



Abraham Mignon
German, 1640 - 1679

Still Life with Fruit, Fish, and a Nest

c. 1675

oil on canvas

overall: 94 x 73.5 cm (37 x 28 15/16 in.)

framed: 117.5 x 98.4 x 5.1 cm (46 1/4 x 38 3/4 x 2 in.)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. H. John Heinz III 1989.23.1

ENTRY

The celebration of the richness and fertility of the land is a theme that reappears in different forms throughout the seventeenth century, whether in still-life, landscape, or mythological scenes. This work, painted in the mid-1670s, is an evocative image of abundance in which the fruits of the water are depicted along with the fruits of the land. The catch of the day, still hanging from hooks attached to lines that drape over the edge of the bait box, glistens in the subdued light of this deeply recessed scene. The fishing pole and its case can be seen resting on the fruit piled in the wicker basket. A great tit, perched on a branch of a craggy, moss-covered tree, watches over her nest with its four eggs nestled in the branches of a hibiscus plant.

[1] Two European goldfinches, one of which stands alertly on the handle of the basket, further enliven the scene. Frogs by a pool of water in the lower left, snails, caterpillars, and lizards (one of which is dead and has attracted a horde of ants) further enrich this woodland scene.

While the components of this painting belong to an allegorical tradition of abundance, they also seem to represent various stages in the cycle of life. The bird's eggs stand for birth; ripe fruit and blossoming flowers indicate maturity; old age is included in the guise of the gnarled tree; and the fish and the corpse of the

lizard represent death. Religious concepts further complement these dual aspects of abundance and the cycles of life. The wheat and grapes, so prominently displayed in this still life, traditionally represent the Eucharist. These varied symbolic associations are fused together in such a way as to create a metaphorically rich image that could be appreciated by the viewer on many levels.

This flowing composition and the complex symbolism contained within it were clearly inspired by the work of Jan Davidsz de Heem (Dutch, 1606 - 1684), with whom Mignon studied in Utrecht. A particularly close prototype, *Ruins with Fruit and Bird's Nest* [fig. 1], must have been executed by De Heem during the late 1660s, at a time when Mignon presumably was active in the master's studio. This still life from Dresden, likewise set in a grotto, includes so many of the same elements—luscious fruit, gnarled tree, bird's nest and eggs, live and dead animals, all drawn together by the rhythms of long stalks of wheat—that one wonders whether Mignon had an active hand in its execution. In any event, from this thematic basis, Mignon executed a number of related works that became progressively more decorative and mannered as a result of his luminous colors and crisp articulation of forms. One composition in Budapest is particularly close in concept, the basic difference being that a selection of flowers instead of fruit serves as the primary still-life motif. [2]

The large number of similarly complex compositions still extant confirms Arnold Houbraken's statement that Mignon's paintings were in great demand. Although Houbraken avows that Mignon worked from life, the artist frequently reused motifs, such as the frogs, in various paintings. [3] He also painted variants and multiple versions of his most successful works. At least three other versions of the Gallery's painting exist: a signed version [fig. 2] in the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich; an unsigned version in the Hermitage, Saint Petersburg; [4] and an unsigned version sold on the New York art market (Sotheby's, January 12, 1989, no. 187).

The signed Munich painting is the prime example of this composition, while the Gallery's work is most likely an autograph replica. An extensive, vigorously executed underdrawing that outlines the composition has been revealed by Infrared Reflectography [fig. 3]. Evidence of a grid pattern in the Underdrawing indicates that Mignon transferred the composition from another source, probably a preparatory drawing. [5] Although he had various students who may well have made replicas, and his paintings were also reputed to have been copied after his death, [6] the quality of this version is so high that one must assume Mignon was

primarily responsible for its execution. Not only is the brushwork vigorous throughout, the range of textures created, from the soft skin of the peaches to the crisply articulated forms of the grains of wheat, are consistent with those found in Mignon's autograph works. [7] The Gallery's painting, moreover, is not an exact replica of the Munich version; slight variations exist in the positions of the frog and the dead lizard in the foreground relative to the other still-life elements. [8]

