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Peter Van Boucle

(Antwerp 1610 – 1673 Paris)

*Still life of game, vegetables,
a pig, and a boar's head in
a basket*

oil on canvas

183 x 143 cm.;

72 x 56 1/4 in.

Provenance

Private collection, Spain.

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This magnificent still life with a peacock, dead game and butcher's meat, which bore the traditional attribution to Jan Fyt, has recently been identified by Dr. Fred G. Meijer as being a work by Fyt's Antwerp contemporary Peter van Boucle, who is also said to have been trained in the studio of Frans Snyders, one of the most highly esteemed animal and still-life painters of the seventeenth century.

Whereas Fyt spent his working life in Flanders, Van Boucle emigrated to France with his father, the engraver Carel van Boucle, to escape the turbulence of the 30 Years War. There he, and other Flemish compatriots, were to play a key role in the development of still life painting in France. They settled in the Faubourg Saint-Germain in Paris, an area outside the walls of the city and therefore beyond the reach of the restrictive laws imposed on foreigners by the rules of the corporation of master painters and sculptors. Carel van Boucle joined this group in 1617 and is recorded with his son in Paris in 1623, though Peter seems to have gone back and forth from his native Antwerp, where he may have spent some time in the studio of Snyders and was a member of the guild of Saint Luke from 1632 to 1636, his still lifes being much sought after by the bourgeois clientele of the Flemish city. It was, however, for his activity in France that Peter van Boucle's fame principally rests. He returned some time probably in the late 1640s to settle in Paris, where there are documented works known from 1648, and was a prolific and successful painter whose clients included Louis XIV (who owned two works by Van Boucle)¹ and the great collector, dealer and banker, Everard Jabach. One of the two pictures mentioned in the royal inventories is the magnificent kitchen still life by Van Boucle now in the Louvre (fig. 1): a painting which has affinities with the present work in the unflinching realism of some of its details. He also painted a large number of still lifes of flowers and fruit (see, for example, fig. 2) and was closely associated with some of the artists, such as Louise Moillon, who also specialised in this genre, as well as painting alongside other still-life painters such as Peter Binoit, Lubin Baugin (with whom he often collaborated), and Jacques Linard. Van Boucle was a prolific and highly regarded artist who is said to have been very well paid for his talents, but died in poverty at the Hôtel-Dieu in Paris in 1673, having squandered his wealth in debauchery.

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Van Boucle's speciality was still lifes and animal paintings, but he also collaborated with other artists such as Simon Vouet and Lubin Baugin in making cartoons for tapestries woven at the Gobelins factory. Stylistically his work may be said to have combined the opulent Baroque style of the Antwerp school with a refinement and delicacy and an attention to realistic detail, which perhaps reflects the influence of the spare classicism of contemporary French still-life painting (see, for example, fig. 3). Many of his pictures, such as the present work, elaborately depict dead animals and vegetables, laid out on a simple rustic table, combined with and enlivened by the presence of living animals and occasionally human figures (fig. 4). Here the influence of Frans Snyders can be perceived, whose still-life paintings often play on the tensions between dead animals and living animals, and frequently portray hostile encounters between predators and their prey or between dogs and cats, as in the *Market Scene on a Quay* in the North Carolina Museum of Art (fig. 5). In the present picture, the table is set with an array of dead animals including a magnificent peacock (a motif which also occurs in the Snyders painting in North Carolina). Beneath the table a dog stalks a rooster and a pig's head is shown in a wooden bucket, injecting a powerful element of rather macabre realism, which can be compared with the motif of the calf's head and hooves in the bucket shown in the superb *Butcher's meat with dog and cat* of 1651 in the Louvre (fig. 1). In that picture we also see a confrontation between living animals: the cat on the table cloth and the dog whose muzzle is raised, eying up the chop which dangles over the edge of the table. It is these tensions between life and death and between the beauty of the art and the unflinching realism with which some of its constituent elements are depicted, that gives Peter van Boucle's paintings their power and enduring appeal. He was an artist who not only played an important role in the development of seventeenth-century still-life painting, but also exercised a powerful influence on eighteenth-century French artists, which can be seen in the animal paintings of Oudry and Desportes and the still-life paintings of Chardin.

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Figure 1. Peter van Boucle, *Still-Life with Butcher's Meat, Dog and Cat*, 1651.
Louvre Museum, Paris



Figure 2. Peter van Boucle, *Still Life with Fruit*, 1649.
Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio

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Figure 3. Lubin Baugin, *Still Life with Wafer Biscuits, Glass and Wickerwork Flagon*.
Louvre Museum, Paris



Figure 4. Peter van Boucle, *Man and Woman with a Fruit and Vegetable Stall, Dead Game and Two Dogs*. Musée des Beaux Arts, Besancon

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Figure 5. Frans Snyders and workshop, *Market Scene on a Quay*, c. 1635-1640.
North Carolina Museum of Art, North Carolina

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Footnotes

¹ Bailly's inventory records: 'un panier rempli de choux, asperges, onions, et raisins et une corbeille remplie de fruits pose sur un p d stal, au bas duquel est une botte de raves et un singe qui est assis tenant du raisin dans sa patte' and a second picture [qui] 'represente de la viande de boucnerie avec une t te de veau et les pieds dans un bassin sur un p d stal; assez proche on voit un chat qui veut mordre sans une eclanche et un gros chien qui abboye'. Quoted by Michel Far , *Le Grand Si cle de la Nature Morte en France: le XVII Si cle*, Paris 1974, p. 102.