

Michael Sweerts

Brussels 1618 – 1664 Goa

Backgammon Players in an Interior

Signed lower centre: MS

Oil on canvas

75 x 102 cm.

Provenance:

Bologna, collection Ercolani family, for several generations until 2020¹

Literature:

V. Bloch, *Michael Sweerts*, The Hague 1968, 23, fig. 18

R. Kultzen, 'Französische Anklänge im Werk von Michael Sweerts', in: A.-M.S. Logan (ed.), *Essays in northern European art : presented to Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann on his sixtieth birthday*, Doornspijk 1983, pp. 127-133, pp. 128-129, fig. 2

R. Kultzen, *Michael Sweerts : Brussels 1618 – Goa 1664*, Ghent 1996, pp. 31, 100, cat. no. 44, pl. 44

P.C. Sutton, 'Introduction', in: G. Jansen, P.C. Sutton, *Michael Sweerts (1618-1664)*, exh. cat. Amsterdam,

Rijksmuseum, San Francisco, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Hartford, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of

Art 2002, pp. 11-24, p. 16, fig. 11



When art historian Willem Martin published the first study on Michael Sweerts in 1907 he claimed him for the Dutch, hailing him as the ‘enigmatic Dutch Le Nain.’² This statement soon proved to be erroneous, when Sweerts was identified as the son of merchant David Sweerts and his wife Martynken Balliel from Brussels, where he was baptised on 29 September 1618. Nothing further is heard about Sweerts until 1646, when he is documented as living in the Via Margutta in Rome. It is possible, though, that he arrived earlier; according to an acquaintance, he was well travelled and spoke seven languages.³ Although not recorded as a member of the *Bentvueghels*, the society of Netherlandish artists in Rome, documents show that in 1646 he was entrusted – on behalf of the Accademia di San Luca – with collecting contributions among the Netherlandish painters for the feast of St Luke. He is mentioned as being in the Via Margutta until 1651. During this period Sweerts enjoyed success with paintings in a style adhering to the *Bambochianti*, depicting subjects ranging from every day, local common life, artists sketching, artists’ studios, travellers, men playing games and large interiors, all with a solemn monumentality that was completely his own. In Rome he enjoyed the patronage of the wealthy Deutz brothers from Amsterdam, who visited the city during their Grand Tour, c. 1646-1650. Their inventories mention numerous pictures by Sweerts.⁴ Another important patron was the young nephew of Pope Innocent X, Prince-Cardinal Camillo Pamphilj (1622-1666), who owned at least four paintings by Sweerts. Moreover, an entry in Pamphilj’s account book of March 1652 mentions ‘various amounts of oils used since 17th February in His Excellency’s Academy’, giving evidence that Sweerts set up a painting academy in Pamphilj’s palace.⁵ By July 1655 at the latest, Sweerts was back in Brussels, where he stood as godfather to his nephew. A document of February 1656 indicates that he had set up another academy, primarily to train tapestry designers. While this major project evolved, he decided to join the evangelical *Société des missions Etrangères*, or the French Missionaries, which is probably why he left for Amsterdam in 1660. The diary of fellow missionary Nicolas Étienne, with whom Sweerts visited the churches and the poor of Amsterdam, describes Sweerts’ life as ‘tout extraordinaire et miraculeuse’, informing us that he was a vegetarian, sleeping on the floor and sharing everything with others.⁶ In December 1661 the missionaries sailed to Palestine *en route* to China. During the trip Sweerts started to exhibit uncontrolled outbursts, leading to his dismissal from the mission at arrival in Tabriz (modern day Iran). The next we hear of is the painter’s death in Goa, India, whilst with the Portuguese Jesuits in 1664. He left behind an oeuvre of little over 120 surviving paintings, only three of which are dated.



Fig. 1 Louis le Nain, *The Guardroom*, 1643, oil on canvas, 111 x 137 cm., Paris, Musée du Louvre



Fig. 2 Lucas Vorsterman after Adam de Coster, *Tric-Trac Players by Candlelight*, c. 1628, engraving, 27.1 x 35.1 cm., Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum (reverse)

The present painting – large, compositionally complex, ambitiously arranged, and masterful in its colouration – is one of the masterpieces of Sweerts’ early period, and one of five works that depict men playing games.⁷ We are introduced to a shadowy interior with a beautiful black and white tiled floor by a seated lute player in the left foreground, whose figure remains in shadow. Dressed in a brown fur-lined coat, a red cloak and a hat, he quietly plays his instrument as he looks out at the viewer. In the background a curtained door gives a glimpse of a gorgeous blue sky. The main light source, though, comes from the left, and illuminates the central table scene with a stark chiaroscuro. Around the table, two elegantly dressed young men with feathered hats play backgammon. While the man behind the table concentrates on his move, the



Fig. 3 Cornelis Anthonisz, *The Prodigal Son Dissipating his Patrimony in a Brothel*, c. 1540, woodcut, 27 x 21.2 cm., Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum

other stares to the left, the dice waiting in his hand. A third man in a grey cloak, also at the table, watches in silence. Among the company we notice above all two attractive ladies with songbooks, one of whom looks over her shoulder to the left, where a man plays with a dog. In the right foreground, a magnificent still-life of a lute on a chair, a yellow cloak, and piled-up songbooks on a wooden box catches surprisingly bright light. Behind it, two boys fold a cloth, while in the dim background couples climb the stairs.

