



Philips Wouwerman  
Dutch, 1619 - 1668

## *Battle Scene*

c. 1645/1646

oil on panel

overall: 48 x 82.5 cm (18 7/8 x 32 1/2 in.)

framed: 62.9 x 97.3 x 6 cm (24 3/4 x 38 5/16 x 2 3/8 in.)

Inscription: lower right, PH in monogram: PH.W.

Gift of Joseph F. McCrindle in memory of Frederick A. den Broeder 2000.159.1

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### ENTRY

Early in his career Philips Wouwerman specialized in expressive depictions of military encounters; he was not, however, a romantic who idealized warfare. [1] Even though he included all of war's heroic accoutrements in this painting—trumpet, drum, flags, and colorful sashes worn by brave soldiers—he portrayed the battlefield as a deadly and messy milieu where clear divisions between friend and foe are impossible to establish. This skirmish unfolds on the side of an ordinary sandy dune, so undistinguished in appearance that it reinforces the impression that such human slaughter occurs without any significance or relevance to the larger course of human affairs. Smoke and dust billowing from the tumult largely obscure the distant landscape and the mounted soldiers who are arriving to join the battle from beyond the crest of the hill. To judge from the Dutch flag at the right and the red sash worn by the central rider brandishing his trumpet in the air, the skirmish is between Dutch and Spanish soldiers. Nevertheless, the immediate circumstances that have pitted these forces against each other, the eventual outcome of the battle, and the consequences for the victor and the vanquished are unknown and of no apparent interest to the artist.

The battle rages right before us, and there is no escape from its furor. As the horses of the mounted soldiers rear their hoofs over the dead and maimed, armed combatants grimace as they try to subdue their enemy. With swords and knives raised to cause yet more bloodshed, and rifles and pistols firing to kill, there is no end in sight to the carnage. Wouwerman focused his composition on four riders and their steeds struggling for survival in the vortex of the battle: a horseman wearing a red sash who holds aloft his trumpet; a rider with an orange sash on a white mount that jumps over a third horse whose rider has fallen onto the ground with a gaping wound on the back of his head; and, most menacing of all, a fierce warrior who is about to decapitate his Dutch adversary with his drawn sword. At the far left is a lone figure of a wounded drummer, clutching the profusely bleeding stump of his right arm. With his now useless drum lying abandoned on the ground before him, he fearfully tries to escape from the violence. [2]

Wouwerman's ability to capture the heat of battle was one of the most celebrated aspects of his extensive oeuvre. Cornelis de Bie wrote in 1661 that Wouwerman's battle scenes were so lifelike that Nature could not make them any more perfect. [3] At the beginning of the following century Arnold Houbraken was even more enthusiastic in his admiration of Wouwerman's ability to paint "fiery passion flashing from the eyes of man and rider, fear in those who flee, pain in the maimed, and the hue of death painted on the lips of the slain." [4] Whether Wouwerman conceived such battle scenes entirely from his imagination or actually witnessed such human brutality is not known. By the mid-1640s, when he painted this work, Spanish and Dutch forces were no longer fighting in the Province of Holland. [5] Perhaps the young artist had witnessed battles when he was in Germany in 1638–1639, as conflicts between these enemies were still actively being waged there at that time. Whatever the source of his inspiration, Wouwerman's battle scenes greatly appealed to Dutch and Flemish collectors, who paid high prices for these works. [6]

This painting is one of a number of comparable works Wouwerman made relatively early in his career. In each of them he situated a skirmish on the side of a sandy dune, a diagonal terrain that added to the battle's dynamic intensity. Although these paintings are largely monochromatic, Wouwerman gave pictorial focus to his images with a few carefully positioned accents of color and light. In this instance, he drew attention to the three central riders circling one another, the fallen wounded soldier, and the dead man dressed in red and blue. He probably composed his paintings with the aid of now-lost preliminary drawings, for similar,

although never identical, figures and horses appear in a number of his works. [7] The rearing horse carrying the trumpeter in this painting, for example, is comparable to one in Wouwerman's *Attack on a Convoy*, 1644 [fig. 1]. He must also have made counterproofs of these drawings: a mirror image of the white steed in the National Gallery of Art's painting appears as a bay horse with a white blaze in a comparable battle scene in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art [fig. 2].

