Situated as they are against a pale greenish-ocher background, the subtle colors
and organic rhythms of Van Huysum’s exuberant floral display create an elegant
ensemble. The poppy, morning glory, and ranunculus tendrils that weave in and
out of the densely massed rose, vinca, carnation, iris, and tulip blossoms carry the
eye throughout the bouquet, so that the viewer takes in the entire arrangement
without focusing unduly upon any individual blossom. The image’s decorative
character is further enhanced by the terra-cotta vase embellished with playful
cupids and the precariously perched nest containing three pale blue eggs.

Van Huysum is known to have studied with his father, Justus van Huysum
(1659–1716), yet in this work the primary artistic inspiration must have been that of
Jan Davidsz de Heem (Dutch, 1606 - 1684). De Heem, whose realistic depictions of
natural forms were greatly admired in the early eighteenth century, [1] similarly
organized his flower bouquets with sweeping rhythms that draw the eye in a
circular pattern throughout the composition (see Vase of Flowers). His remarkable
painting techniques allowed him to create illusionistic images of individual
blossoms. De Heem’s complex bouquets included flowers that would never be in
bloom at the same time, for example, tulips and morning glories, and Van Huysum
likewise took pleasure in including such improbable combinations in his paintings.
Perhaps following De Heem’s lead, Van Huysum similarly depicted both tightly
formed blossoms at the height of their beauty and tulips with wide opened petals,
indicative of flowers past their prime. Moreover, like De Heem, Van Huysum
enlivened his scenes with insects of various types, such as small ants crawling on
(and occasionally eating) petals and butterflies alighting on the uppermost
blossoms. Finally, whether as an artistic conceit or to emphasize the freshness of the bouquet, both artists delighted in depicting dewdrops gathered on the green leaves. The water droplets act as a foil to the delicate colors and shapes of the blossoms and also add small accents of light that further activate the compositions.

Despite the similarities in concept apparent in the works of these two men, great differences also exist. De Heem preferred a dark background against which he could contrast the whites and vibrant colors of his bouquet and concentrate the energy of his composition. Van Huysum, by contrast, chose later in his career to use backgrounds with a light tonality so that he could create a more delicate and, ultimately, more decorative image. De Heem often included nonfloral elements, such as stalks of grain and bean pods, that were instrumental in conveying an underlying religious meaning for his paintings. Van Huysum, on the other hand, does not appear to have chosen specific types of plants for their symbolic associations. Rather, he seems to have designed floral arrangements to suggest both the richness and fertility of nature and, through allusions to the cycle of life, the transience of earthly existence.

The chronological evolution of Van Huysum’s style is difficult to determine because of the relative paucity of dated still lifes. This work, however, with its light background, must date shortly after Still Life with Flowers and Fruit and belong to the early part of Van Huysum’s mature phase, which began around 1720. Infrared reflectography seems to confirm this, as it reveals in the upper right corner a sharply defined vertical element resembling a pilaster—an architectural element that began to appear in his work in that decade. [2] During the early 1720s he tended to place his flowers in terra-cotta vases decorated with playful putti fashioned after the relief sculptures of François Duquesnoy. [3] This work is more lyrically composed than his early flower still life in Karlsruhe dated 1714 [fig. 1], but is not as complex as, for example, the asymmetrically conceived Bouquet of Flowers in an Urn, 1724, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art [fig. 2]. Other characteristics of the somewhat later style of the Los Angeles painting are the ornately shaped stone ledge and the outdoor setting. [4]

With his technical virtuosity and precise observations of flowers and fruit, Van Huysum was able to convey both the varied rhythms of a striped tulip’s petal and the glistening sheen of its variegated surface. Just how he achieved these effects has never been precisely determined because he was a secretive artist who hid his artistic techniques from others. Nevertheless, it would seem that his paintings combine blossoms rendered from life and those derived from drawn models. In a
letter to a patron in 1742, Van Huysum complained that he could not complete a still life that included a yellow rose until the flower blossomed the following spring. [5] The rose in question was presumably similar to the hybrid known as *Rosa huysumiana* seen in the left center of this painting. Indeed, certain of his paintings carry two dates from consecutive years. [6] While it is not known whether Van Huysum painted this work over an extended period of time, Pentimenti, particularly near the poppies at the top of the bouquet, indicate that he made significant changes in the arrangement of these compositional elements.

