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

Balthasar van der Ast
Dutch, 1593/1594 - 1657

Basket of Fruits

c. 1622

oil on panel
painted surface: 18.1 x 22.8 cm (7 1/8 x 9 in.)
overall (with additions): 18.8 x 23.5 cm (7 3/8 x 9 1/4 in.)
framed: 38.4 x 43.8 x 3.2 cm (15 1/8 x 17 1/4 x 1 1/4 in.)
Inscription: lower right: .B.vander.ast...
Collection of Mrs. Paul Mellon 1992.51.1

ENTRY

By the early 1630s, the Prince of Orange, Frederik Hendrik, and his wife, Amalia van Solms, had formed an important collection of contemporary Dutch and Flemish paintings. Their taste led them to collect mythological and allegorical paintings as well as princely portraits. The inventory of their possessions made in 1632 lists only four still lifes, two of which hung in a small room belonging to the princess that also contained two allegorical paintings attributed to Sir Peter Paul Rubens (Flemish, 1577 - 1640) and a portrait of Amalia van Solms by Rembrandt van Rijn (Dutch, 1606 - 1669). As described in the inventory, the still lifes were “two small paintings in ebony frames, one a basket with fruit and the other a basket with flowers, by Van der Ast.”[1] These two paintings must be *Basket of Fruits* and *Basket of Flowers*, one of the rare sets of companion pieces created by this early seventeenth-century master.[2] While it is not known when or how Van der Ast’s paintings were acquired by Amalia van Solms, their existence in the princely collection indicates the esteem in which this artist was held by his contemporaries.[3]

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Van der Ast was trained by his brother-in-law, Ambrosius Bosschaert (Dutch, 1573 - 1621), who taught him the fundamentals of painting, in particular the accurate depiction of flowers, fruits, shells, insects, baskets, and Chinese-export ceramics—all subjects of his paintings.[4] It was undoubtedly from Bosschaert that Van der Ast derived the idea of representing a symmetrically placed wicker basket filled with flowers and with shells scattered on the tabletop.[5] Bosschaert may also have taught him the technique of making preliminary drawings or watercolor studies of flowers, fruits, and shells to use as models that could be variously combined. The elegant red-and-white variegated tulip that hangs over the edge of the basket in *Basket of Flowers*, for example, can be found in a number of Van der Ast's compositions.[6]

A clear difference, however, exists between the two artists. Whereas Bosschaert's blossoms are crisp and their colors vivid, Van der Ast's forms are softer, with diffuse contours and more muted colors, as in his *Basket of Flowers*. Light no longer plays evenly over the surface, but selectively highlights the central core of the composition, creating a more dynamic image than any comparable painting by Bosschaert. Van der Ast reinforces this effect by bringing his forms close to the picture plane and compressing the space between the various compositional elements. Finally, he adds variety to his scene, not only with the plethora of flowers in his basket, including tulips, roses, irises, fritillaria, columbine, an anemone, a hyacinth, a carnation, and a cyclamen leaf, but also with the rare and exotic shells and fruit that lie on the table. A dragonfly in the upper right and a hermit crab in the lower left further enliven the scene.

The same richness within a small scale is evident in the companion piece, *Basket of Fruits*. Plums, apples, apricots, three sorts of grapes, a Seville orange, and a quince are arranged in a wicker basket identical to that in *Basket of Flowers*. The table holds many of the same types of fruit as well as medlars and cherries. Two Wan-Li plates that Van der Ast has placed at a slant on each side of the basket add elegance and preciousness to the scene.

As pendants, the two works complement each other in a number of ways. Their compositions are virtually identical: a centrally located overflowing wicker basket with still-life elements grouped around it in a semicircular manner. The combination of fruit and flowers found in these two works creates a sense of appreciation for the abundance and beauty of God's creation, a prevalent theme in early seventeenth-century still-life painting.[7] Van der Ast may have introduced the shells and the Wan-Li china for their exotic appeal, but their presence also allowed

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him to include all four of the natural elements: traditionally, fruit was associated with the earth, flowers with air, shells with water, and fine china with fire.

