Bosch are gathered on the left above armor and other war implements. An animal vomits documents with inscriptions such as „timor pesta fame“ or „falsi testimoni“ pointing to plagues and injustice. The supposed consequences or rather penalties for human actions are shown in the view on the right: In the distance, the Great Fire of London in 1666 can be seen, the city panorama probably adapted from the model by Claes Visscher (1587–1652) (cf Lot 32, Fig. 1). Above the city blazing in a sea of flames, the comet of 1665 is depicted in the sky, which was held responsible for the Great Plague of London that broke out in the same year and also for the Great Fire the following year.



