

Lawrence Steigrad Fine Arts begins fourth decade dealing Old Master paintings

by Carolin C. Young

NEW YORK, NY.- In 1989 Lawrence Steigrad and his wife and business partner, Peggy Stone, began dealing in Old Master paintings backed only by a thousand dollars and a few credit cards. For the first year, in case things didn't work out, Stone continued to work as a cataloguer at William Doyle, returning home to help with researching and cataloguing late into the night. Their astonishing gamble paid off. Three decades and many art fairs later, they have a firmly established reputation with leading museum curators and collectors for "rediscovering" works of art — especially Dutch portraiture of the seventeenth century — that hold aesthetic merit yet challenge longstanding scholarship.



Fig.1. *Portrait of Ott van Bronckhorst* by CORNELIA TOE BOECOP (after 1561 – 1630 – 1634). signed, inscribed, and dated on the book in the lower left AETATIS/SVAE .52/ANNO 1606: ~ (on the left page); J.Cornelia toe/ Boecop genamt/ Hrderúijk heft/ dijt gemaect:s ∞ (on the right page) Charged with the sitter's coat-of-arms in the upper right. Oil on panel, 37 7/8 x 30 ¼ inches All photographs courtesy of Lawrence Steigrad Fine Arts, New York.

In January 2020, they inaugurated the start of their fourth decade in business with the private sale of Cornelia Toe Boecop's *Portrait of Ott van Bronckhorst* of 1606 to the Rijksmuseum (Fig. 1). With his pristine lace collar and cuffs, sumptuous rings, fanciful gloves, and elegantly upturned fingers, the sitter strikes an arresting pose that the artist has subtly emphasized in the rich tones of the tablecloth and gilt-edged tomes of the books that sit beside him, and the counter-balance of his prominent coat-of-arms in the upper right. Although of a different time and place, this image of van Bronckhorst seems poised to converse with Titian's renowned *Portrait of a Young Man with a Glove* at the Louvre.

Beyond its sheer glamour, the painting is also remarkable because it now stands as only the fourth known surviving work by the artist, who was not only rare for gaining professional repute as a female artist in her time, but who also appears to have been taught by her mother, a fact that invites us to reconsider the history of women artists. Steigrad commented, "We are particularly proud of this sale. To sell a picture to such a prestigious museum as the Rijksmuseum is always an honor, but to be part of a movement to include more female artists in the traditional narrative of art history is especially gratifying."

Portraiture, particularly English and Netherlandish, has featured at the gallery from its inception because Steigrad and Stone saw that the genre was undervalued. Great pictures by well-known artists were available up and down the Eastern seaboard and in Chicago and selling for less than still-life paintings by other artists.

If the couple lacked deep pockets, they were not short on expertise. Both grew up in art world families. Steigrad is the son and grandson of Dutch collectors and has fond memories of his grandparents

gathering the family at New York's annual Winter Antiques Show, where they were expected to buy something modest and then sit over a proper lunch to discuss what they might have purchased if they had been given a larger budget. Stone was raised in a family of prominent nineteenth-century painting dealers.

Both further honed their knowledge by moving through the professional ranks of leading galleries and auction houses before going off on their own. Nevertheless, they acknowledge that it would be impossible for an aspiring dealer to follow their path today. Steigrad estimates that one would need at least a million dollars, and probably a backer, too, to break in. Despite these odds, Stone has kept the dream alive for a new generation with two children's books that describe the adventures of a dog named Leyster, who manages, as they have, to break into this elusive field.

Their first purchases were made at an auction house in Maine, where others in the room were so shocked that anyone would wish to buy a Jupiter and [very nude] Danae by Francesco Furini that they burst into applause when the hammer went down on it. They bought four paintings at that sale, entirely on credit.

Much of their success undoubtedly derives from their ability to share their sense of adventure and excitement about collecting stunning works for modest prices with their clients. They take pride in having placed many works in major museums, but they take special pleasure in sales to clients of more limited means. It was Steigrad's ability to offer unusual but high-quality works for relatively modest prices that led TEFAF founder Rob Noortman to persuade the couple to take a booth at the fair. He knew that to transform the original, highly specialized Maastricht Old Master show into the broad-reaching, international behemoth TEFAF has now become he needed great pieces in the ten to twenty-thousand dollar range at least as much as the multimillion dollar items.

