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Adriaen Brouwer  
*The three Singers*

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ADRIAEN BROUWER

(Oudenaarde 1605/1606 - 1638 Antwerp)

## *THE THREE SINGERS*

Oil on panel.

28,5 x 22,5 cm.; 11 1/4 x 8 7/8 in.

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### Provenance

Collection J. B. van Lancker, his sale Antwerp, 18 August 1835, lot 41, acquired by "Pardieu Paris";  
Collection of Dr E. Sklarz, London;  
Collection of Georges Édouard Warneck, Paris;  
His sale, Galerie Georges Petit, 27 and 28 May 1926, lot 20, sold to Lugt for J. W. Nienhuys;  
Collection J.W. Nienhuys, Bloemendaal-Aerdenhout;  
Thence by descent.

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### Literature

C. Hofstede de Groot, *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten holländischen Maler des XVII Jahrhunderts* (Band 3), Esslingen 1910, p. 611, no. 62b.  
E. J. Reynolds, *Some Brouwer Problems*, Lausanne 1931, pp. 49-50, ill. 24.  
K. de Clippel, *Joos van Craesbeeck (1605/06-ca.1660), een Brabants genreschilder*, Turnhout 2006, p. 209, as Adriaen Brouwer, pp. 208-210, no. A76, ill. 186;  
J.F. Heijbroek, *Fritz Lugt - 1884-1970 Living for Art*, Paris, 2012, p.199, footnote 119.

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*We are grateful to Dr. Katrien Lichtert for confirming the attribution to Adriaen Brouwer following inspection of the original on 29 January 2026.*

Although he may be considered one of the most important Flemish genre painters of the seventeenth century, little is known about the life of Adriaen Brouwer.<sup>1</sup> It has generally been assumed that he was born in 1605 or 1606 in Oudenaarde; however, as the cities' birth records for the years 1603-1606 are missing, an exact date of birth cannot be established. Presumably, Brouwer was born between 1603-05 to Adriaen de Brouwere and Maria de Sutter, who had at least seven children. His father was probably active in the tapestry industry, as he was recorded as settling several debts with tapestry makers and dealers when selling his house in 1608. It appears the family moved to Gouda, as on the 15th of July 1614 the local mayor and aldermen granted permission to 'Adrian de Brouwer van Oudenaerde in Vlaenderen' to reside in the city. It is possible Adriaen senior was offered a job there by the tapestry producer Charles de Tavernier.

It is not known who Brouwer studied with during his time in Gouda. He next appears in a document dated 23 July 1626, as a witness to the statement by the painter Adriaen van Nieulandt and the art dealer Barend van Someren that they had visited the house of a local ribbon salesman in March 1625 to view 32 paintings, which were subsequently sold to the merchant Pieter Cornelisz Blyenberch, with van Someren acting as the middleman. The art historian Arnold Houbraken suggests in his *Groote Schouburgh (1718-1721)* that van Someren employed Brouwer at some point;<sup>2</sup> in any case, with his extensive network of painters, engravers and art dealers the latter seems to have been an important intermediary for the young painter. After his death in 1632, van Someren's extensive collection of prints and drawings was auctioned in 1635; Rembrandt bought several drawings by Brouwer at the sale. While the document of 1626 places Brouwer in Amsterdam, that year he was also recorded as a member of De Wijngaertrancken, a chamber of rhetoric in nearby Haarlem that was very popular with local artists (Frans Hals was a member from 1616 until 1625.) It seems that by 1626 at the latest Brouwer had settled in Haarlem, as he also became a member of the local guild of St Luke.

Houbraken states that Brouwer had been apprenticed to Frans Hals,<sup>3</sup> although there are no archival records to substantiate this. As the painter left traces in quite a few inventories in Amsterdam, including in the art collections of several renowned art

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<sup>1</sup> The following short artist's biography has for the largest part been based on the excellent essay by Jager, A. e.a., "Natif d'Audenaerde? Nieuwe inzichten in de afkomst van Adriaen Brouwer en zijn leven in de Noordelijke Nederlanden", in: Lichtert, K. (ed.), *Adriaen Brouwer. Meester van Emoties*, Amsterdam 2018, pp. 36-49.

<sup>2</sup> Houbraken, A., *De Groote Schouburgh der Nederlantsche Konstschilders en Schilderessen*, vol. 1, Amsterdam 1718 - 1721, p. 322.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 319.

