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...
weighty messages De Heem sought to convey.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.
April 24, 2014

NOTES


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.
[1] Provenance from notes in NGA curatorial files.

EXHIBITION HISTORY


BIBLIOGRAPHY


