



Adriaen Coorte
Dutch, active 1683 - 1707

Still Life with Asparagus and Red Currants

1696

oil on canvas

overall: 34 x 25 cm (13 3/8 x 9 13/16 in.)

Inscription: lower left on front of ledge in black paint: A. Coorte. 1696; on reverse: two circular red seals removed from previous stretcher and set into current stretcher, on each, "IRENE" under a crown, and large, embossed fabric monogram on a piece of fabric that may have been cut from a previous lining fabric, under a crown, ornately intertwined letters, possibly "IBK"

The Lee and Juliet Folger Fund 2002.122.1

ENTRY

Adriaen Coorte had an ability to endow simple pictorial elements with a sense of grace and poetry, as in this image of a bundle of white asparagus perched at the edge of a stone plinth. The asparagus shoots still have the vigor of live plants, their tips reaching upward and outward, as though striving toward an unseen light source. Recently plucked sprigs of red currants, gracefully resting on the ledge and draped over its side, complement the tightly bunched, long cylindrical forms of the asparagus.

Coorte conveyed the tenderness of the young asparagus shoots and the promised lushness of the currants' inner core through delicate modeling and subtle nuances of color, but he did so with great restraint. The simplified and idealized shapes of the asparagus and currants give them an enormous presence—something greater than mere morsels to be enjoyed at a meal. Coorte simultaneously emphasized their organic qualities by juxtaposing them against the strongly geometrical shape of the gray stone ledge, in which cracks remind the viewer that life, indeed all matter, is transient.

Depictions of asparagus bunches appear frequently in Coorte's limited oeuvre.^[1] Asparagus and currants were both seasonal delicacies harvested in June and grown in Zeeland, the Dutch province where the artist worked most of his life, and

both were valued for their nutritional content and medicinal properties.[2] Coorte probably was drawn to this combination for aesthetic reasons, with the freely draped circular forms of the red fruit visually complementing the tautly bound bunch of asparagus with its subtle green, purple, and white colors.

An X-radiograph [see X-radiography] of *Still Life with Asparagus and Red Currants* indicates that Coorte left a rectangular-shaped reserve for the bunch of asparagus slightly above the final placement [fig. 1]. He executed the asparagus and red currants with thin glazes [see glazing], perhaps following pigment recommendations for painting asparagus that Willem Beurs included in his contemporary treatise.[3] Coorte's careful, almost naive renderings of these natural forms have no obvious precedent in Dutch art, though they do share qualities with the artistic traditions from the early seventeenth century that Coorte would have found in Middelburg, where he presumably lived and worked for most of his life. As the capital of Zeeland, this prosperous trading center gained much of its wealth from an influx of Flemish émigrés, among them artists such as Ambrosius Bosschaert (Dutch, 1573 - 1621). It also benefited enormously from the presence of the Dutch East and West India Companies, both of which established important regional offices in this well-situated maritime city. Middelburg's wealthiest citizens adorned their homes with luxury goods from around the world and their gardens with rare bulbs and plants.

Bosschaert and his followers often painted small-scale images of carefully observed flowers and fruit to create a pleasing and uplifting visual experience. The aesthetic appeal of these works was enhanced by the widespread belief that each of these plants revealed God's infinite power and ingenuity.[4] Although Coorte worked almost a century later and rarely painted flowers, he fully embraced the spirit of Bosschaert's age, when great virtue was attached to the careful depiction of the natural world.

Old estate inventories indicate that Coorte's paintings remained largely in Zeeland during the eighteenth century. The prices for them were modest, and their true artistic merit seems not to have been appreciated until the 1950s, when the Dutch art historian Laurens Bol introduced Coorte's works to a broad public.[5] Bol noted that a number of Coorte's paintings had been sold in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as pendants, and it may well be the case that *Still Life with Asparagus and Red Currants* was paired with another work. When this painting first appeared on the art market in London in 1977, another painting by Coorte of identical dimensions and date, *Still Life with a Bowl of Strawberries and*

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Gooseberries, was offered for sale by the same owner [fig. 2].^[6] As with Coorte's pairing of asparagus and red currants in the present work, the relationship between the two paintings seems to have been primarily aesthetic in nature. Their complementary compositions of sumptuous delicacies arrayed on facing stone ledges perfectly balance each other through their colors and pictorial structures, as well as through their visual and sensual appeal.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES