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dealers and artists, it is possible that he also worked there for a while. In 1631 Brouwer moved to Antwerp, where he registered as a master of the local guild of St Luke in 161/32. That same year, he took in Jan Baptist Dandoy as an apprentice, indicating that he intended to stay in the city for a longer period. It appears Brouwer met with financial difficulties soon after his arrival, for on October 5, 1632, his household effects were inventoried and handed over to his debtor, the silk dealer Jan van den Bossche. By late 1632 he presumably returned briefly to Haarlem to attend the baptism of his niece Adrienne (both Adriaen's brother Hans and his sister Janneke had moved to Haarlem by then); he is next recorded on the 23rd of February 1633 'op den castele van Antwerpen' (i.e. in jail) confessing to owing a debt of 1600 guilders to the same Jan van den Bossche - a debt he promises to pay off with monthly payments in the form of paintings. However, the artist never did seem to get his finances in order, as by 1635 he was in arrears on his rent and had to promise his friend and landlord Paulus Pontius a brothel scene ('een stucxken schilderije, wesende een Bordeeltken') by his own hand to make up for the missed payments.<sup>4</sup> Houbraken mentions that Brouwer spent some time in Paris after that, fruitlessly trying to make a living. Brouwer died sick and penniless in Antwerp in early 1638; he was buried on 1 February. Brouwer's repeated financial difficulties (which are well documented) combined with his preferred choice of subject - fighting, drinking and smoking low-lives holed up in taverns - seem to have done his reputation little good.

While his early biographers testify to the almost universal appreciation of his work, they also unflinchingly point to his debauched and irresponsible lifestyle, painting him as a heavy drinker severely lacking in moderation, 'with a pipe in his mouth in nasty piss-taverns' ('met 't pijpken in den mont in slechte pis-taver[n]en').<sup>5</sup> However, identifying the artist with his subject like this does Brouwer little justice, as he was one of the best and most innovative seventeenth-century artists the Low Countries ever produced. Building on the tradition of Pieter Bruegel, he went on to create a wholly new stylistic idiom which effortlessly fused elements from both Northern and Southern Netherlandish painterly trends and fashions. Although Brouwer is mostly known for his genre scenes, he also contributed greatly to the development of both portraiture and landscape painting. Already during his life Brouwer was hugely influential on his contemporaries: he was a true 'artist's artist', whose work was collected by the greats of his day, including Rubens, whose estate inventory mentions no less than seventeen of Brouwer's works. Furthermore, Rubens was profoundly influenced by Brouwer's - startlingly modern - approach to painting landscapes, of which he owned at least five. Rembrandt, too, was a collector of Brouwer; in 1656 he owned one of the latter's sketchbooks and seven paintings (including one copy).

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<sup>4</sup> Van den Branden, F. J., *Adriaan de Brouwer en Joos van Craesbeeck*, Antwerp 1882, p. 53.

<sup>5</sup> Cornelis de Bie, *Het Gulden Kabinet*, 1661, p. 93.

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While the young Rembrandt - who probably met Brouwer in Amsterdam in the 1620's - is often mentioned as a source of inspiration for Brouwer, it has been noted that the influence was probably not just one-sided, but rather a case of (friendly) artistic rivalry or *aemulatio*. Frans Hals and Jan Lievens, who both knew Brouwer well, also seem to have been influenced by him.<sup>6</sup> Van Dyck even included Brouwer in his *Iconographia* (fig. 1).

Brouwer signed about a quarter of his paintings; none are dated.<sup>7</sup> Stylistically and iconographically, the oeuvre can be divided into three periods: an early Dutch period (ca. 1625/-1630), the early Antwerp years (1630-1634) and the later Antwerp period (1634-1638). During the early period he mostly painted works with large numbers of figures placed in an interior, often in lively colours. Gradually his compositions became more balanced, with a reduced number of figures, which became livelier and more expressive. After moving to Antwerp, he used a more subdued colour palette, dominated by browns, greys, greens and blues - with the occasional red or pink accent thrown in. He started painting more 'close-up' compositions featuring one or more figures at three-quarter or half-length, as well as *tronies*. During the later years, Brouwer further reduced his works to the very essence, focusing on a limited number of figures - often a sole figure - against a neutral background. He also started painting sublime small-scale landscapes. The late works are characterized by a *virtuoso* technique with almost transparent paint layers made up of very loose, sketch-like brushstrokes, often still showing the ground layer. The colour palette in these works is almost monochrome, with mostly *ton-sur-ton* hues.

The present painting can be situated in the early Antwerp years, ca. 1630-1632. Three men are sitting at a table, in front of which is a wine barrel. To the left, the man in the red coat and brown hat is looking intently at a sheet of paper on the lectern in front of him, while to the right the man in the green coat and the high hat is looking at the sheet he is holding up, looking quite amused. Between the two men, a third man, also looking at the paper on the lectern, appears to be singing (?) loudly. Traditionally, the composition has been identified as *The three Singers*. When the picture was sold in Antwerp in 1835, it was already recognized as a work by Brouwer - "rare and very well preserved".<sup>8</sup> However, as the painting was unseen for almost a century, its recent reappearance and rediscovery is significant, allowing us to situate the work again within Brouwer's limited oeuvre.

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<sup>6</sup> For Brouwer's influence on his contemporaries, see the essay by Atkins, C. D. M., "Schilder voor Schilders", in: Lichtert, K. (ed.), *Adriaen Brouwer. Meester van Emoties*, Amsterdam 2018, pp. 115-125.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p 21.

