



Christoffel Pierson  
Dutch, 1631 - 1714

## *Niche with Falconry Gear*

probably 1660s

oil on canvas

overall: 80.5 x 64.5 cm (31 11/16 x 25 3/8 in.)

framed: 94 x 77.8 x 4.5 cm (37 x 30 5/8 x 1 3/4 in.)

Inscription: lower right: Chr.Pierson.f

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### ENTRY

In this striking painting, Christoffel Pierson has created the vivid illusion of hunting equipment placed in and around an arched, light-filled niche set into a white stucco wall. The red-plumed falcon's hood resting atop the wooden birdcage is the visual focus of the painting. Two different types of whistles hang from the birdcage, while other types of hunting equipment, including a hunting horn, a net, and a bow and arrow, lie near it. Flanking the niche are *trompe l'oeil* nails from which hang, on the left, a powder bag and powder horn, and, on the right, a shoulder bag for carrying game.

The equipment shown here was appropriate for a variety of types of hunting, including riflery, archery, trapping with nets and decoy, and falconry. Falcons were used mainly to catch small birds living near rivers and swamps. Round leather hoods or bonnets were placed over the falcons' heads, covering their eyes, to keep the birds calm during transport to and from the hunt. As in this painting, falconry hoods were often decorated with colored leather, gold braids, or plumes. Small birds could also be caught using snap nets. After the hunter arranged his nets on the ground he would attract game birds with small decoy whistles or with live song birds in wooden cages.[1]

Hunting, and falconry in particular, was a popular pastime reserved for Dutch aristocrats, notably those at the Dutch court in The Hague.[2] Shortly after mid-century, this interest encouraged the development of painted game pieces and depictions of hunting implements. Two artists from The Hague who specialized in such images were the brothers Anthonie (1630/1631–1671/1673) and Johannes (1633–1688) Leemans, both of whom painted large-scale illusionistic depictions of

hunting equipment displayed symmetrically on a white stucco wall, an arrangement that probably reflected actual practice.[3] Pierson, who was trained as a portraitist and history painter in The Hague, is generally described as having been inspired by the Leemans brothers to begin painting comparable *trompe l'oeil* images. Arnold Houbraken wrote that Pierson followed “Leemans” in depicting “hunting implements, bird cages, and shooting weapons” because of the high esteem and good prices artists received for such works.[4] The Leemans, however, probably did not begin to paint *trompe l'oeil* images of hunting implements before the late 1650s, by which time Pierson had left The Hague and was living in Gouda. Houbraken may have had a different Leemans in mind when he referred to Pierson’s source of inspiration, possibly Leendert Leman, who is reported to have painted illusionistic hunting scenes in Gouda.[5]

Houbraken was enthusiastic about Pierson’s ability to trick the eye in his *trompe l'oeil* paintings of hunting implements. He remarked that no one had ever been able to match the naturalism of Pierson’s works, in which every object appears to hang on the wall so convincingly that most people are fooled by the deception.[6] In *Niche with Falconry Gear*, Pierson has effectively exploited the niche motif to enhance his *trompe l'oeil* effects: objects seem to exist both behind and in front of the picture plane, and thereby enter into the viewer’s space.[7] The illusionism benefits further from the artist’s ability to convey the varied textures of the materials from which the hunting implements were made, whether horn, wood, metal, or leather, and from his sensitivity to light, whereby subtle shadows are cast onto the stucco wall and concave surface of the arched niche. It is easy to imagine how a viewer might be momentarily deceived when encountering this painting for the first time, and the delight one would feel when that deception was revealed.

Fewer than ten illusionistic hunting pieces by Pierson are known, and none of these are dated, so the chronology of his still lifes cannot be established with any certainty.[8] Many of the same hunting implements reappear in these works so it is probable that Pierson painted most of them for the open market rather than for a specific patron. *Niche with Falconry Gear*, however, differs in its focus on a niche, and in this instance Pierson might have conceived his painting for a specific location in the home of a Dutch aristocrat. The success of its illusionism is contingent on the painting being seen from the proper vantage point to make its perspective work and on having a natural light source on the left so that the shadows have a basis in reality.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

