

# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Jan Baptist Xavery  
(Antwerp 1697 - 1742 The Hague)

*A pair of marble reliefs  
depicting playful putti*

white carrara marble

each: 46 x 76 cm. (18 1/8 x 29 7/8 in.)



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## Provenance

Van Ertborn collection, Antwerp, c. 1840;  
Chevalier van Havre collection, Schoten, until 2013.

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Jan Baptist Xavery was born in Antwerp in 1697. He was the son of Albert Xavery, who was also a sculptor. He completed his training in Italy, where he travelled extensively, absorbing the influence of both Italian masters and Flemish masters who had preceded him there, such as François Duquesnoy. He settled in The Hague, where he became Sculptor to the Court. In 1725, his name was entered into the registry of artists from The Hague, for which he paid the due fee. His known pupils include the sculptor Willem Hendrik van der Wall (1716 - 1790). While working in The Hague, he married Christine Robart. The couple had two sons: Frans and Jacob Xavery, who would both become painters. Jan Baptist Xavery also temporarily worked in Kassel. He worked in marble, terracotta, ivory and sandstone, proving himself to be a versatile artist, well-versed in working in different media. Examples of his work can be found in a number of important museums today, such as the Victoria & Albert Museum (London) and the Rijksmuseum (Amsterdam).<sup>1</sup>

The present pair of marble reliefs were part of the well-known van Ertborn collection in the nineteenth century. Florent van Ertborn, born in Antwerp in 1784, grew up in a wealthy, art-loving family. In 1817 he became mayor of Antwerp, which he remained until 1828, when he became governor of the province of Utrecht. During his lifetime, van Ertborn amassed an impressive art collection, including works by masters such as Jan van Eyck, Hans Memling and Antonello da Messina. The paintings from his collection were later donated to the Royal Museum of Fine Art (Antwerp), where they formed the nucleus of the old master paintings collection. The present two plaques probably formed part of the interior of the van Ertborn house, which still stands in Antwerp today (fig. 1).<sup>2</sup>

At some point in the nineteenth century, probably sometime after the death of van Ertborn in 1840, the plaques came by inheritance into the possession of the van Havre family. The van Havre family is one of the oldest noble families in Belgium, dating back to 1376. They originally came from the Waasland, but by the seventeenth century they settled in Antwerp, where they soon became one of the most distinguished families. Their correspondence, for example, includes several letters written to Peter Paul Rubens. In 1714 Emperor Charles VI bestowed the hereditary title of 'Knight of the Holy Roman Empire' on Alexandre-Aloïs van Havre, secretary of the city of Antwerp. From that moment on, the family adopted as their



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coat of arms a pair of lions holding banners and supporting a heraldic shield (fig. 2). For their motto, they chose the Latin phrase: '*Nescit Labi Virtus*', which means 'Virtue cannot fall'. In 1814, the Emperor Napoleon bestowed the title of 'Baron of the Empire' to Jean-Michel-Antoine-Joseph van Havre, a title that is still carried by the eldest van Havre to this day. The family had the two marble plaques installed in their town house, which unfortunately was torn down at the beginning of the twentieth century. When the family moved to the adjacent town of Schoten, they took the marble reliefs with them to their new dwelling, where they have remained until now.<sup>3</sup>

The two reliefs depict a well-known Flemish baroque theme: that of mischievous little angels, also known as putti, going about their naughty business. The theme was first popularized by the important Flemish sculptor François Duquesnoy (1597 - 1643). He spent most of his artistic career in Rome, where he worked for many important patrons, such as Cardinal Richelieu, who even wanted to appoint him Sculptor to King Louis XIII. Early on in his career, Duquesnoy developed a new type of angel or putto relief, inspired by the *Bucolica* by the Roman author Virgil: bacchanalia featuring putti who are drinking, teasing animals and generally misbehaving.<sup>4</sup> A beautiful, if badly damaged, prototype is the relief he made for the Villa Doria Pamphili in Rome (fig. 3), which clearly inspired one of the two current reliefs.