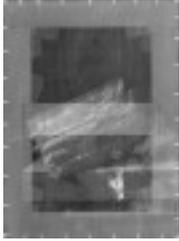


fig. 1 xray, Adriaen Coorte, *Still Life with Asparagus and Red Currants*, 1696, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, The Lee and Juliet Folger Fund, 2002.122.1



fig. 2 Adriaen Coorte, *Still Life with a Bowl of Strawberries and Gooseberries*, 1696, oil on canvas, Private collection

NOTES

- [1] Quentin Buvelot, *The Still Lives of Adriaen Coorte (Active c. 1683–1707): With Oeuvre Catalogue* (The Hague, 2008), 43, notes that asparagus appears in thirteen of Coorte's paintings, one-fifth of his oeuvre.
- [2] See Barbara Kruijsen et al., *Asperges in olieverf: een koninklijke groente in de zeventiende eeuw* (Maastricht, 2005), 91. Food historian Peter G. Rose has kindly informed us that asparagus and currants were included in a variety of seventeenth-century Dutch recipes for stews and sauces. Currants were also typically used to make juices, syrups, fruit pies, and cakes.
- [3] Willem Beurs, *De groote waereld in't kleen geschildert, of schilderagtig tafereel van's Weerelds schilderyen, kortelyk vervat in ses boeken: verklarende de hooftverwen, haare verscheide mengelingen in oly, en der zelve gebruik* (Amsterdam, 1692), 152–153. "En zijn ook de asperges gemakkelijk te schilderen: dog daar dient gemerkt, dat de knoppen boven uit den paarsen moeten geschildert worden met swart, lak en wit, of met lak, indigo, swart en wit, 't geene onder de aarde gestaan heft met de sellery en endivy gemeenschap; gelijk byna 't geen boven d'aarde is in witte asperges." (And asparagus is also easy to paint: there it needs to be noted that in addition to the purple, the knobs must be painted with black, [red] lake, and white, or with [red] lake, indigo, black, and white, the part standing under the earth is comparable to celery and endive [and remains white].) This source is particularly interesting because Beurs based his recipes on his own practical experiences as an artist. For a discussion of Beurs' treatise and Coorte's adaption of his recommendations when painting asparagus, see Arie Wallert, *Still Lives: Techniques and Style—The Examination of Paintings from the Rijksmuseum* (Amsterdam, 1999), 32–36, 93–94.
- [4] See Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., *Small Wonders: Dutch Still Lives by Adriaen*

Coorte (Washington, 2003), 7.

- [5] See particularly Laurens J. Bol, "Adriaen Coorte, stillevenschilder," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek 4 (1952–1953)*: 193–232; and Laurens J. Bol, *Adriaen Coorte: Stillevenschilder* (Dordrecht, 1958), 16, no. 12.
- [6] For this painting, see Peter C. Sutton, *Dutch and Flemish Paintings: The Collection of Willem Baron van Dedem* (London, 2002), 84–87, no. 13, where, in the provenance, the lot number in the 1977 sale is given incorrectly as no. 83 (it was no. 85).
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TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support is a medium-weight, plain-weave fabric. It has been lined and the tacking margins have been removed, but cusping around all four edges indicates that it probably retains its original size. The ground is a smooth, off-white layer of medium thickness. The paint is relatively thin and fluid. Coorte used low impasto in the lights and thin glazes to build shadows in the darks. X-radiographs reveal a rectangular shape, roughly the same size as the asparagus, but slightly above and to the left of the asparagus. It seems that the artist blocked in the asparagus as rectangle and then moved it down and to the right during the final execution of the painting.

The painting is in very good condition. The paint bears a fine crackle pattern with minute losses at the intersections of the cracks. There are two small losses in the left ends of the asparagus and several others in the leaves, currants, and scattered through the background. The painting was treated in 2002 at which time discolored varnish, inpaint, and overpaint were removed. The varnish and inpaint applied during that treatment have not discolored.

PROVENANCE

Baroness Irene von der Becke-Klüchtzner. "property of a gentleman"; (sale, Christie, Manson & Woods, London, 8 July 1977, no. 84); (David Koetser Gallery, Zurich); private collection; (David Koetser Gallery, Zurich); purchased 7 October 2002 by NGA.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

2003 Small Wonders: Dutch Still Lifes by Adriaen Coorte, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 2003, checklist no. 6, color repro.

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- 2006 Bénézit, Emmanuel. *Dictionary of artists*. 14 vols. Paris, 2006: 3:1357.
- 2008 Buvelot, Quentin. *The still lifes of Adriaen Coorte (active c.1683-1707): with oeuvre catalogue*. Exh. cat. Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis, The Hague. Zwolle, 2008: 32, 43, 57, 64, 96, 97, no. 24, repro.

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