



Ambrosius Bosschaert
Dutch, 1573 - 1621

Bouquet of Flowers in a Glass Vase

1621

oil on copper

overall: 31.6 x 21.6 cm (12 7/16 x 8 1/2 in.)

framed: 53.3 x 43.8 x 5.7 cm (21 x 17 1/4 x 2 1/4 in.)

Inscription: lower right in monogram: .AB.1621; across bottom in blue field: C'est l'Angelic[ue] main du gra[n]d Peintre de Flore / AMBROISE, renommé jusqu' au Rivage Moré. (This is the angelic hand of the great painter of Flora, Ambrosius, renowned even to the banks of the Moré).

Patrons' Permanent Fund and New Century Fund 1996.35.1

ENTRY

Ambrosius Bosschaert infused his flower bouquets with a sense of wonder. He had an unerring compositional awareness, and delighted in combining an array of flowers of various colors and shapes to create a pleasing and uplifting visual experience. Here, a spectacular yellow bearded iris and a red-and-white striped tulip surmount a bouquet that also contains, among others, roses, a blue-and-white columbine, fritillaria, grape hyacinth, lily of the valley, forget-me-not, globeflowers, and a sprig of rosemary. [1] At the base of the ribbed onion-shaped glass vase lie a pansy and a cyclamen blossom. [2] A damselfly alighting on the iris and a Red Admiral butterfly on the cyclamen further enliven the composition. These flowers could not have all been in bloom at the same time; therefore, and because several of them recur in other paintings by Bosschaert, he must have worked from memory or from drawings he kept in his studio. [3]

At the lower right edge of the stone ledge are the artist's monogram and the date 1621, the year of his death. The picture is made all the more poignant by the French inscription, written in gold lettering on a blue ground, that fills an illusionistic plaque attached to the ledge's front: "C'est l'Angelic[ue] main du gra[n]d Peintre de Flore / AMBROISE, renommé jusqu' au Rivage Moré" (This is the angelic hand of the great painter of Flora, Ambrosius, renowned even to the banks of the Moré). [4] The inscription offers a moving testament to the artist's enormous reputation,

which, as the phrase implies, extended to the farthest reaches of the Dutch commercial empire. [5]

This exceptional painting is the one that Bosschaert took with him in 1621, when he traveled from Breda to The Hague to deliver a *blompot* (flower still-life painting) to Frederick van Schurman (or Schuermans), the *bottelier* of Prince Maurits. [6] For this work Bosschaert received the extraordinary sum of 1,000 guilders.

Unfortunately, according to the artist's daughter Maria, Bosschaert fell ill while in The Hague and died in the home of his patron, "to the sorrow of many art lovers." Frederick van Schurman had been ennobled by the Holy Roman Emperor, and Maria Bosschaert referred to Van Schurman as a *joncker* (from the German *Junker*), an honorary title that corresponds to the old inscription "Jonckheere" on the verso of the painting.

The illusionistic plaque was always conceived as part of the composition, although it is not known who actually composed and wrote the celebratory French text. [7] Not only did Bosschaert paint the shadow of the pansy falling over the plaque's upper edge, but Infrared Reflectography at 1.5 to 1.8 microns [8] reveals that he carefully ruled in the plaque with dark lines before he began painting [fig. 1]. Bosschaert, in fact, made detailed Underdrawings of all of his pictorial elements: leaves, blossoms, and insects. He even indicated the painting's central vertical axis with a ruled line. [9] It thus seems probable that Bosschaert's patron specifically commissioned this bouquet of flowers to commemorate the artist and his fame. It is, tellingly, the only painting the artist ever made with such an illusionistic plaque. The importance of this work within Bosschaert's oeuvre is further supported by the fact that Ambrosius Bosschaert the Younger (1609–1645), the artist's son, made three adaptations of the composition, one of which he painted on silver in 1627 [fig. 2].

Bosschaert's carefully balanced composition reflects the naturalistic style of his flower paintings at this late period of his career. Although he surmounted this bouquet with two large flowers, much as he had done throughout his career, he arranged the rest of the flowers more informally than he had done in the previous decade, in part by overlapping individual blossoms. Moreover, his sophisticated glazing techniques allowed him to create soft, velvety textures for flower petals and leaves, an effect quite different from the crisp forms of his earlier style. He also introduced here subtle tonal gradations in the background to enhance the sensation of light flooding the image.