April 24, 2014

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## NOTES

- [1] See Scott A. Sullivan, *The Dutch Gamepiece* (Montclair, NJ, 1984), 37, for a discussion of decoy whistles. For nets, see Joost van den Vondel, *Vorstelijcke Warande der Dieren* (Amsterdam, 1682), no. 66.
- [2] Scott A. Sullivan, *The Dutch Gamepiece* (Montclair, NJ, 1984), 36, notes that Prince Maurits restricted the use of falcons, hawks, and other birds of prey to the nobility and that these restrictions continued throughout the seventeenth century.
- [3] For information about Anthonie and Johannes Leemans, see Fred G. Meijer in Edwin Buijsen, *Haagse Schilders in de Gouden Eeuw: Het Hoogsteder Lexicon van alle Schilders Werkzaam in Den Haag 1600–1700* (The Hague, 1998), 180–184.
- [4] Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen*, 3 vols. (The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1976), 2:261. “Ziende ook dat het Jachttuig, Vogelkouwen, en Schietgeweer geschildert door *Leemans* toen in byzondere agting was en wel betaald werd, begon hy deze wyze van schilderen meê ter hand te nemen, ’t geen hem zoo toeviel, dat nooit iemand hem daar in gelyk geweest is, als by de stukken in handen van vele Konstkenners blykt, die zoo natuurlyk geschildert zyn dat yder ding in ’t byzonder schynt van den wand af te hangen, waar door menigte van menschen bedrogen zyn geworden.”
- [5] See Abraham Bredius, “Het schildersregister van Jan Sysmus,” *Oud-Holland* 8 (1890): 298, for the notation from 1664 in the painting register of the Amsterdam doctor Jan Sysmus that a Leendert Leman in “Ter Gouw” (Gouda) “floereerde in ‘vogelkoytjes etc. met schaduwen te schilderen.’” No paintings by Leendert Leman are known, so stylistic connections to Pierson cannot be confirmed.
- [6] See Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen*, 3 vols. (The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1976), 2:261. See note 4 for the transcription of this text.
- [7] The use of a niche motif for the depiction of hunting implements is unique in Pierson’s oeuvre, and is rarely, if ever, found elsewhere, though a number of still-life specialists active in The Hague—such as Cornelis Lelienbergh (1626–1676), William Gowe Ferguson (British, 1632/1633 - c. 1690), and Hendrick de Fromantou (c. 1633–c. 1690/1994)—did use niches in

illusionistic paintings of dead game.

- [8] For two of these, see J. Bokhoven, *Leven en werk van Christoffel Pierson (1631–1714): "Den Kloeken rijmer en Konstrijken Schilder"* (Schiedam, 1986), nos. 9 and 12.
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## TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting was executed on a medium-weight, plain-weave fabric. It has been lined and the tacking margins are no longer extant. Cusping indicates that the painting has not been cropped, but the current stretcher is slightly larger than the painting's original dimensions and the edges have been filled and inpainted to incorporate them into the picture, expanding the painting slightly. A dark brown underlayer is visible in the craquelure. It is unclear if this is the ground layer or an underpainting. The paint layer is applied with smoothly blended, tight brushstrokes and multiple layers of glazing. The X-radiographs and examination with infrared reflectography at 1.5 to 1.7 microns<sup>[1]</sup> revealed that the large horn on the left was originally reversed, so that the wide side of the horn was closest to the edge of the painting.

The painting is in fairly good condition, though the X-radiographs reveal a complex tear at the top of the arch, just to the right of center, and an irregular, vertical damage on the left side, extending through the horn. The paint is slightly cupped along the moderate craquelure pattern, and many small losses have occurred in the intersections of the cracks. Inpainting exists around the perimeter of the painting, where it masks abrasion, as well as in a series of small damages in the bottom right corner. The painting has been partially cleaned in the past, with remnants of an earlier varnish remaining in the netting and the shadowed areas around it. The varnish is only very slightly yellow, and it remains clear and evenly glossy. The painting has not been treated since acquisition.

[1] Infrared reflectography was performed using a FLIR Indigo / Alpha VisGaAs camera fitted with an H astronomy filter.

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## PROVENANCE

Capitain Page.<sup>[1]</sup> Temple Hargrove, Sr.; his estate; (sale, Christie, Manson & Woods, New York, 3 October 2001, no. 61); (Berenberg Fine Art, Lugano); purchased 12 March 2003 through (Rob Smeets, Milan) by NGA.

[1] This name appears on a label on the back of the painting.

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## EXHIBITION HISTORY

2002 *Deceptions and Illusions: Five Centuries of Trompe l'Oeil Painting*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 2002-2003, no. 62, repro.

2008 *The Deluded Eye. Five Centuries of Deception*, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, 2008-2009, no. 33, repro.

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## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 2002 Ebert-Schifferer, Sybille. *Deceptions and Illusions: Five Centuries of Trompe l'Oeil painting*. Exh. cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2002:250, no. 62, 380, repro.
- 2003 Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr. "Christoffel Pierson: Niche with Falconry Gear." *National Gallery of Art Bulletin* 30 (Fall 2003): 18, color repro.
- 2008 Sیدن, Karin. *Lura Ögat: Fem sekelrs bländverk*. Stockholm, 2008: 125, repro., 201, no. 33.

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