

## *IN THE FOREGROUND: OBJECT STUDIES*

A Podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP) at the Clark Art Institute

### **“The Status of the Human”: Amy Freund on the First French Hunting Portrait**



Jean Daret and Nicasiaus Bernaerts, *Portrait de chasseur assis en compagnie de ses chiens* (Portrait of a Seated Hunter with His Dogs), 1661. Oil on canvas, 51 5/8 x 70 5/8 in. Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature, Paris, France.

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**Transcript**

## **Caitlin Woolsey (host)**

Join us for an immersive, personal encounter with a single work of art as seen through the eyes of an art historian. You're listening to *In the Foreground: Object Studies*, a podcast series from the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute.

In this episode, Amy Freund, associate professor and Kleinheinz Family Endowed Chair in art history at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, reveals the newly discovered painting *Portrait of a Seated Hunter with His Dogs*, which dates to nearly forty years before the genre was previously believed to have emerged in France. Amy describes how this painting testifies to the creative as well as the destructive power of humans, challenging certain seventeenth-century conceptions of "man" by subverting assumed hierarchies of human and animal.

## **Amy Freund**

Hi, I'm Amy Freund. I'm a professor of art history at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, and today I will be talking about a French portrait of a hunter, painted in 1661. The story of my encounter with this painting starts in a very 2021 way, when a friend texted me an image that had been posted on the Instagram account of an auction house he follows. It was a newly discovered painting that was about to go up for sale. The timing was perfect because I am currently working on a book about hunting art in late seventeenth and early eighteenth century France. In my research I'm really focusing on the representation of humans and animals, of masculinity and social status, of political power, and of violence. This newly discovered portrait, which seemed to include all of those things, is signed and dated 1661. Now that is almost 40 years earlier than what I and everyone else had considered to be the first French hunting portrait, making this newly discovered painting a rare and surprising anomaly.

My first feeling was a pure thrill of discovery, and then a brief moment of panic. What did this do to my arguments about hunting art and the cultural history of France? I'd just published an article in a major art history journal about hunting portraiture, and I'd made a series of claims based on a set of assumptions that now all seemed to be out of date. But delight won out over panic because it's so rare that a work of art like this resurfaces and adds a whole new body of evidence to your ongoing research.

This newly discovered painting is large: it's roughly four by six feet, which makes it a nearly life-size portrait. It depicts a man with a very large gun, three dogs, and a pile of dead game, in a wild and mountainous landscape. All of these elements are painted with immense care in detail and thus invite us to consider them all separately and carefully. But the composition—how all these elements fit together—is also really powerful. Particularly since this would have been an extremely unusual portrait in 1661, the artist and the patron simply would not have a formula to fall back on.

The man, the first element that I'll talk about, is sitting on the ground, his lounging really, with one hand clutching his hunting gun and the other one resting on the head of a dog, who is bringing a dead bird to him in its mouth. The man's wearing an outfit that he plausibly could have put on to go hunting, something that's not the case in some of the lavish hunting portraits that would be produced later in France. He's wearing a broad-brimmed hat, a fairly earth-toned and casual outfit, heavy boots, and a powder horn, bandolier style. The powder horn, which contains the gunpowder he'd need to light his gun, rests right in his crotch, which is an entertaining detail that also points to the role of hunting portraits in asserting masculinity.

Speaking of asserting a masculinity, the gun is also a very prominent element of this portrait. It's very long, which is true to the kind of type of gun that was used for hunting birds and hare in the seventeenth century. It's so long that doesn't actually fit into the composition; it's cut off at the barrel, on the right edge of the portrait.

The dogs are a really important part of the composition. They occupy a lot of space. There are three of them in the left half of the composition. Two of them are very intently focused on the man and one of them is curled up and asleep and the bottom left-hand corner of the canvas. The dogs are what we would now call a spaniel or pointer type, and they're very carefully observed and individuated, each with different coats and with very vivid expressions on their faces. The main dog, the one that's closest to us as viewers, is bringing the retrieved dead bird to the human figure, and puts its paw, its front paw, on the hunter's leg. Its nose and its ears and that paw are all framed by the hand of the hunter., which is which is resting on its head, and the dead partridge in its mouth. So there are these three kinds of bodies that are overlapping in the central part of the composition.

The dead game is piled up on the right-hand bottom corner of the composition. This is a pile of animals, both birds and hare, that have been brought low by the joint efforts of the human and canine hunters. They're all limp and inverted in death; they're all upside-down and sort of sprawled out, which makes a real contrast with the alert poses and gazes of the dogs and the human sitter.

All of these formal elements—man, gun, dogs, dead game—are embedded into a carefully rendered and quite specific looking landscape. There are gestural tree trunks which frame the composition at the left and the right. And then the mountain landscape extends into the far distance. It's a painting designed to draw our eye to the sitter and then to plunge us into the natural world.