<sup>8</sup> Collection J. B. van Lancker, his sale Antwerp, 18/8/1835, lot 41, as "Adriaen Brouwer", acquired by "Tardieu Paris" for 130.

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After the Antwerp sale in 1835, the painting ended up in London,<sup>9</sup> before being acquired by Georges Édouard Warneck (1834-1924), a marine officer and art dealer based in Paris, for his private collection. After his death, his collection was sold at Galerie Georges Petit in Paris on the 27th and 28th of May 1926. The catalogue of the sale, written by Frits Lugt, mentions works by Metsys, Rubens, Rembrandt and Hals, alongside many other greats. Lot 20 was Brouwers *Les Chanteurs*, on which Lugt wrote: 'This painting [is] one of the best by the master [...] A less spirited version, probably by Craesbeeck, is conserved at the Prado in Madrid (no. 1390)'.<sup>10</sup> Lugt acquired the painting for the Dutch collector J. W. Nienhuys for the tidy sum of 105.000 francs; it remained by descent in the family until recently. In his 1931 publication *Some Brouwer Problems*, E. J. Reynolds, too, considered the Prado version (see fig. 3) as by van Craesbeeck, after the original formerly in the Warneck collection. He noted the similarities with Brouwer's *Bauernquartett* in Munich<sup>11</sup> - notably the figure on the right in both paintings - and situated both paintings in the early 1630's.<sup>12</sup> Karolien de Clippel published the Prado version as by Craesbeeck in her 2006 monograph on the artist - the panel, after all, is signed 'CB' - and dated it ca. 1632-1633.<sup>13</sup> This further supports the date of creation for Brouwer's panel. De Clippel published the prime version by Brouwer - the present painting - as well, its whereabouts unknown.<sup>14</sup>

An interesting drawing undoubtedly connected to the present painting is in Stockholm's Nationalmuseum. *The Singing Peasants* by Brouwer (see fig. 3) is a small drawing, measuring only 67 x 78 mm. Reynolds considered it a 'rough' autograph copy after the painting;<sup>15</sup> de Clippel however considered it a preparatory drawing, which indeed seems more likely.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to Craesbeeck's copy, at least two old copies of Brouwer's original have been preserved, attesting to its popularity at the time.<sup>17</sup> Craesbeeck himself 'recycled'

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<sup>9</sup> In the collection of Dr E. Sklarz.

<sup>10</sup> Sale catalogue, Galerie Georges Petit, *Collection Warneck*, Paris, 27 - 28 May 1926, p. 38.

<sup>11</sup> Oil on panel, 43 x 57,3 cm. Alte Pinakothek, Munich, inv. no. 109.

<sup>12</sup> E. J. Reynolds, *Some Brouwer Problems*, Lausanne, 1931, p.49; Reynolds also noted that: "It is unlikely that Brouwer brought any pictures with him from Holland, or that if he did, he could keep them during his long incarceration.", citing this as further proof for a dating after Brouwer's return to Antwerp.

<sup>13</sup> Karolien de Clippel, Joos van Craesbeeck (1605/06-ca.1660), *een Brabants genreschilder*, Turnhout, 2006, p. 210.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, ill. 186.

<sup>15</sup> E. J. Reynolds, *Some Brouwer Problems*, Lausanne, 1931, 50.

<sup>16</sup> Karolien de Clippel, *Joos van Craesbeeck (1605/06-ca.1660), een Brabants genreschilder*, Turnhout 2006, p. 389, notes 365 and 366.

<sup>17</sup> One is an oil on panel, 28 x 22 cm, State Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow, inv. no. 1782; the other is a copy of unknown dimensions and support sold by Katz, Dieren, to a private London collector in 1948.

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the group of three figures in another painting, his *Singing Company in an Interior*.<sup>18</sup> Brouwer, too, reused the figures in this composition. Apart from the Munich Bauernquartett, already mentioned, the figure on the right also returns in his *At the Tooth Puller's*, now in the Liechtenstein Collection.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Karolien de Clippel, *Joos van Craesbeeck (1605/06-ca.1660), een Brabants genreschilder*, Turnhout, 2006, cat. no. A83

<sup>19</sup> Oil on panel, 22,7 x 15,9 cm. Liechtenstein Collection, inv. no. GE 539.

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Fig. 1. Schelte a Bolswert after Anthony van Dyck, *Portrait of Adriaen Brouwer*, 1644, engraving, 24.5 x 16 cm (plate). Washington, National Gallery of Art.

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Fig. 2. Joos van Craesbeeck, *The Three Singers*, oil on panel, 30 x 24 cm. Madrid, Museo del Prado.

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Fig. 3. Adriaen Brouwer, *Singing peasants*, sketch on paper, 6.7 x 7.8 cm.  
Stockholm, Nationalmuseum.

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