Sweerts’ *Backgammon Players* grants us a view into a Roman brothel, where it’s dark during the day and high-class young men play for money; where music is made, and pretty women in coy dresses sing, and take men upstairs. Remarkably, no signs are found of inebriation, loudness or lewd excess. Given the painting’s varied composition, Sweerts admirably succeeds in unifying its atmosphere, aptly described by Sweerts expert Rolf Kultzen as an ‘expectant silence.’⁸ Indeed, a concentrated, psychological tension can be felt, both amongst the players and the entourage. In this respect Kultzen rightly points to the work of the Le Nain brothers, especially the *Guardroom* of 1643 in the Louvre (fig. 1). The well-travelled Sweerts must have been keenly aware of the works of the Le Nains, who lived and worked in Paris, and our *Backgammon Players* certainly pays debt to their artistic vocabulary (not for nothing was he called the ‘Dutch Le Nain’ by Martin). Still, he relied on other sources as well. In Rome, he no doubt saw paintings by the Caravaggists that employed the motif of a sitting lute player as an inductive *repoussoir* figure. Such a work by the Flemish Caravaggist Adam de Coster (1585/86-1643) – famous for his depictions of night scenes – which Sweerts probably knew through the engraving by Lucas Vorsterman (1595/96-1674/75), seems a direct example (fig. 2).⁹ Apart from the obvious compositional analogies, De Coster’s image corresponds in its depiction of quiet concentration and the absence of (alcoholic) glut. A sixteenth century engraving by Cornelis Anthonisz (c. 1505-1553) shows yet more striking parallels (fig. 3). Depicting the biblical parable of *The Prodigal Son Dissipating his Patrimony in a Brothel*, this allegorical print shows an interior with a tiled floor, in which a man (*Mundus*, the allegorical representation of the World) sits in a chair in the same position in the left foreground as our lute player. He likewise wears a fur-lined coat, his foot is identically positioned (here resting on the head of *Conscientia*, Conscience), as is his right arm, which rests on the armchair. Behind him we see a similar doorway with a view to a landscape. At the table the prodigal son sits behind a backgammon board, surrounded by female figures representing *Caro* (Lust), *Haeresis* (Heresy), *Avaritia* (Greed) and *Vanitas* (Vanity). Do these parallels imply that Sweerts intended his *Backgammon Players* to be a disguised depiction of the Parable of the Prodigal Son? This seems less likely, as more direct clues are absent.

In fact, while using Anthonisz' composition as a template, Sweerts' *Backgammon Players*, though highly constructed, aims to reflect a contemporaneous reality. Thus we recognise the lady looking over her shoulder in Sweerts' *Young Woman at her Toilet*, even wearing the same hairnet (fig. 4).¹⁰ With her jewellery, the mirror on her lap and a maidservant arranging her hair, the innuendo of the shadowed, anonymous man entering the room suggests she is a courtesan, the same role she adopts in the *Backgammon Players*. Who this woman was, or how she made her living we do not know, but she was someone in Sweerts' Roman orbit. The man in the grey cloak likewise reappears in Sweerts' oeuvre, not as an individual model, but rather as a type, apparently representing the traveller, or visitor. As such we find him in the *Painter's Studio* in Zürich, in the *Bathing Scene*



Fig. 4 Michael Sweerts, *Young Woman at her Toilet*, oil on canvas, 36 x 47 cm., Rome, Galleria dell' Accademia Nazionale di San Luca



Fig. 5 Michael Sweerts, *Harbour Scene*, oil on canvas, 64 x 87 cm., Paris, Musée du Louvre



Fig. 6 Michael Sweerts, *A Painter's Studio*, c. 1648, oil on canvas, 71 x 74 cm., Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum



Fig. 7 Michael Sweerts, *A Game of Draughts*, 1652, oil on canvas, 48.6 x 38.1 cm., The Hague, Mauritshuis (on loan from the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam)

in Strasbourg and – appearing very similar to the figure in our painting – in the Louvre *Harbour Scene*, where he disembarks, as a porter carries his trunk behind him (fig. 5).¹¹ It is noteworthy that Sweerts found willing patronage in exactly this kind of wealthy visitor on their Grand Tour.¹² One could easily imagine how the *Backgammon Players* alluded to these visitors' Roman experience, possibly even involving Sweerts, who maintained close ties and – as has been suggested – might well have intended some of his works as 'unique souvenirs' for these Grand Tourists.¹³ In this regard it is interesting to reconsider Kultzen's suggestion that the lute player might be a self-portrait.¹⁴ On the other hand – and in absence of knowledge about the early history of our canvas – the work's 20th century Italian provenance does not necessarily point in the direction of a souvenir for a Northern visitor.

