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NICOLAS TOURNIER Montbeliard 1590 - Toulouse 1639

Five Men Playing Dice

Canvas 116 x 165 cms

Provenance: Sir Robert Wilmot, Osmaston, Osmaston-by-Derby,
by 1811 (?).
The Anson Collection, Catton Hall, Burton-on-Trent.
Private European Collection.

Literature: D.P. Davis, A New Historical and Descriptive View of Derbyshire, 1811, pp.277-9 (as Annibale Carracci).
B. Nicolson, 'Bartolommeo Manfredi', in Studies in Renaissance and Baroque Art presented to Anthony Blunt, London, 1967, pp.111-2 (as 'Follower of Manfredi ?French').
idem. The International Caravaggesque Movement, Oxford, 1979, p.103 (as Tournier).

Nicolas Tournier is documented as having been in Rome between 1619 and 1627. Comparatively little is known about his activity during this period, and many of the pictures he painted then were once attributed alternatively to Caravaggio, Manfredi and Valentin. Tournier was undoubtedly strongly influenced by Bartolommeo Manfredi (1580-1620). In fact, the recurrent subject matter, soldiers playing cards, gamblers, and concert and banquet scenes, of what Joachim von Sandrart defined in 1683 as the Manfrediana Methodus figures prominently in Tournier's early work.

A fuller understanding of both Tournier's Roman sojourn and his fundamental importance, second only to that of Valentin, in the French Caravaggesque movement came about as a result of studies by Roberto Longhi and other scholars, such as the late Benedict Nicolson. In 1972 Longhi attributed the Card Players in the Gemaldegalerie, Dresden, and the Drinker in the Galleria Estense, Modena, to the young Tournier, along with other works (R. Longhi, 'I pittori della realta in Francia' in Paragone, XXIII, 269, 1972, pp.3-18, fig.14), and B. Nicolson related the two paintings to the Five Men Playing Dice exhibited here had a picture of the same subject with four figures at Attingham Park, Shrewsbury (B. Nicolson, 'Bartolommeo Manfredi'). He subsequently confirmed the attribution of both paintings to Tournier (B. Nicolson, The International Caravaggesque Movement).

Manfredi's influence is evident both in the subject matter of this Five Men Playing Dice and in Tournier's feeling for surface texture and his use of strongly contrasted chiaroscuro. However, as noted by Longhi, the French artist invests his scenes with a sense of gravity which is lacking in Manfredi's work (R. Longhi, op.cit., p.10). This painting contains in the soldier on the left, whose fierce gaze draws the viewer into the scene, one of the most characteristic compositional devices of the Caravaggesque school. Tournier used a similar figure in the Concert Party in the Stedelijke Museum, Bourges, where he also repeated the richly carved table as a focal point around which to group his figures. The same table is found in an even more elaborate form with a deeply carved relief panel after the Antique in the Card Players in the Gemaldegalerie.