LOT 40
PROPERTY FROM A PRIVATE COLLECTION, NEW YORK
HENDRICK GOLTZIUS
MÜLBRACHT (BRACHT-AM-NIEDERRHEIN) 1558 - 1617 HAARLEM
UNEQUAL LOVERS
signed in monogram and dated upper right: HG [in ligature]/1615
oil on canvas
27 by 23 inches; 68.5 by 58.5 cm.

ESTIMATE 700,000-900,000 USD

PROVENANCE
Anonymous sale, Zurich, Uto Auktions AG, 25-29 November 1985, lot 1429 (as Christiaen Couwenbergh), unsold;
Anonymous sale, London, Sotheby's, 5 July 1995, lot 19;
Where purchased by Jack Kilgore, New York;
From whom acquired by the present owner in 1996.
LITERATURE

O. Hirschmann, Hendrick Goltzius als Maler: 1600-1617, The Hague 1916, p. 82, no. 30 (known only from Adriaen Matham's engraving);

M. van der Vlist, Goltzius als schilder, unpublished undergraduate thesis, University of Utrecht 1974, p. 52;


E. de Jongh and G. Luijten, Mirror of Everyday Life. Genre Prints in the Netherlands 1550-1700, exhibition catalogue, Amsterdam 1997, p. 84, note 21 and p. 172 (where referred to in relation to the Matham print);


To be included in Lawrence Nichols's forthcoming monograph on Goltzius as no. A-59.

CATALOGUE NOTE

Until it came to light in 1985 (see Provenance), Goltzius's audacious depiction of Unequal Lovers was known only from an engraving by Adriaen Matham, son of the artist's stepson (fig. 1). Heralded by Franits as “surely ranking among the earliest genre pictures in the Dutch Republic,” the picture is astonishing not only for its subject but also for the immediacy with which it is portrayed.¹

The theme of unequal lovers has a long literary history, dating back to the Roman playwright Plautus (circa 254–184 B.C.) and carrying through to the works of Boccaccio, Erasmus and Sebastian Brant. In the visual arts it was commonly the subject of prints, most often with moralizing inscriptions attached. The theme was expressed in two forms, an old woman soliciting a handsome young man or, more commonly, an old man soliciting a pretty young woman.

Goltzius and his workshop made a number of engravings of Unequal Lovers, but with the exception of the print by Matham, all are set in a defined interior and the figures are shown in three-quarter or full length. Here the impact is greater because Goltzius sets the large half-length figures against a blank background; they are big and forceful and so crowded into the narrow frame of the composition that they seem to push out into our space. Goltzius paints the figures in bold bright colors, and while his brushwork is sophisticated there is nothing subtle about the scene he is painting. The man is old and ugly, with his long grey hair, moles and bulbous nose while the woman is young and firm-fleshed, with pink cheeks and swelling breasts. Her elaborate braids and open bodice mark her as a prostitute, not an innocent girl, and the man is her client, who seeks not love but sex.² His furs and jewelry alone indicate that he is wealthy, while in his right hand he holds an unmistakably phallic money bag, which his companion joyfully fondles. To dispel any doubt about what is about to transpire, Goltzius shows her looking the old man in the eye as she inserts her left forefinger into a fold in the fabric of her dress. It appears he added the gesture relatively late in the composition of the painting, because a pentimento indicates that originally he had placed her finger higher up on her bodice and resting on top of the fabric.

By giving the man a horribly distorted nose, Goltzius has made the lovers more "unequal" and increased the underlying moralizing message of the painting.³ A caricatural drawing by Goltzius of an old man with a similar “potato” nose, in the Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam, adds a further dimension to our understanding. It, taken together with an engraving titled Meynaert Noeswys, also in Rotterdam, points to the swollen nose as a symbol of foolishness and gullibility.⁴ That would fit the man here if he thinks that anything good will come of his encounter. The present work dates from 1615, a period of great productivity for the artist.⁵ In 1600, while at the height of his fame as an engraver and draftsman, Goltzius abandoned printmaking and took up painting. He quickly established himself as one of the foremost painters in Haarlem and continued with undiminished prowess until his death on January 1, 1617. A drawing in a New York private collection in pen and brown ink on vellum, which Reznicek dated to shortly after 1600, appears to be a first idea for Unequal Lovers (fig. 2).⁶ It is oval in format and shows a similar couple about to kiss, but the contrast between the two figures is not as strongly delineated as in the painting – the man is not so
ugly and the woman not definitely a prostitute – and the sexuality not so explicit. The format of the Unequal Lovers is as striking as the frankness of the approach and increases the impact of the picture. There are very few precedents for Goltzius’s use of half-length figures. One is a picture he himself painted, now in the Musée de la Chartreuse, Douai, which shows an old woman pursuing a young man. It is dated 1614 and shows a woman pouring money into the lap of a bare-chested young man. While it does show the same story as the present work, though from the opposite side, it is not a pendant as it is significantly larger. One of the few other contemporary examples is Cornelis van Haarlem’s Mercenary Love, also of 1614. Although the woman there is actually bare-breasted, the portrayal itself is more restrained and classicizing. What differentiates Goltzius’s Unequal Lovers is the way he takes a moralizing subject out of its quotidian setting, strips it down and presents it directly and unabashedly to us, the viewers.

We are very grateful to Lawrence W. Nichols for his generosity and help in the preparation of this note.

1. W. Franits, p. 18 (see Literature).
3. Comparing it to the figure in Domenico Ghirlandaio’s Portrait of an Old Man and a Boy in the Musée du Louvre, Paris, it would appear that Goltzius is painting a man suffering from rhinophyma, a disease of the nasal tissues found in older men. See E. Fahy in The Renaissance Portrait from Donatello to Bellini, exhibition catalogue, New York 2011, p. 159.
4. Both bear ironic inscriptions describing the foolish men’s noses swelling with learning.

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**Fig. 1**
Hendrick Goltzius, Unequal Lovers, Private Collection, New York

**Fig. 2**
Adriaen Matham after Hendrick Goltzius, Unequal Lovers, engraving, 43.2 by 30 cm