A long tradition of battle scenes in Dutch art gave Wouwerman a pictorial framework for his own compositions. Nevertheless, when one compares *Battle Scene* with depictions of skirmishes by the Haarlem master Esaias van de Velde I (Dutch, 1587 - 1630) or by Palamedes Palamedesz (1607–1638) from Delft, it is evident that Wouwerman introduced an entirely new intensity to the battlefield genre. [8] Whereas the action in these earlier scenes seems stilted and frozen, Wouwerman made it come alive, not only through his compositional mastery but also through his ability to depict the sense of movement in both horses and humans.

It seems probable that Wouwerman's dynamic vision of men and horses in the midst of battle drew heavily from non-Dutch pictorial sources, which he would have known primarily through prints. Chief among these predecessors was Antonio Tempesta (Florentine, 1555 - 1630), whose etchings of battle scenes featuring rearing horses and close combat were widely circulated and enormously influential during the early seventeenth century. A number of specific prototypes for Wouwerman's horses appear in these prints, including the steed carrying the trumpeter in the National Gallery's painting [fig. 3]. Another probable source for the dramatic poses of man and beast that characterize Wouwerman's battle scenes was Sir Peter Paul Rubens (Flemish, 1577 - 1640), whose compositions he could have known through prints. [9] Finally, Houbraken notes that Wouwerman acquired a suitcase full of "models, drawings and sketches" from the estate of his fellow painter in Haarlem, Pieter van Laer (Dutch, c. 1592 - 1642). [10] Van Laer, also known as Bamboccio, had spent fourteen years in Rome before returning to Haarlem in 1639. Shortly before Wouwerman died, he purportedly burned Van Laer's drawings along with his own, so it is impossible to know the extent of Van Laer's impact on Wouwerman's art. Nevertheless, the presence of a strongly foreshortened dead soldier in the foreground of this painting raises the possibility that one of Van Laer's drawings was a copy of Andrea Mantegna (Paduan, c. 1431 - 1506)'s *Dead Christ*, c. 1490, in the Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan. Another possible source for this striking image is *Dead Adonis*, 1609, by Hendrick Goltzius (Dutch,

1558 - 1617) [fig. 4].

While the earlier provenance of *Battle Scene* is not known, intriguing hints of its history exist in earlier sale records and from labels on the verso of the panel. [11]

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

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## COMPARATIVE FIGURES



**fig. 1** Philips Wouwerman, *Attack on a Convoy*, 1644, oil on panel, Sammlungen des Fürsten von und zu Liechtenstein, Vaduz-Vienna



**fig. 2** Philips Wouwerman, *Battle Scene*, c. 1645, oil on canvas, Los Angeles County Museum of Art



**fig. 3** Antonio Tempesta, *David Kills Goliath*, 1613, etching, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, 1974.55.33



**fig. 4** Hendrick Goltzius, *Dead Adonis*, 1609, oil on canvas, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam,. Photo © Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

## NOTES

- [1] I would like to thank Henriette Rahusen for her assistance with this entry.
- [2] Michel P. van Maarseveen et al., *Beelden van een strijd: Oorlog en kunst vóór de Vrede van Munster 1621–1648* (Delft, 1998), 122, notes that commands for infantry were relayed by a drummer, whereas commands for cavalry were passed on by bugle players. As Wouwerman includes both a drummer and a bugle player in this work, it would seem that the skirmish is between two such groups, perhaps on reconnaissance missions.
- [3] Cornelis de Bie, *Het Gulden Cabinet van de Edel Vry Schilderconst* (Antwerp 1661), 281: “soo aenghenaem net en near het leven datter inden Natuer gheen meerder volmaecktheyt in’t leven en can bethoont oft bewesen worde[n]/oft t’is daer in door d’eelheyt van sijn Pinceel al te sien.”
- [4] Arnold Houbraken, *De Groote Schouburgh der Nederlantsche Konstschilders en Schilderessen*. 3 vols. (The Hague, 1753; reprint: Amsterdam, 1976), 2:72: “men ziet het driftvuur Paerd en Ruiter uit de oogen schitteren, in de vlugtigen de vrees, in de verminkten de pyn, en in de afgemaaiden de doodverf op de lippen geschildert.”

