

The Musicians' Brawl

Georges de La Tour (b.1593, d.1652)
French, about 1625–30
Oil on canvas
33 3/4 x 55 1/2 in.
72.PA.28



About the Art

Two street musicians fight, perhaps over a place to play their instruments. The man on the left, wearing a hurdy-gurdy slung around his shoulders, defends himself with a knife and the crank of his instrument. The man in the center hits him with a shawm, a precursor to the oboe, and squeezes a lemon into his eyes to determine the legitimacy of the old man's blindness. To the right, two more itinerant musicians laugh and grin, enjoying the fight. An anguished old woman grasps the top of her broom and watches from the left. She wears a pleading expression, as if begging them to stop their quarreling.

The figures are compressed in a shallow space, pushed up close to the viewer to create a sense of claustrophobia and add to the immediacy of the scene. Georges de La Tour describes each character and his or her expression in great detail: rotting teeth, leathery skin, and wild, unfocused eyes. Different textures—fabrics, wood, hair, and flesh—are minutely observed and realistically painted.

About the Artist

Little is known of Georges de La Tour's life. By 1620, he was established at the prosperous town of Lunéville, where he specialized in religious and genre scenes. His primary patrons seem to have been Lunéville's bourgeoisie and the duchy's administration at nearby Nancy. In 1639, he gained the title of *peintre du roi* (painter to the king) and was wealthy enough to arouse jealousy among his fellow townsmen. Georges de La Tour's early mode typifies the Mannerist style of Nancy. By the 1620s, however, he had come into contact with the art of Caravaggio, probably through prints or paintings by northern artists such as Gerrit van Honthorst and Hendrick ter Brugghen. Lit by crisp daylight, de La Tour's works from this period are characterized by their still atmosphere and meticulous rendering of ornament and textures.

Increasingly, de La Tour was drawn to candlelight scenes in which a single flame created an atmosphere of otherworldly calm. He gradually simplified forms until, in his late works, all masses were reduced to simple, almost geometrical, shapes. After his death, de La Tour passed into virtual oblivion for almost three centuries. In 1915, a German scholar recognized de La Tour's style in several pictures that had been variously ascribed to Spanish, Dutch, and other French artists.