NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS
Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century

Philip van Kouwenbergh
Dutch, 1671 - 1729

Flowers in a Vase

c. 1700

oil on canvas
overall: 67 x 51 cm (26 3/8 x 20 1/16 in.)
framed: 85.7 x 68.6 x 10.2 cm (33 3/4 x 27 x 4 in.)
Inscription: lower right: [P] Kouwe[]be[]h
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William Draper Blair 1976.26.2

ENTRY

This decorative still life is one of the few signed works by this relatively unknown Amsterdam painter. The execution is fairly broad, and the colors are deep and rich. Van Kouwenbergh has displayed his floral arrangement around an elaborate earthenware urn situated at the edge of a stone ledge. The composition is organized along a diagonal that is not embellished with intricate rhythms of blossoms or twisting stems. In this respect Van Kouwenbergh belongs to the tradition of late followers of Jan Davidsz de Heem (Dutch, 1606 - 1684), specifically Elias van den Broeck (c. 1650–1708), who may have been Van Kouwenbergh's teacher, and Rachel Ruysch (1664–1750), with whom his still lifes are sometimes confused.[1] As none of Van Kouwenbergh's few known paintings are dated, it is impossible to establish a meaningful chronology for his work. Nonetheless, because of stylistic similarities to paintings by Van den Broeck, this painting probably dates from early in his career.[2]

Van Kouwenbergh includes many of the plants found in paintings by De Heem and his followers, including roses, poppies, morning glories, white lilacs, and stalks of wheat. He also incorporates a banded grove snail, two centipedes attacking each other, and a butterfly. In De Heem's still lifes—for example, *Vase of Flowers*—flowers, wheat, and insects are often imbued with symbolic meaning related to the cycle of life or to Christian concepts of death and resurrection. Van Kouwenbergh probably understood the philosophical concepts underlying De Heem's carefully conceived compositions, but too little is known of his oeuvre to be able to judge this with certainty. In this painting the rather whimsical sculptural element surmounting the urn would seem to set a tone quite contrary to the

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weighty messages De Heem sought to convey.

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April 24, 2014

NOTES

[1] See Fred G. Meijer, “Philip van Kouwenberg,” *Oud-Holland* 102 (1988): 319. Meijer has been able to assemble an oeuvre for the artist consisting of fewer than twenty still-life paintings.

[2] Anke A. van Wagenberg-Ter Hoeven, “Nog een bloemstuk van Philip van Kouwenbergh (1671–1729),” *Antiek* 26 (1991): 253–254, has proposed a date at the end of the seventeenth century on the basis of the palette and the appearance of the wheat. She expressly compares this painting with another undated still life at Stourhead House, Wiltshire (National Trust) (her fig. 2).

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support, a heavy-weight, loosely and plain-woven fabric, has been lined with the tacking margins removed. Cusping is visible along all edges. Colored imprimaturas were applied locally over a fawn-colored ground. Thin, fluid paint layers are subtly blended, exploiting darker underlayers, and modified with light glazes and scumbles. The fading of a fugitive yellow pigment may be the cause of the blue tonality to the leaves, which overlap the completed vase.

The bottom edge and lower left corner are extensively damaged and reconstructed. A small loss is found in the red flower at center. Moderate abrasion overall has exposed darker underlayers, altering the tonal balance. The painting was lined and discolored varnish was removed in 1969, prior to acquisition.

PROVENANCE

Probably by inheritance to Viscount de Beughem, Brussels; by inheritance to his niece, Mary Eula Mason Blair [1906 -1983], and her husband, William Draper Blair [1902-1993], Washington, D.C.;[1] gift 1976 to NGA.

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[1] Provenance from notes in NGA curatorial files.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1989 Extended loan for use by Secretary Robert Mosbacher, U.S. Department of Commerce, Washington, D.C., 1989-1993.

1993 Extended loan for use by Secretary Ron Brown, U.S. Department of Commerce, Washington, D.C., 1993-1997.

1997 Extended loan for use by Secretary William M. Daley, U.S. Department of Commerce, Washington, D.C., 1997-1999.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1985 National Gallery of Art. *European Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. Washington, 1985: 217, repro.

1991 Wagenberg-Ter Hoeven, Anke A. van. "Nog een bloemstuk van Philip van Kouwenbergh (1671–1729)." *Antiek* 26 (1991): 252-255, repro.

1995 Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr. *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*. The Collections of the National Gallery of Art Systematic Catalogue. Washington, 1995: 152-154, color repro. 153.

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