Van Huysum’s dynamic painting process is further revealed through infrared reflectography, which shows that he both left reserves for flowers and stalks that were never included in the final composition and also painted blooms for which he did not make a reserve, only to paint them out at a later stage. While such alterations and revisions may complicate our understanding of Van Huysum’s process, it is precisely the complex evolution of the present work that lends the floral arrangement such vigor and spontaneity.


Revised by Alexandra Libby to incorporate information from a new technical examination.

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NOTES


[3] For Duquesnoy’s relief sculpture, see Mariette Fransolet, François du Quesnoy: Sculpteur d’Urbain VIII, 1597–1643 (Brussels, 1942). John Walsh Jr. and Cynthia P. Schneider, in A Mirror of Nature: Dutch Paintings from the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Edward William Carter (Los Angeles, 1981), 66, believe that although the figures were inspired by Duquesnoy, the vases
TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The wood support is a single vertically grained plank that was thinned and cradled during a previous treatment. [1] A thin, white, smooth ground was applied overall. The paint is of a medium paste consistency with slight impasto used to create specific flower petals. The paint layering is complex and varies depending on how much a particular area was reworked by the artist. The background is composed of at least five to six layers. The lighter and more yellow paint in the background was only applied on the right side of the composition and ends at the top center near the stem of the red and white poppy. This partial layer was applied when the composition was close to completion. It was carefully painted up to and around many of the elements in the right side of the bouquet, helping to further define their shape. In comparison, most of the leaves and flowers on the left side of the composition were painted directly on the darker earth-colored layer.

Multispectral infrared reflectography (MS-IRR) helped to reveal numerous changes in the composition. [2] Reserves were left for a number of flowers, stalks, and leaves, but some of these elements were never incorporated into the final composition. Other flowers and leaves, for which no reserve was left in the initial blocking out of the composition, were brought to a more finished state and then painted out, either covered up by another part of the bouquet or incorporated into the background. Several adjustments were made to both the size and shape of the putti on the terra-cotta vase, as well as to the angle and shape of the marble pediment. Many of these changes, especially those to the bouquet itself, resulted in a more vibrant and lively composition, rather than a full, symmetrical bouquet. Also visible in MS-IRR are a number of sharply drawn, bold lines that may have been actually designed by Van Huysum himself.

[4] John Walsh Jr. and Cynthia P. Schneider, in A Mirror of Nature: Dutch Paintings from the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Edward William Carter (Los Angeles, 1981), 66 n. 9, have determined that the first dated painting by Van Huysum with an outdoor background is from 1720.


been made using a wet medium such as ink. While two of those lines form the front edge of the marble slab, there are a few other lines that don’t appear to correlate with any other elements within the final composition. Lastly there is a vertical cylindrical form on the right side of the painting, possibly representing a column or tree trunk, which may indicate Van Huysum was considering a landscape or outdoor scene for the background rather than gradated color.

The support, ground, and paint layers are in good and stable condition. There is a small vertical check in the top edge, left of the center, that has been repaired. There is a fine craquelure pattern throughout, as well as small scattered losses. Previous restorers, in an effort to “reveal” pentimenti, overcleaned and greatly abraded the top background layers. During treatment in 2015, grime and a moderately thick, discolored, nonoriginal varnish layer was removed, as was some old overpaint. The painting was also revarnished and inpainted with stable and reversible materials.

Dina Anchin, based on the examination report by Kay Silberfeld.

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TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] Earlier technical summaries of this work were prepared by Melissa Katz and Catherine Metzger.


PROVENANCE

(Jacques Goudstikker, Amsterdam), by 1919 until at least 1920. Vas Diag, before 1924; (Leggatt Brothers, London); acquired 21 July 1924 by Lord Claud Hamilton;[1] by inheritance to his widow, Lady Claud Hamilton; (sale, Christie, Manson & Woods, London, 28 November 1975, no. 23); (Alexander Gallery, London); purchased 18 February 1977 by NGA.
The provenance from Vas Diag to Lord Hamilton is given in a letter from Charles Leggatt to Arthur Wheelock, 31 December 1982, in NGA curatorial files. Records of the Leggatt Brothers that might have provided more information about Diag and the purchase from him were destroyed in World War II. “Lord Claud Hamilton” could be one of several people; one possibility is that he was Lord Claud Nigel Hamilton (1889–1975), whose widow (she died 1984) was born Violet Ruby Ashton, and was earlier Mrs. Keith W. Newall.

EXHIBITION HISTORY


1920 Collection Goudstikker d'Amsterdam, Kunstkring, Rotterdam, 1920, no. 24.


BIBLIOGRAPHY