Steigrad did not need much convincing. He had always participated in the fair by sending works on consignment through other dealers. Maastricht's core audience of Dutch and German collectors offered a perfect match for the gallery's Northern European stock. In a complete reversal of the robber baron generation, when European paintings and furniture arrived in the United States by the boatload, the vast majority of Steigrad and Stone's offerings now make the trip in reverse. TEFAF recognized the importance of their contribution with a prominent placement at the fair, where they exhibited annually through 2018. In 2011, they garnered the further honor of having one of their works selected as the cover image for the show catalog. That exquisitely rendered portrait of 1667 by Hendrick Berckman depicts a young boy of about two so finely dressed in started lace and colorful ribbons over his silken skirts that the picture was misidentified as representing a little princess when it sold in 1931 (Fig. 2). It exemplifies the Steigrad aesthetic.



Fig. 2. *Young Boy with a Dog* by Hendrick Berckman (1629-1679), 1667, Oil on panel. 31 ¼ x 23 ¾ inches

In addition to TEFAF and other select fairs, for twenty-five years Steigrad and Stone operated an airy and private gallery on East Sixty-ninth Street in New York City, where they hosted numerous exhibitions. They have also published many print catalogs that present their ground-breaking research alongside

the enticing images that have passed through their hands. The first edition of 1999 records an impressive client roster that at that date included the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the New Orleans Museum of Art, the University of Arizona Museum of Art, and the Rienzi Collection at the Museum of Arts, Houston. Subsequent favorites include a luminous picture of three-year-old Willem van der Muelen of Utrecht, painted in 1634 by Jan Cornelisz van Loenen, which they sold to the Fritz Behrens Foundation for the Landesmuseum in Hannover, Germany. Another is a charming family group of 1663 by Jan Mytens that they acquired from a private collection in a Belgian castle and sold to the Auckland Art Gallery Toi a Tamaki and Mackelvie Trust in Auckland, New Zealand (Fig. 3).



Fig 3. *Portrait of a Family Group by an Ornamental Fountain in a Pastoral Landscape* by Jan Mytens (1613/ 1614–1670), 1663. Signed and (partially effaced) at lower left center. Oil on canvas, 51 3/8 by 61 3/4 inches.

Their very first sale to the Rijksmuseum nevertheless remains a personal and career highlight. The picture, *The Women’s Speed-Skating Race on the Westersingel in Leeuwarden, January 21, 1809* by Nicolaas Baur also demonstrates how the couple have continued to evolve beyond a single theme or period without losing an ability to identify contemporary themes within historic works (Fig. 4.). At first glance, the painting provides a charming neoclassical revival of the popular seventeenth-century theme popularized by painters such as Hendrick Avercamp. With further study, it actually commemorates the second

year of a brand-new skating competition inaugurated for women, and as such, offers important historical evidence of new breakthroughs for women beginning to open up. (Steigrad admits to open-mindedness about time, place, or theme but confesses an allergy to anything that is ‘saccharine-y’.

The Rijksmuseum placed the picture on hold during the first hour of the TEFAF 2013 opening.



Fig 4. *The Women’s Speed-Skating Race on the Westersingel in Leeuwarden, January 21, 1809* by Nicolaas Baur (1767–1820), 1810. Signed and dated “N. Baur 1810” at lower right. Oil on canvas, 23 1/2 by 29 1/2 inches. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

No sooner had they completed the sale than an impassioned Dutchwoman appeared in the Steigrad booth begging for it because she is the direct, fifth-generation descendant of the race's winner. She even had the winning trophy and bore her ancestor's name as proof. As heartbreaking as that moment was, they had to send her away empty-handed. They then connected the two parties so that the painting now sits in its new home as the 'Gift of Willem Jan Hacquebord and Houjke Anna Brandsma' – retaining its family connection as well as its institutional prestige.

Steigrad and Stone are equally proud to have inaugurated the next chapter of their ongoing adventure with a sale to the same distinguished institution. As ever, they continue to take pleasure in expanding interest and knowledge in this field, as well as a true sense of joy.