



7 Theodor Rombouts (1597-1637) - *Interior with Three Smokers* The symbolism of smokers and tobacco in Netherlandish genre paintings is often richly ambiguous to modern eyes. Smoking was hotly debated in popular discourse - it was increasingly fashionable yet morally condemned as a profligate activity. In different contexts, a pipe might be a symbol of *vanitas* or of eroticism, while the act of smoking might represent creativity in artists' self-portraits, or reckless misbehavior in tavern scenes. In this *Interior with Three Smokers* by the Flemish Caravaggesque painter Theodor Rombouts, there is an atmosphere of brooding rather than bawdiness, with figures depicted in heavy contemplation. The man smoking on the left is almost the personification of *ennui* - perhaps pondering the transience of earthly life, which would, like his tobacco, go up in smoke. This painting might also be part of an ambitious set of the senses, in which smoking represented either that of smell or of taste. Rombouts' subject was popular amongst Caravaggesque artists, but rarely in this form: representations of individual smokers are much more common.