

KLAAS MULLER

M E E R T E N S A B R A H A M

Birds on a Branch

It is thought that Meertens made drawings after examples of taxidermy, but also from life, as was also done by Schouman. Menageries were fashionable during the period, such as the richly maintained collections of the Stadtholder William V in The Hague and at Het Loo, near Apeldoorn.

The present sheet is particularly fresh and is one of Meertens's most accomplished sheets – indeed, if the Made in Holland stamp had not been present, this work might have been mistaken for a drawing by Schouman.

Our drawing can for instance be compared to Meertens's sheet Six South American Birds in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, which comes from the same group. The group did not only include drawings of birds, but also for instance of a fallow deer calf.

This delicately executed drawing represents a Purple-breasted Cotinga (*Cotinga cotinga*) from Surinam and a Bokmakierie (*Telophorus zeylonus*) from the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa. The Cotinga is seen on the back and therefore its purple breast cannot be observed. As they are from two different continents, the birds would never have encountered in the wild. The spontaneously painted tropical landscape with palm trees along the lower edge further illustrates the exotic nature of the birds – as is well known, the eighteenth century witnessed a great growing interest in the observation of the natural world, evidenced for instance by the emergence of encyclopedias and collections of drawings such as the present one, valued possessions of lovers of art, but also of amateur naturalists.

This delicate watercolour by Abraham Meertens was once in the collection of renowned Dutch collectors Saam and Lily Nijstad, whose exquisite taste was best exemplified by their private collection, called the Unicorn Collection. This spectacular group of works on paper numbered five hundred pieces and only contained drawings considered the finest in quality and condition. The works of Aert Schouman figured strongly in the Unicorn Collection, as did that of his follower, Abraham Meertens. The latter was quick to learn Schouman's colour palette and compositional arrangement, as well as his technique of capturing natural history subjects in watercolor and washes.

The present work is part of a group of around one hundred bird and animal drawings formerly attributed to the Dordrecht artist Aert Schouman, owned by the American art dealer Donald M. Bonnist in the early 1970s. The Schouman expert L.J. Bol, director of the Dordrecht Museum, was invited to the United States to examine the group in 1972. Unable to make the journey, he asked the dealer Saam Nijstad to go in his place. Nijstad concluded that the drawings were not by Schouman, but by Meertens; in the following year, Nijstad bought the whole group. At the time of their importation into the United States, it had been necessary to apply the stamp 'MADE IN HOLLAND' to the verso of each drawing, in order to avoid American customs duty on the reimportation of domestically produced objects; ever since, these works have amusingly been known as the 'Made in Holland' drawings.

The authorship by Meertens was kindly confirmed by Drs Charles Dumas and Drs Robert-Jan te Rijdt upon examination of the original on 8 July 2022.

435 x 275 mm sheet size

361 x 250 mm image size



Literature

1. Charles Dumas and Robert-Jan te Rijdt, *Kleur en raffinement. Tekeningen uit de Unicorno collectie*, exh. cat. Amsterdam (Rembrandthuis) and Dordrechts Museum (Dordrecht) 1994-1995, p. 26.
2. R. Harmanni, 'Zeeuwse vogelbehangsels in de tweede helft van de achttiende eeuw en het werk van Abraham Meertens (1747-1823)', *iZeeland* 3 (1994), pp. 53-62 and C.W. Fock, 'Abraham Meertens, een eigenzinnig ontwerper', in : K. Heyning en G. van Herwijnen (red.), 'Om een prijs en plaats'. *De Middelburgse Teeken Akademie 1778-2003*, Middelburg 2004, p.34.