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

April 24, 2014

COMPARATIVE FIGURES

NOTES

- [1] Dr. Stoors L. Olson, curator at the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, has kindly identified the birds and the fish (perch, pike, and roach) in this painting. The speckled eggs in the nest are those of a great tit and not of a goldfinch (which are bluish).
- [2] *Still Life with Flowers, Fish, and Bird's Nest*, Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest, inv. no. 3539.
- [3] Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen*, 3 vols. (The Hague, 1753) 3:82–83.
- [4] *Still Life with Fruit, Fish, and a Bird's Nest in Woodland*, Hermitage, Saint Petersburg, inv. no. 1052.
- [5] Magdalena Kraemer-Noble, *Abraham Mignon 1640–1679* (Leigh-on-Sea, 1973), who did not know of this painting, believes that Mignon only signed paintings he actually executed, a position I believe to be too extreme.
- [6] See Sam Segal and Liesbeth M. Helmus, *Jan Davidsz. de Heem en zijn kring* (Utrecht, 1991), 214, 217 n. 2.
- [7] The surety of execution is also evident in the x-radiographs [see X-radiography] of the painting. Some studio participation may exist in the area of the basket and the background.
- [8] Examinations with Infrared Reflectography indicate that the positions of the frog and lizard were altered during the course of the painting's execution. See Technical Summary.
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TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support, a fine-weight, plain-weave fabric, has a double lining. The tacking margins have been trimmed, but cusping visible along all edges indicates that the original dimensions have been retained. A smooth, thin, white ground was applied overall, followed by a brown imprimatura that was also employed as the background tone. Infrared reflectography at 2.0 to 2.5 microns^[1] reveals a grid layout for the transfer of the precise brush-applied underdrawing in the fish and fruits. It also shows changes in the positions of the lizard and the frog. Thin, smooth paint layers were applied in a slow, deliberate manner with some strokes blended wet-into-wet. Leaves painted transparently over the background incorporate the brown layer as a shadow.

A long horizontal tear in the lower right corner transverses the fish, while a smaller area of damage has occurred along the bottom edge at the left. Abrasion is minimal, and losses are confined to the edges and tears. Remnants of a selectively removed aged varnish layer are found over the background, while a fresher semi-matte varnish is present overall. No conservation has been carried out since acquisition.

[1] Infrared reflectography was performed using a Santa Barbara Focalplane InSb camera fitted with a K astronomy filter.

PROVENANCE

Private collection, England. private collection, Switzerland; (Peter Tillou Works of Art, Litchfield, Connecticut); purchased May 1986 by Mr. and Mrs. H. John Heinz III, Washington, D.C.;^[1] gift (partial and promised) 1989 to NGA; gift completed 1992.

[1] Provenance information was provided by Diane Martz, with the Heinz collection, in e-mails to Arthur Wheelock of 7 and 10 September 2012 (in NGA curatorial files). She writes in her first message that in the papers of Ingvar Bergstrom, who catalogued the Heinz collection, "there is a version of a certification for the picture that lists a private English collection as provenance."

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1989 Still Lifes of the Golden Age: Northern European Paintings from the Heinz Family Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1989, no. 28.

1996 Obras Maestras de la National Gallery of Art de Washington, Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City, 1996-1997, unnumbered catalogue, 74-75, color repro.

1997 Rembrandt and the Golden Age: Dutch Paintings from the National Gallery of Art, The Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, 1997, unnumbered brochure.

2006 Loan to display with permanent collection, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, 2006-2007, unnumbered brochure, fig. 3.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1989 Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr., and Ingvar Bergström, eds. *Still Lifes of the Golden Age: Northern European Paintings from the Heinz Family Collection*. Exh. cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Washington, 1989: no. 28, color repro. 75.
- 1995 Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr. *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*. The Collections of the National Gallery of Art Systematic Catalogue. Washington, 1995: 174-176, color repro. 177.
- 2006 Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr. . *In Celebration of Jan Davidsz. de Heem's Still-Life with Grapes*. Exhibition brochure. Hood Museum of Art, Hanover, 2006: fig. 3.
- 2007 Kraemer-Noble, Magdalena. *Abraham Mignon, 1640-1679: catalogue raisonné*. Studien zur internationalen Architektur- und Kunstgeschichte, vol. 44. Petersberg, 2007: 35, 38, 130, 132, 288 n. 12, as a 17th century copy by an unknown artist.
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