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]
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
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


[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.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support, a single, horizontally grained wood board, has a slight concave warp. Thin wood strips, are attached to the 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. Inpainting covers scattered minor losses. Abrasion is moderate throughout, particularly in the darks of the shells. No conservation has been carried out since acquisition.

PROVENANCE


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


2015 Asia in Amsterdam: The Culture of Luxury in the Golden Age, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, 2015-2016, no. 45b, repro.