

# Abraham Mignon

1640–1679

THE SON of shopkeepers, Abraham Mignon was born in Frankfurt and baptized in the Calvinist Church on 21 June 1640. When his parents moved to Wetzlar in 1649, Mignon was placed under the care and artistic apprenticeship of Jacob Marrell (1614–1681), a still-life painter and art dealer. Marrell was undoubtedly impressed with Mignon's abilities, for he entrusted his affairs to him whenever he was away in Holland on business. Furthermore, Marrell asked Mignon to instruct his stepdaughter, Maria Sibylla Merian (1647–1717), in still-life painting. By 1664 Marrell and Mignon had left Frankfurt for Utrecht, and in 1669 both were registered in the Saint Luke's Guild there. While in Utrecht, Mignon maintained the strong religious beliefs of his family. In 1672 he was elected deacon of the Waalse Kerk of Utrecht, a position he held for five years. He married Maria Willaerts, the cousin of the seascape painter Adam Willaerts (1577–1664), in 1675. He died just a few years later, and was buried on 27 March 1679 in Utrecht.

Throughout his short career Mignon painted a variety of still-life subjects, but he is best known for his lush compositions of flowers and fruits placed on stone ledges and in niches, or set within ruins and grottos. He developed a distinct style marked by precise detail and drawing. His oeuvre clearly reflects the influence of a number of painters, including Marrell and, most importantly, Jan Davidsz. de Heem (q.v.). Mignon and De Heem both entered the Utrecht painters' guild in 1669, and Mignon must have studied with him. De Heem's influence is best seen in Mignon's use of bright colors, assurance of drawing, and increasingly elaborate compositions.

Considering that he died before his fortieth birthday, many of the approximately four hundred still-life paintings that have been attributed to Mignon are undoubtedly the works of followers and imitators. Nevertheless, this enormous following attests to the popularity of his compositions, which were eagerly sought by collectors in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including the elector of Saxony and Louis XIV of France.

## Bibliography

Houbraken 1753, 3: 82–83.  
Bol 1969: 320–323.  
Kraemer-Noble 1973.

1992.51.5

## *A Hanging Bouquet of Flowers*

probably 1665/1670

Oil on oak, 38.1 x 29.9 (15 x 11<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>)

Gift of Mrs. Paul Mellon, in Honor of the 50th Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art

## Inscriptions

At the lower left: *AB Mignon f.*

**Technical Notes:** The support is a single, vertically grained wood board with thin wood strips attached to edges beveled on the back. The lower right corner is chipped and worn. Thin opaque paint is applied over a thin, smooth, pale gray ground layer in layers blended wet into wet with slightly impasted highlights.<sup>1</sup> Abrasion is extensive, particularly in the background. In 1994 the painting underwent treatment to consolidate flaking and remove discolored retouching and varnish.

**Provenance:** Private collection, England;<sup>2</sup> (John Mitchell & Son, London); purchased November 1961 by Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon, Upperville, Virginia.

MIGNON has united this decorative floral piece through the free-flowing rhythms of flowers, fruits, and grains that hang from a blue satin bow. With crystalline clarity and an exquisite sense of design, he has arranged blossoms in such a way that their various shapes and vivid colors complement each other with an easy naturalness. At the center of the composition are the large forms and pale colors of the white viburnum, the light pink carnation, and the white and red variegated tulip. Surrounding these flowers are smaller orange red poppies, crab apple blossoms, Chinese lanterns (*Physalis alkekengi*), amaranthus, and long grains of wheat. While the bouquet hangs gracefully, the whole has an energetic feel as a result of the way various flowers, including the morning glory, yellow rose, and the blue love-in-a-mist (*Nigella damascena*), turn back upon themselves as they reach up to the light.