Van der Ast almost certainly created these works in the early 1620s. The soft, atmospheric character of his painting style reflects the influence of Roelandt Savery (Dutch, 1576 - 1639), who had also joined the Utrecht Saint Luke's Guild in 1619. In the early 1620s Van der Ast painted a number of comparable compositions that feature the same elements. Sam Segal has noted that around 1623 the Batavian rose, visible here in the front of *Basket of Flowers*, was replaced in Van der Ast's repertoire by the Provins rose, further confirmation for the early dating of these paintings.[8]

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

April 24, 2014

NOTES

[1] S. W. A. Drossaers with Cornelis Hofstede de Groot and C. H. de Jonge, "Inventaris van de meubelen van het Stadhouderlijk kwartier met het Speelhuis en van het Huis in het Noordeinde te 's-Gravenhage," *Oud-Holland* 47 (1930): 212, nos. 76, 77: "Twee cleyne schilderikens met ebben lijsten, het een een mandeken met fruyten ende het ander een mandeken met bloemen, door [Balthasar] van der Ast gedaen" ("Two small paintings with ebony frames, the one a basket with fruits and the other a basket with flowers, by Van der Ast"). The inventory was made in August 1632.

[2] The connection between the description in this inventory and these two paintings was first made by Laurens J. Bol, "Een Middelburgse Brueghel-groep," *Oud-Holland* 70 (1955): 146, note 36. Laurens J. Bol, in *The Bosschaert Dynasty: Painters of Flowers and Fruit*, trans. A. M. de Bruin-Cousins (Leigh-on-Sea, 1960), has identified only three other pairs by Van der Ast, none of which answers to the description in the inventory (cat. nos. 43, 44; 51, 52; 53, 80).

[3] A large proportion of the paintings in the princely collection had been executed by artists from Utrecht; thus it may well be that Van der Ast's work was known to Amalia van Solms as a result of his residence in Utrecht during the 1620s.

[4] See Ingvar Bergström et al., *Clarity in Awareness: An Exhibition of Fine and Important Dutch and Flemish XVIIth-Century Still-Life Paintings* (London, 1984), 66–75.

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[5] See Ingvar Bergström, "Baskets with Flowers by Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder and Their Repercussions on the Art of Balthasar van der Ast," *Tableau* 6 (1983–1984): 66, fig. 1.

[6] Laurens J. Bol, in *The Bosschaert Dynasty: Painters of Flowers and Fruit*, trans. A. M. de Bruin-Cousins (Leigh-on-Sea, 1960), has identified this tulip, known as a "Summer Beauty," in at least six other compositions (cat. nos. 18, 20, 26, 46, 63, 116).

[7] See Ingvar Bergström, *Still Lifes of the Golden Age: Northern European Paintings from the Heinz Family Collection* (Washington, DC, 1989), 11–25.

[8] Sam Segal, *Flowers and Nature: Netherlandish Flower Painting of Four Centuries* (The Hague, 1990), 190.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support is a single, horizontally grained wood board with thin wood strips attached to edges on all four sides. The edges of the panel are beveled on the back. Paint is applied over an off-white ground in thin, opaque, and translucent layers with minimal brushmarking. Discolored inpainting covers scattered minor losses, particularly in the fruit. The ground is visible through small areas of moderate abrasion. No conservation has been carried out since acquisition.

PROVENANCE

Probably Princess Amalia van Solms [1602-1675], The Hague, by 1632.[1] (sale, Philippus van der Schley, Amsterdam, 16 February 1802 and days following, 1st day, no. 55 [with NGA 1992.51.2]); Levij Pakker.[2] Mrs. Beaumont, England; (sale, Christie, Manson & Woods, London, 19 March 1906, no. 17 [with NGA 1992.51.2]); (Collings).[3] (Fritz Gerstel Gallery, Berlin); (his sale, Kunstsalon Keller & Reiner, Berlin, 21-22 January 1908, no. 36 [with NGA 1992.51.2]). (Kunsthandel Gebr. Douwes, Amsterdam), c. 1938; sold to Dr. Hans Wetzlar, Amsterdam, by 1952;[4] (his sale, Sotheby Mak van Waay, Amsterdam, 9 June 1977, no. 5 [with NGA 1992.51.2]); (John Mitchell & Son, London); sold November 1977 to Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon, Upperville, Virginia; gift 1992 to NGA.

[1] According to an inventory of the collection of the Prince of Orange and his wife

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Amalia van Solms made in August 1632.

