

Complete works

Text

HEARSAY OF THE SOUL

On Hercules Segers

1.

Sometimes great visionaries appear that seem to anticipate the course of our culture, like the pharaoh Akhenaton, who was more than a thousand years ahead of his time as the first monotheist, but also the creator of a new style in ancient Egyptian art, or like Carlo Gesualdo, Prince of Venosa, who four hundred years ago in his Sixth Book of Madrigals created music that leads straight to the twentieth century. Only from Stravinsky on have we heard music like his, and it is not a coincidence that Stravinsky made two pilgrimages to Gesualdo's castle near Naples and wrote an orchestra piece with the title »Monumentum pro Gesualdo.« This list is extendable: Hölderlin, who as a poet went to the outer limits of human language, or Turner, predecessor of the impressionists.

2.

And now, it is time that we make a pilgrimage to the work of Hercules Segers, the father of modernity in art. He lived and worked at about the time of Gesualdo; he was born probably in 1589 or 1590, and probably died shortly after 1630. Hardly anything is known about his life, and very few works of his have survived.

3.

It is shocking for me, and unacceptable, that I have not met a single art student in my life who has even heard of Segers, and it is deeply disquieting that I have not seen a single curator in any modern art museum who has had a clue. However, my contacts have been very scarce. Segers was not well known to his contemporaries either. His name can be found in documents of the 17th century spelled as Seghers, but he himself signed his work »Segers«. Born to Pieter Seghers and Cathalijntgen Hercules, Mennonites from Flanders, he signed into the painters' guild of Haarlem in 1612 under his first names Hercules Pietersz without surname, and married in 1615 Anneken van der Bruggen. Soon, he ran into serious financial difficulties, and had to sell his home in Amsterdam where he lived. Poverty and ill fortune accompanied him until the end of his days. Samuel van Hoogstraten, a pupil of Rembrandt, laments that there was no market for Segers prints although they were – he says it beautifully – »pregnant of whole provinces«. According to Samuel van Hoogstraten, much of his printed work was used as wastepaper, probably to wrap fish or sandwiches.

4.

Images can be like windows pushed open for us into a world of the unearthly, the sheer imagination, as if aliens had come upon us in the form of a strange visitation; and at the same time we recognize the visions as something not foreign, but belonging to us – born hundreds of years later – as if they had been dormant deeply within us. A genius like Hercules Segers makes us acquainted with images, as if we had been made known to a brother who was with us, but not made known to us yet. His work creates an illumination inside of us, and we instantly know that this is not a factual truth, but an ecstatic one. Most of his prints are not real landscapes. We can be almost certain that Segers has never seen a mountain or a rock formation in his life.

5.

His images are hearsay of the soul. They are searchlights, or rather an ominous, frightened light opening breaches into the recesses of our self. It is like a hypnotic vortex pulling us down to the bottom of a bottomless pit, to a place that seems somewhat known to us: ourselves. We morph with these images. Caspar David Friedrich has recognized this for himself: »I have to render myself to what surrounds me,« he said, »I have to morph into a union with my clouds and rocks, in order to be what I am«.

6.

Less than a dozen oil paintings of Segers have come down to us, and only four of them can be attributed to him with certainty. Rembrandt, one of the very few contemporaries to recognize his genius, bought from him a Mountain Landscape, which is in the Uffizi in Florence today. In all probability, Rembrandt repainted it in part, »improved« it, by adding a cart and oxen in the foreground and clouds in the sky. But the oil paintings seem to be within the idiom of the time. His experimental prints set Segers apart from his epoch.



7.

Of his etchings and prints, mostly in small formats, only some 180 survive, and many of them show the same motif but in a strongly divergent variety of colors and printing techniques. Not all of his technical procedures are fully deciphered yet. Segers frequently painted over, his prints with a brush, tainted his papers with aquarelle colors, and experimented with light and effects of color. Some of his pictures are printed on linen, and Segers was so impoverished that he is rumored to have used his tablecloth and bed sheets as materials. In some of his prints of landscapes, ropes and parts of sails suddenly appear, and the idea is not far-fetched that in his poverty he used plates that had been used before for a picture of a sailing boat. He probably drifted into alcoholism, and was considered some sort of madman. He suffered from bouts of deep depression, and around 1635 (?) he allegedly fell drunk down his staircase and was dead that very instant.

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