Mignon painted a large number of such hanging



Abraham Mignon, *A Hanging Bouquet of Flowers*, 1692. 51.5

bouquets, sometimes focused on flowers, sometimes on fruit.<sup>3</sup> Although they are essentially decorative ensembles, complete with requisite insects to add to their illusionistic character, they derive from a tradition that began in a far more serious vein. The origins of such hanging bouquets are to be found at the beginning of the seventeenth century in paintings by Daniel Seghers (1590–1661). By the mid-1620s Seghers had developed a specialty in which he painted garlands of flowers hanging from ribbons around a painted image of an altarpiece.<sup>4</sup> Seghers, a devout Jesuit, developed his concept from the floral garlands painted by his teacher, Jan Brueghel the Elder, but also from the Church practice of surrounding altarpieces with garlands of live flowers.<sup>5</sup>

Seghers' innovation was widely emulated in Flemish art. Paintings of flowers and fruits surrounding illusionistically painted sculptures and religious scenes were executed by a number of Flemish artists, among them Joris van Son (1623–1667), Jan Pauwels Gillemans I (1618–c.1675), Frans Ykens (1613–c.1679), and, most significantly in this context, Mignon's teacher, Jan Davidsz. de Heem (q.v.). All of these artists, moreover, followed Seghers' practice of choosing flowers and fruits that were imbued with symbolism related to the religious image at the center of their compositions.<sup>6</sup> De Heem expanded upon this genre in two basic ways. Occasionally he depicted a single bouquet of fruit or flowers, or combination thereof, hanging from a stone niche in which rested various religious objects, thereby shifting the focus of the painting from a centrally placed religious image to the floral/fruit arrangement.<sup>7</sup> He also occasionally removed the religious component of the scene entirely. A number of his paintings depict garlands of flowers or fruit hanging from blue ribbons before an otherwise empty painted stone niche.<sup>8</sup>

Mignon, in this painting, has removed even those vague references to the origins of this pictorial genre that remained in De Heem's garland paintings. Not only is there no reference to the central devotional character of Seghers' paintings, but he has also eliminated all references to a niche. All that remains from the earlier tradition is the blue ribbon from which the festoon hangs. Despite this adaptation in the character of the motif, the strong relationship this work has with De Heem's paintings suggests that Mignon must have executed it shortly after he left De Heem's workshop, thus probably in the late 1660s. There is absolutely no basis for questioning the attribution as was done by Kraemer-Noble.<sup>9</sup>

## Notes

1. Limited pigment analysis is available in the Scientific Research department (17 August 1993).
2. Correspondence from Peter Mitchell, 22 June 1992 (in NGA curatorial files). The painting may have come to Mitchell from a Mr. Phillips, of Hitchin (Antiques) Ltd., for it is noted as having been in his possession by Pavière 1965, 32.
3. For a listing of these see the catalogue of Mignon's paintings in Kraemer-Noble 1973.
4. Seghers collaborated with a number of other artists in these works, including Cornelis Schut the Elder (1597–1655), Gerard Seghers (1591–1651), and Abraham van Diepenbeeck (1596–1675).
5. These observations are made by Ildiko Ember in Wausau 1989, 66.
6. For an assessment of the symbolic relationships of a number of these paintings see Paris, 1987.
7. See Segal in Utrecht 1991, cat. 27, 177–180. In this painting from the National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, signed and dated 1653, a crucifix and a skull rest in the niche from which hangs a garland of fruit. Segal analyzes extensively the symbolic associations of the fruit.
8. Segal in Utrecht 1991, cat. 23, 171–172. According to Segal, De Heem painted more than ten such paintings. One of these is dated 1675. In 1669, however, Cosimo de' Medici acquired such a garland painting, which hangs today in the Palazzo Pitti, Florence.
9. See Kraemer-Noble 1973, 53, cat. no. B142.

## References

- 1965 Pavière: 32, color repro.  
1973 Kraemer-Noble: 53, no. B142.

## 1989.23.1

### *Still Life with Fruit, Fish, and a Nest*

c. 1675  
Oil on canvas, 94 x 73.5 (36.7 x 28.7)  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. H. John Heinz III

**Technical Notes:** The support, a fine-weight, plain-weave fabric, has a double lining. The tacking margins are trimmed but cusping visible along all edges indicates the original dimensions have been retained. A long horizontal tear in the lower right corner transverses the fish, while a smaller area of damage has occurred along the bottom edge at the left. A smooth, thin white ground was applied overall, followed by a brown imprimatura also employed as the background tone. Infrared reflectography reveals a grid layout for the transfer of the precise brush-applied underdrawing in the fish and fruits.

Thin, smooth paint layers were applied in a slow, deliberate manner with some strokes blended wet into wet. Leaves painted transparently over the background incorporate the brown layer as a shadow. Abrasion is minimal, and losses are confined to the edges and tears. Remnants of a selectively removed aged varnish layer are found over the background, while a fresher semi-matte varnish is present overall. No conservation has been carried out since acquisition.