[2] This sale was kindly brought to the attention of Arthur Wheelock, Jr., by Sam Segal; see his letter of 12 February 2009 in NGA curatorial files. The buyer is noted in the sale contents section of the Getty Provenance Index Databases, J. Paul Getty Trust (sale catalog N-23).

[3] The Mellon collection records (copy in NGA curatorial files) indicate that the seller at the 1906 sale was a "private English collection (? Mrs. Beaumont)." This information was kindly confirmed, and the buyer's name provided, by Lynda McLeod, Librarian, Christie's Archives, London, in her e-mail of 28 March 2013, in NGA curatorial files.

[4] According to information provided to Paul Mellon at the time of his acquisition (see NGA curatorial files). The painting was published in M.J. Friedländer's 1952 catalogue of the Wetzlar Collection, no. 3.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1955 Jubileumtentoonstelling, Kunsthandel Gebr. Douwes, Amsterdam, 1955, no. 2.

1960 La Nature Morte et son inspiration, Galerie André Weil, Paris, 1960, no. 1.

1998 A Collector's Cabinet, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1998, no. 2.

1999 From Botany to Bouquets: Flowers in Northern Art, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1999, no. 3, fig. 36, as Basket of Fruit.

2009 Judith Leyster, 1609-1660, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 2009, unnumbered brochure.

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1952 Friedländer, Max J. *Collection Dr. H. Wetzlar*. Amsterdam, 1952: 8, no. 3a, repro.

1955 Bol, Laurens J. "Een Middelburgse Brueghel-groep." *Oud Holland* 70 (1955): 146, 153.

1955 Kunsthandel Gebr. Douwes. *Jubileumtentoonstelling, 1805-1955* . Amsterdam, 1955: 1, no. 2.

1960 Bol, Laurens J. *The Bosschaert Dynasty: Painters of Flowers and Fruit*. Translated by A.M. de Bruin-Cousins. Leigh-on-Sea, 1960: 38, 79, no. 72, 102 n. 85.

1990 Segal, Sam. *Flowers and nature: Netherlandish flower painting of four centuries*. Translated by Ruth Koenig. Exh. cat. Nabio Museum of Art, Osaka; Tokyo Station Gallery, Tokyo; Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Amstelveen, 1990: 190, 191 n. 3 (where the reference to Bol 1960 gives an incorrect citation to "no. 32" that should be "no. 38").

1995 Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr. *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*. The Collections of the National Gallery of Art Systematic Catalogue. Washington, 1995: 5, 8, color repro. 6.

1997 Spicer, Joaneath A., and Lynn Federle Orr. *Masters of Light: Dutch Painters in Utrecht during the Golden Age*. Exh. cat. Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore; National Gallery, London. New Haven, 1997: 362.

1998 Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr. *A Collector's Cabinet*. Exh. cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1998: 65, no. 2.

1999 Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr. *From Botany to Bouquets: Flowers in Northern Art*. Exh. cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1999: 46-47, 83; no. 3, fig. 36.

2007 Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr., and Michael Swicklik. "Behind the Veil: Restoration of a Dutch Marine Painting Offers a New Look at Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art and History." *National Gallery of Art Bulletin*, no. 37 (Fall 2007): 4, 5, fig .5.

2008 Paul, Tanya. "'Beschildert met een Glans': Willem van Aelst and artistic self-consciousness in seventeenth-century Dutch still life painting." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, 2008: 128, fig. 48.

2011 Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr., and Daniëlle H.A.C. Lokin. *Communication: Visualizing the Human Connection in the Age of Vermeer*. Japanese ed. Exh. cat. Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art; Miyagi Museum of Art, Sendai; Bunkamura Museum of Art, Tokyo. Tokyo, 2011: 29, fig. 2.

2011 Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr., and Daniëlle H.A.C. Lokin. *Human Connections in the Age of Vermeer*. Exh. cat. Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art; Miyagi Museum of Art, Sendai; Bunkamura Museum of Art, Tokyo. London, 2011: 20, fig. 3.

2012 Paul, Tanya, et al. *Elegance and Refinement: The still-life paintings of Willem van Aelst*. Exh. cat. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; National Gallery of Art, Washington. New York, 2012: 39, fig. 3.

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