*[brief musical interlude]*

There's one more formal element that competes for our attention in this painting, and it's maybe the most surprising part of an already very surprising competition. Right underneath the hunter's hand

that's cradling the gun, framed by the wings and legs of the dead birds and the pile of dead game, in the right hand corner is the artist's signature in Latin seemingly, inscribed on a rock. It translates as: "Daret invented and painted it, Paris, 1661. Nicasius made the animals." Besides giving us a place and a date, the signature tells us that this is what's known as a two-handed painting: a collaboration between two artists. The first artist is Jean Daret, not exactly a household name, but he was a successful painter from the south of France, who in 1661, we know had come to Paris to work for Louis XIV. The second artist, Nicasius Bernaerts, was an up-and-coming specialist in animal painting, who soon after this portrait was executed would be hired to decorate the Royal Menagerie at the new Chateau of Versailles. This is a very large and assertive and wordy signature, in an era where signing was the exception, not the rule. And it really forces us to think about the portrait as an artificial construct, despite the fact that it's so preoccupied with the natural world. The existence and the placement of that signature asserts both the creative and the destructive powers of men, I use again, the term "man" advisedly. The birds are dead by the sitters hand, and the human and the animal are reproduced by the artists' hands, plural.

When we put all the compositional elements together—man, gun, dogs, dead game, landscape, signature—we start to see what the painting is trying to tell us. One of the things it's telling us is something about the status of the human. It doesn't—like many later hunting portraits [do]—it doesn't actually emphasize the uprightness and sort of two-leggedness of the human hunter. Many later hunting portraits will feature men standing or sitting extremely upright in the landscape. Instead, by using the square, climbing pose, the artists are stressing what humans and animals have in common. They're both absorbed into this landscape. The painting is also telling us something about dogs. They're so vivid, they're so visually important, and their specificity and their affective relationship to the human hunter, are clearly key to the strategies of this painting. Another element that this painting stresses is violence: the glorification, the proximity of the gun, the vividness of the death, the death of the dead game, the dead game bird that's in the dog's mouth, right in the center of the painting, really draws our attention to life and death.

*[brief musical interlude]*

The painting is really stressing the symbolic resonance of hunting, showing man (again, advisedly "man") as a part of nature, but also as a being that acts violently upon the natural world. That gun is a real assertion of artifice and dominance. And it in some ways balances out the man's kind of supine position and his formal connection to the animals.

We have some other clues based on the research and writing of Carole Blumenfeld, who is a scholar working in France, and she has pinpointed a possible identity for the sitter: a nobleman with a distinguished lineage living in Aix-en-Provence, in the south of France. Blumenfeld even identified the

landscape as a famous rock outcropping outside of Aix. I'm really convinced by her research and her identification of the sitter, particularly because it fits what we already know about hunting portraiture in France: that it's a way of advertising the sitter's privilege in a social system, where such privileges, including hunting, were reserved for the nobility, where only nobility were technically allowed to hunt in France.

While there's a lot about this portrait that's familiar, I want to come back to the element of surprise. This painting is thrilling to me, and to a small but very excited subset of art historians who've learned about it since it came into onto the market. Because as far as we know, this is a one-off painting. Hunting portraiture doesn't become fashionable in France until about the year 1700. But in this very early example of genre, we can already see some of the key elements that I see operating in hunting art at this moment in history: a desire to link hunting and masculinity, and to celebrate masculinity; the link between hunting and social status, and social status and political power. And then, if you'll excuse the pun, the fuzzy line between human and animal, which is very much a part of this painting's design.

We won't be able to see this—well, “we” being people who are not in France—won't be able to see this in person for a while. And that brings us to the oddity of studying an object that you can't see firsthand. But I'm really happy to report that this painting was bought at auction by the Hunting Museum in Paris, the Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature. And so it will be, I very much hope, available to the public when that museum reopens its doors after a major renovation, and after the end of the pandemic.

### **Caitlin Woolsey (host)**

Thank you for listening to *In the Foreground: Object Studies*, a podcast from the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute. The Clark sits on the ancestral homelands of the Mohican people. We acknowledge the tremendous hardship of their forcible removal from these homelands by colonial settlers. A federally recognized nation, they now reside in Wisconsin and are known as the Stockbridge Munsee Community. As we learn, speak, and gather here at the Clark, we pay honor to their ancestors past and present, and to future generations, by committing to building a more inclusive and equitable space for all.

This series is created and produced by me, Caitlin Woolsey, with assistance from Caro Fowler, Samantha Page, and Jessie Sentivan; sound editing and musical interludes composed by John Buteyn; and theme music by lightchaser. To see images and more information about the artwork discussed, please visit [clarkart.edu/podcast/object-studies](http://clarkart.edu/podcast/object-studies).