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Floral still lifes became popular in the early seventeenth century, in part because they depicted the exquisite, imported blooms collected by wealthy citizens who wished to admire their colors and rhythmic forms throughout the year. Bosschaert's bouquets capture the fragile beauty of flowers and the sense of hope and joy they represent. They seem so real we almost believe it is their aroma—and not the artist's brush—that has drawn the damselflies and butterflies to their petals. Bosschaert's approach to flower painting, in which blossoms that bloom at different times of the year are assembled into a single sumptuous display, reflects a fundamental theological belief then held by both Catholics and Protestants: that God's munificence was to be found in the extraordinary richness and beauty of the natural world. [10] Thus, even as pictorial accuracy was important in recording God's individual creations—flowers, insects, and shells—an imaginative melding such as that found here was meant to celebrate the greatness of his blessings. It is, however, only through the delicacy of Bosschaert's touch—his “angelic hand”—that this bouquet achieves a lifelike quality analogous to God's own creativity. [11]

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Infrared reflectogram, Ambrosius Bosschaert, *Bouquet of Flowers in a Glass Vase*, 1621, oil on copper, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Patrons' Permanent Fund and New Century Fund, 1996.35.1



fig. 2 Ambrosius Bosschaert the Younger, *Flowers in a Vase*, 1627, oil on silver, private collection. Photo courtesy Noortman Master Paintings, Maastricht

NOTES

- [1] *The Inspiration of Nature* (London, 1976), 24.
- [2] *Viola tricolor cultivar* is an annual and is commonly known as heartsease, or wild pansy. See Pat Diehl Scace, *The Floral Artist's Guide: A Reference to Cut Flowers and Foliages* (Albany, NY, 2001), 150.
- [3] The yellow bearded iris and the white rose, for example, appear, in slightly different orientations, in Bosschaert's *Bouquet of Flowers on a Ledge*, 1619–1620, Los Angeles County Museum of Art. See John Walsh Jr. and

Cynthia P. Schneider, *A Mirror of Nature: Dutch Paintings from the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Edward William Carter* (Los Angeles, 1981), 15–19, no. 4. See also Noortje Bakker et al., *Masters of Middelburg: Exhibition in the Honour of Laurens J. Bol* (Amsterdam, 1984), 32 note 7. Flowers often appear in the same position or reversed, such as the variegated tulip and the lily of the valley in *Bouquet of Flowers in a Stone Niche* at the Statens Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen.

- [4] Moré was spelled in a variety of ways, including More, Mourée, Mori, Moure, and Mauri. Fort Nassau, a Dutch fortress on the Gold Coast of Africa, was located on the bank of the river Moré. The indirect reference to the Nassau family, seems even more significant when considering that the person who probably commissioned the painting, Frederick van Schurman, held an official function at the court of the Nassaus in The Hague. I would like to thank Rozemarijn Landsman for correcting the transcription of this text, which had been misinterpreted in earlier literature on this painting. She received helpful assistance from Prof. Dr. Jos A. A. M. Biemans, curator of manuscripts, University of Amsterdam (correspondence October 6, 2009).
- [5] Henriette Rahusen discovered that the phrase “rivage Moré” (the banks of the river Moré, in modern-day Ghana) refers to a contemporary song by Dutch composer Jan Pietersz Sweelinck (1562–1621), who put to music the words of a French poem by Philippe Desportes (1546–1606). In the poem, part of his “Les Amours de Diane” (1573), Desportes states that none of the exotic goods merchants acquired on the banks of the river Moré equaled the flawless beauty of his beloved Diana.
- [6] Maria Bosschaert, Ambrosius’ daughter, wrote the following about her father: “Mijn vader Ambrosius Bosschaert is gesturven in Schravenhage in ‘t jaer als den 12 jarigen Trebes uut was, doch was woonachtig binnen Breda maer near den Hage getrocken om een blompot te leveren die hij hadde gemaect voor de bottelier van Sijn Hoochheyt daervoor hij dulent gulden hadde bedongen ende is aldaer sieck geworden ten huuse van joncker Schuermans, vader van Anna Maria Schuermans ende aldaer gesturven ende in Schravenhage begraven, tot droeffheyt van veel liefhebbers.” Abraham Bredius, “De bloemschilders Bosschaert,” *Oud Holland* 31 (1913): 138. For further commentary, see Laurens J. Bol, *The Bosschaert Dynasty: Painters of Flowers and Fruit*, trans. A. M. De Bruin-Cousins (Leigh-on-Sea, 1960), 32–33 n. 75. For a depiction of Van Schurman’s daughter, the famous scholar and artist Anna Maria van Schurman, see Cornelis Jonson van Ceulen’s portrait Anna Maria van Schurman.
- [7] The language of the Dutch court was French, and Bosschaert lived in Breda at that time. The combination of these two facts suggests that he may already have had strong connections to the Nassau court. Breda had been the residence of the Princes of Orange in the Netherlands since 1544, and had been the home of Philips Willem of Nassau (1554–1618), who held the

title of Prince of Orange before his younger half-brother, Maurits of Nassau.