- [5] Wouwerman only signed his works with the monogram “PH.W” between 1642 and 1646. After that time he signed his paintings “PHIL.W” or “PHILS.W.” See Frederik Duparc and Quentin Buvelot, *Philips Wouwerman, 1619–1668* (The Hague, 2009), 22.
- [6] Frederik Duparc and Quentin Buvelot, *Philips Wouwerman, 1619–1668* (The Hague, 2009), 104.
- [7] Wouwerman’s drawings are extremely rare, and no such individual studies of animals have survived. Arnold Houbraken, *De Groote Schouburgh der Nederlantsche Konstschilders en Schilderessen*. 3 vols. (The Hague, 1753; reprint: Amsterdam, 1976), 2:73, wrote that the rarity of Wouwerman’s drawings stemmed from his deathbed decision to burn all of his “models and drawings.” The validity of Houbraken’s account, however, has been questioned in Frederik Duparc and Quentin Buvelot, *Philips Wouwerman, 1619–1668* (The Hague, 2009), 38 and 138. These authors note that later collectors owned substantial numbers of Wouwerman’s drawings, which, however, have not survived to the present day.
- [8] For the Dutch tradition of battle scenes, see Michel P. van Maarseveen et al., *Beelden van een strijd: Oorlog en kunst vóór de Vrede van Munster 1621–1648* (Delft, 1998), 107–132.
- [9] See, for example, the horse at the right in the engraving by Schelte Adamsz Bolswert (c. 1586–1659), which he made after Rubens’ *The Conversion of Saint Paul*.
- [10] Arnold Houbraken, *De Groote Schouburgh der Nederlantsche Konstschilders en Schilderessen*. 3 vols. (The Hague, 1753; reprint: Amsterdam, 1976), 2:73–75.
- [11] See this painting’s Provenance, note 1, for more information.
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## TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support, an oak[1] panel made from a single board, is beveled on the back around all four edges. The ground is a white layer of medium thickness. The artist applied a thin, brushy, yellowish brown wash over the ground prior to the paint. The paint was applied in thin layers that blend together. It is thicker and more detailed in the foreground figures and thinner and less detailed in the background. Impasto is found only in the brightest highlights.

The painting is in good condition. Small losses in the paint and ground exist around the edges, especially in the lower right corner. The paint and glazes are somewhat abraded in the area of the gray smoke billowing from the battlefield. The painting

was treated in 2001 to remove discolored varnish and inpainting and to restore the abraded glazes.

[1] The characterization of the wood is based on visually examination only.

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## PROVENANCE

(Carlo Sestieri, Rome);[1] purchased 1960s by Joseph F. McCrindle [1923-2008], New York; gift 2000 to NGA.

[1] Although the earlier provenance of the painting is not known, hints of its history exist in earlier sale records and from labels on the verso of the panel. This work may be the painting identified as “Cavalry fight on a Hill” that was sold by J. H. van Heemskerck in The Hague in 1770 (sale of 29 March 1770, no. 142, sold for 461 florins to Deodati). The dimensions recorded for that work, 20 1/2 by 34 1/2 inches, are only slightly larger than those of this painting. See: Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century*, translated by Edward G. Hawke, 8 vols., London, 1907-1927: 2(1909):498, no. 770e. One of the old handwritten labels on the verso reads: “N:XXVII / Une bataille par Phillippe Wouwerman.” The other label, which indicates that the painting was at one point in Sweden, reads: “Österby-samlinger / Söderfors.”

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## EXHIBITION HISTORY

1983 Haarlem: *The Seventeenth Century*, The Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 1983, no. 137, repro.

1997 *In Celebration: Works of Art from the Collections of Princeton Alumni and Friends of the Art Museum*, Princeton University, The Art Museum, Princeton University, 1997, no. 166, repro.

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## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1907 Hofstede de Groot, Cornelis. *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century*. 8 vols. Translated by Edward G. Hawke. London, 1907-1927: possibly 2(1909):498, no. 770e.
- 1983 Hofrichter, Frima Fox. *Haarlem: The Seventeenth Century*. New Brunswick, 1983: 144.
- 1993 Duparc, Frederik J. "Philips Wouwerman, 1619 - 1668." *Oud Holland* 107, no. 3 (1993): 265, 285 n. 92.
- 1997 Guthrie, Jill. *In celebration: works of art from the collections of Princeton alumni and friends of the Art Museum, Princeton University*. Exh. cat. Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton, 1997: 131, no. 166.
- 2007 Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr., and Michael Swicklik. "Behind the Veil: Restoration of a Dutch Marine Painting Offers a New Look at Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art and History." *National Gallery of Art Bulletin* no. 37 (Fall 2007): 4-5, fig. 7.
- 2012 Grasselli, Margaret M., and Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., eds. *The McCrindle Gift: A Distinguished Collection of Drawings and Watercolors*. Exh. cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2012: 19, fig. 8, repro. 185.
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