The motif of these putti reliefs was eagerly picked up by French, Italian and Flemish artists, who went on to experiment with the prototypes Duquesnoy had created, designing endless variations and interpretations of their own. The French painter Alexandre-François Desportes (1661 - 1743), for instance, depicted one of the reliefs, inserted under a window sill, in one of his hunting still lifes (fig. 4). Bronze casts after sculptures by Duquesnoy were made, several of which are considered as important works of art in their own right today.

The current reliefs stand out for the quality of their execution, with the relief reaching up to 10 cm. in depth at some points. They compare most favourably to other known works by Xavery, such as the signed and dated reliefs now part of the Rothschild Collection at Waddesdon Manor and belonging to the National Trust. The latter were executed in low relief, whereas in the present works some of the details have been sculpted almost in the



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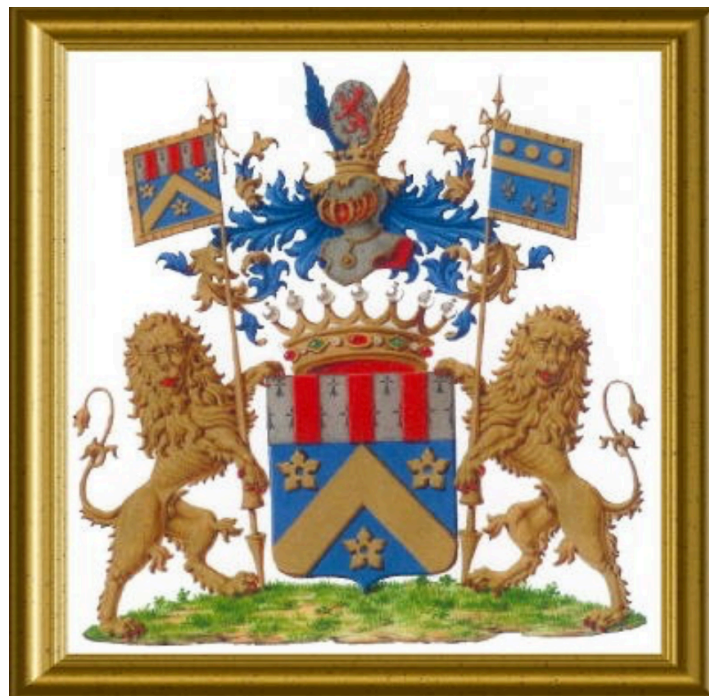
round. Even so, the same motifs and style are clearly present in all four pieces (figs. 5 & 6). The handling of the grapes and tree branches, as well as the movement of the arms and legs of the putti, is very comparable.<sup>5</sup> As such, the present pair of reliefs may be considered an important addition to the *oeuvre* of Jan Baptist Xavery.

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**Figure 1.** The van Ertborn house, Antwerp



**Figure 2.** The van Havre family coat of arms

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**Figure 3.** François Duquesnoy, *Bacchanal of putti with a goat*, 1630.  
Doria Pamphilj Gallery, Rome



**Figure 4.** Alexandre-François Desporte, *Still life with game, a dog, a cat and a hare on a table decorated with a bas relief*, 1730.  
Private collection



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**Figures 5 & 6.** Jan Baptist Xavery, *Bacchic children*, 1737.  
Waddesdon Manor, Buckinghamshire

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> U. Thieme & F. Becker, *Allgemeines Lexikon der bildenden Künstler von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, Leipzig 1999, 29/30, pp. 505-506.

<sup>2</sup> This has been confirmed by the previous owner, Chevalier van Havre, who was related to the van Ertborn family.

<sup>3</sup> A. Goovaerts, *La famille van Havre*, Antwerp 1884, vols. I & II.

<sup>4</sup> M. Boudon-Machuel, *François du Quesnoy, 1597 - 1643*, Paris 2005, pp. 47-60.

<sup>5</sup> We are grateful to Dr. Frits Scholten of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, for kindly pointing this out in a written communication and for stating that the present two reliefs are by the same hand as the ones at Waddesdon Manor, which are attributed to Jan Baptist Xavery.