Placing the *Backgammon Players* in Sweerts' oeuvre, it seems clear that it was painted around the same time as the Rijksmuseum's *Painter's Studio* (fig. 6), datable to c. 1648/50, which employs a similar pictorial scheme, including the sitting figure in the left foreground (becoming a Sweerts favourite), the wonderful still life in the right foreground, a similar tiled floor, and the inclusion of a daylight vista in the background.¹⁵ The outstanding 1652 *Game of Draughts* in the Mauritshuis (fig. 7), the only instance in which he revisited the theme of a board game, already belongs to a later, more polished phase.

Notes

- ¹ Vitale Bloch first published the painting in 1968 (see Literature), as in an Italian private collection. According to the Fototeca Zeri, entry no. 51825, the painting was with Di Castro-Sestieri gallery in Rome in 1973 (see: <http://catalogo.fondazionezeri.unibo.it/search/work>, website assessed April 2022). Kultzen 1983, p. 128, states that the painting was currently (i.e. in 1983) offered in the London art trade. Later the painting appears to have been offered in a sale, Milan, Asta Finarte, 11 June 1996, lot 54. It is not known if these records occurred while the painting was in the possession of the Ercolani family.
- ² W. Martin, 'Michiel Sweerts als schilder. Proeve van een Biografie en een Catalogus van zijn schilderijen.', in: *Oud Holland* 25 (1907), pp. 133-156, p. 134. See also P.C. Sutton, 'Introduction', in: Amsterdam/San Francisco/Hartfort 2002, pp. 11-24, p. 12. For Sweerts' biography, see mainly Kultzen 1996, pp. 1-11, 'Life History'; J. Bikker, 'Sweerts's Life and Career – A Documentary View', in: Amsterdam/San Francisco/Hartfort 2002, pp. 25-36.
- ³ Kultzen 1996, p. 81, appendix G; Bikker 2002, pp. 25, 27 suggests that Sweerts might be identified with a 'Michele' who lived in the same Via Margutta in 1640, in the company of a certain 'Ghirardo, fiamengho, pittore'. In this respect, Bikker points to Jan Six owning two works by Sweerts, which he might have bought in Rome during his Grand Tour, c. 1641/43.
- ⁴ J. Bikker, 'The Deutz brothers, Italian paintings and Michiel Sweerts : new information from Elisabeth Croymans's Journael', in: *Simiolus* 26 (1998), pp. 277-311, pp. 283, 293.
- ⁵ See L. Yeager-Crasselt, *Michael Sweerts (1618-1664) : shaping the artist and the academy in Rome and Brussels*, Turnhout 2015.
- ⁶ See Kultzen 1996, pp. 77-83, Appendixes, for source documents.
- ⁷ The other four are Kultzen 1996, cat. nos. 41 (Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum), 42 (Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza), 43 (Paris, Louvre) and 46 (Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum). A sixth work, Kultzen's cat. no. 80 (private collection), seems doubtful, as Kultzen acknowledges.
- ⁸ Kultzen 1983, p. 128.
- ⁹ For the suggestion that De Coster might have visited Rome, see J. Hillegers, in: J. Hillegers et al., *Salomon Lilian Old Masters 2018*, Amsterdam 2018, pp. 30-37, cat. no. 5, esp. pp. 32, 37, note 10.
- ¹⁰ Kultzen 1996, cat. no. 13.
- ¹¹ Kultzen 1996, cat. nos. 1 (*Painter's Studio*), 38 (*Harbour Scene*), 64 (*Bathing Scene*). For the latter, see also G. Jansen, in: Amsterdam/San Francisco/Hartfort 2002, cat. no. XVIII.
- ¹² Bikker 1998, esp. pp. 292-302.
- ¹³ Bikker 1998, pp. 299-300, with reference to Th. Döring, 'Th. Döring, 'Belebte Skulpturen bei Michael Sweerts : Zur Rezeptionsgeschichte eines pseudo-antiken Ausdrucks Kopfes', in: *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch (Studien zur niederländischen Kunst; Festschrift für Prof. Dr. Justus Müller-Hofstede)* 55 (1994), pp. 55-83, pp. 72-73, and notes 71-72.
- ¹⁴ Kultzen 1983, p. 128.
- ¹⁵ Kultzen 1996, cat. no. 6; G. Jansen, in: Amsterdam/San Francisco/Hartfort 2002, cat. no. VII.