



Abraham Mignon
German, 1640 - 1679

A Hanging Bouquet of Flowers

probably 1665/1670

oil on panel

overall: 38.1 x 29.9 cm (15 x 11 3/4 in.)

framed: 53.3 x 45.1 x 6.4 cm (21 x 17 3/4 x 2 1/2 in.)

overall (with additions): 39 x 31.1 cm (15 3/8 x 12 1/4 in.)

Inscription: lower left: AB (in ligature) Mignon f.

Collection of Mrs. Paul Mellon 1992.51.5

ENTRY

Abraham Mignon 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 arranged blossoms in such a way that their various shapes and vivid colors complement one another 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. Smaller orange red poppies, crab apple blossoms, Chinese lanterns (*Physalis alkekengi*), amaranthus, and long grains of wheat surround these flowers. While the bouquet hangs gracefully, the composition overall has an energetic feel because of the way the 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 bouquets, sometimes focused on flowers, sometimes on fruit.[1] 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 established a specialty in which he painted garlands of flowers hanging from ribbons around a painted image of an altarpiece.[2] Seghers, a devout Jesuit, developed his concept from the floral garlands painted by his teacher, Jan Brueghel the Elder (Flemish,

1568 - 1625), but also from the church practice of surrounding altarpieces with garlands of live flowers.[3]

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 (Dutch, 1606 - 1684). 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.[4] 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 holding various religious objects, thus shifting the focus of the painting from a centrally placed religious image to the floral/fruit arrangement.[5] Sometimes, De Heem would remove 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.[6]

In this painting, Mignon has removed even those vague references to the origins of this pictorial genre that remained in De Heem's garland paintings. *A Hanging Bouquet of Flowers* lacks any reference to the central devotional character of Seghers' paintings, and all references to a niche have been eliminated as well. The blue ribbon that holds the festoon is all that remains from the earlier tradition. Despite this adaptation in the character of the motif, the strong relationship of this work with De Heem's paintings suggests that Mignon probably executed it in the late 1660s, shortly after he left De Heem's workshop.[7]

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

April 24, 2014

NOTES

- [1] For a listing of these, see the catalog of Mignon's paintings in Magdalena Kraemer-Noble, *Abraham Mignon 1640–1679* (Leigh-on-Sea, 1973).
- [2] Seghers collaborated with a number of other artists in these works, including Cornelis Schut I (Flemish, 1597 - 1655), Gerard Seghers (Flemish, 1591 - 1651), and Abraham van Diepenbeeck (Flemish, 1596 - 1675).

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Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century

- [3] These observations are made by Ildiko Ember in *Delights for the Senses: Dutch and Flemish Still-Life Paintings from Budapest* (Wausau, WI, 1989), 66.
- [4] For an assessment of the symbolic relationships of a number of these paintings, see *Symbolique & botanique: le sens caché des fleurs dans la peinture au XVIIe siècle* (Caen, 1987).
- [5] See Sam Segal and Liesbeth M. Helmus, *Jan Davidsz. de Heem en zijn kring* (Utrecht, 1991), no. 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.
- [6] See Sam Segal and Liesbeth M. Helmus, *Jan Davidsz. de Heem en zijn kring* (Utrecht, 1991), no. 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.
- [7] There is absolutely no reason to question the attribution, as was done by Kraemer-Noble. See Magdalena Kraemer-Noble, *Abraham Mignon 1640–1679* (Leigh-on-Sea, 1973), 53, no. B142.
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TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support is a single, vertically grained oak^[1] board with thin wood strips attached to the edges, which are beveled on the back. The lower right corner is chipped and worn. Thin opaque paint is applied over a thin, smooth, pale gray ground in layers blended wet-into-wet with slightly impasted highlights.^[2] Red underpaint is visible in the blue flower near the center and may be present in other areas as well. Abrasion is extensive, particularly in the background. In 1994 the painting underwent treatment to consolidate flaking and remove discolored inpainting and varnish.

[1] The wood was analyzed by the NGA Scientific Research department (see report dated August 1993 in NGA Conservation department files).

[2] The pigments were analyzed using X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy by the NGA Scientific Research department (see report dated August 17, 1993, in NGA Conservation department files).

PROVENANCE

Private collection, England;^[1] (John Mitchell & Son, London); purchased November 1961 by Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon, Upperville, Virginia; gift 1992 to NGA.

[1] 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 Phillips' possession by Sydney H. Pavière, *Floral Art: Great Masters of Flower Painting*, Leigh-on-Sea, 1965: 32.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1961 *The Connoisseur* 147 (June 1961): vii, color repro.
- 1965 Pavière, Sydney H. *Floral Art - Great Masters of Flower Painting*. Leigh-on-Sea, 1965: 32, color repro. 34.
- 1973 Kraemer-Noble, Magdalena. *Abraham Mignon, 1640-1679. Catalogue Raisonné*. Leigh-on-Sea, 1973: 53, no. B142 (noted by the author as "probably not genuine").
- 1995 Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr. *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*. The Collections of the National Gallery of Art Systematic Catalogue. Washington, 1995: 172-174, color repro. 173.

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