- [8] Infrared reflectography was performed using a Santa Barbara Focalplane InSb camera fitted with an H astronomy filter.
- [9] The central axis was also discovered through infrared reflectography of the Rijksmuseum painting, *Still Life with Flowers in a Wan-li Vase* (SK-A-1522). See Arie Wallert and Jolanda de Bruijn, *Still Lifes: Techniques and Style* (Amsterdam, 1999), 48–51.
- [10] For more on this issue, see Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., *From Botany to Bouquets: Flowers in Northern Art* (Washington, DC, 1999), no. 11, fig. 32.
- [11] I would like to thank Perry Chapman and Rachel Pollack for independently advising this point to me. “Ambrosius” derives from the Greek *ambrotos*, meaning “immortal.”
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TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support is a hammered sheet of copper. At some point, four strips of wood were added along the outer edges, framing the outer edges of the panel with a small wooden border that extends approximately an eighth to a quarter of an inch from the outermost edges of the copper sheet.

The ground appears to be a white or light colored layer, which is followed by a thin layer of yellow-gray paint that was presumably applied as an imprimatura. Infrared reflectography at 1.5 to 1.8 microns^[1] revealed the presence of a highly detailed underdrawing. The entire composition is painted with extreme precision using thin layers of paint combined with a subtle layering technique. Bosschaert left several elements in the bouquet in reserve. The bouquet and the surrounding elements are painted with a colorful palette, using a variety of transparent, semi-transparent, and opaque layers. The highlights, the gold inscription, and the signature were most likely added during the final painting stages. The painting has not been treated since its acquisition by the National Gallery of Art.

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

PROVENANCE

Probably painted 1621 for Frederick van Schurman (or Schuermans) [1564-1623], The Hague.[1] (sale, Christie, Manson & Woods, London, 7 April 1922, no. 54); private collection, England; (John Mitchell & Sons, London); private collection, England; (Edward Speelman, Ltd., London); purchased 27 June 1996 by NGA.

[1] This painting is probably the one that Bosschaert took with him in 1621, when he traveled from Breda to The Hague to deliver a *blompot* (flower still-life painting) to Frederick van Schurman (or Schuermans), the *bottelier* of Prince Maurits. For this work Bosschaert received the extraordinary sum of 1,000 guilders. Maria Bosschaert, Ambrosius' daughter, wrote the following: "Mijn vader Ambrosius Bosschaert is gestorven in Schravenhage in 't jaer als den 12 jarigen Trebes uut was, doch was woonachtig binnen Breda maer near den Hage getrocken om een blompot te leveren die hij hadde gemaect voor de bottelier van Sijn Hoochheyd daervoor hij dusent gulden hadde bedongen ende is aldaer sieck geworden ten huuse van joncker Schuermans, vader van Anna Maria Schuermans ende aldaer gestorven ende in Schravenhage begraven, tot droefheyd van veel liefhebbers." See Abraham Bredius, "De bloemschilders Bosschaert," *Oud-Holland* 31 (1913):138. Frederick van Schurman had been ennobled by the Holy Roman Emperor, and the phrase Maria Bosschaert used to refer to Van Schurman, a *joncker* (from the German *Junker*), is an honorary title that corresponds to the old inscription "Jonckheere ..." on the verso of the painting.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1976 *The Inspiration of Nature*, John Mitchell and Son, London, 1976, p. 24.

1998 *A Collector's Cabinet*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1998, no. 7, fig. 13.

1998 *Copper as Canvas: Two Centuries of Masterpiece Paintings on Copper, 1525-1775*, Phoenix Art Museum; Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City; *Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis*, The Hague, 1998-1999, not in catalogue (shown only in The Hague).

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1999 From Botany to Bouquets: Flowers in Northern Art, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1999, no. 11, fig. 32.

2000 Art for the Nation: Collecting for a New Century, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 2000-2001, unnumbered catalogue, repro.

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- 1998 Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr. *A Collector's Cabinet*. Exh. cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1998: 24, 25, fig. 13, 65, no. 7.
- 1999 Ploeg, Peter van der. "Copper as canvas: Two centuries of masterpiece paintings on copperplate." *Mauritshuis in Focus* 12, no. 1 (1999): 23-24, color repro. 24, fig. 13.
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- 2000 National Gallery of Art. *Art for the Nation: Collecting for a New Century*. Exh. cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2000: 26-27, color repro.
- 2002 Ebert-Schifferer, Sybille. *Deceptions and Illusions: Five Centuries of Trompe l'Oeil painting*. Exh. cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2002: 81-82, fig. 4.
- 2004 Hand, John Oliver. *National Gallery of Art: Master Paintings from the Collection*. Washington and New York, 2004: 214-215, no. 172, color repro.
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