



Jan Davidsz de Heem
Dutch, 1606 - 1684

Vase of Flowers

c. 1660

oil on canvas

overall: 69.6 x 56.5 cm (27 3/8 x 22 1/4 in.)

framed: 90.1 x 77.8 cm (35 1/2 x 30 5/8 in.)

Inscription: lower left on parapet: J.D. De Heem f.

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ENTRY

The extraordinary delight the Dutch and Flemish took in the richness of the visual world is nowhere better expressed than in the flower paintings of Jan Davidsz de Heem. In his *Vase of Flowers*, the brightly colored blossoms, fruits, vegetables, and grains that seem to burst forth from the glass vase are painted with such sensitivity that they seem almost alive. Whether it be in the translucency of the petals, the sheen of dew drops on the leaves, or the minute insects that crawl about the stems and blossoms, De Heem has exerted painstaking care to capture the very essence of the still-life elements that make up his composition.

Other still-life painters shared De Heem's concern with illusionism, yet none matched his ability to convey a sense of organic life. Poppies, tulips, roses, wheat, and peas reach out in dynamic rhythms, while insects crawl and flutter about as though the air around them were rife with the varied smells of the richly laden bouquet. Through his artifice, De Heem has allowed the viewer not only to enjoy the beauty of the individual forms but also to imagine the richness of their fragrances. He has done so, moreover, with an arrangement of flowers, fruits, and vegetables that would never have been placed together in the same bouquet, for they grow at different seasons of the year.

While De Heem's ability to seize the full range of one's sensual experiences in appreciating flowers is exceptional, the underlying attitude in his work reflects concerns that had been fundamental to still-life painting since the early seventeenth century. Cardinal Borromeo, the patron of Jan Brueghel the Elder (Flemish, 1568 - 1625), for example, wrote of the pleasure he received from viewing the artist's flowers during icy winters and imagining their odors.[1] In 1646 a Dutch

poet, Joachim Oudaan, described not only the beauty of the blossoms but also the fragrance of a still-life painting.[2] De Heem's dynamic yet harmonious composition belongs to a long-standing tradition. In the early seventeenth century, Ambrosius Bosschaert (Dutch, 1573 - 1621) painted symmetrically arranged bouquets of flowers that were dominated by a large, centrally placed blossom. Stems of flowers were relatively short and flowers did not overlap. De Heem's work has evolved from this fairly rigid format—he breaks the symmetry, overlaps his blossoms, and, in particular, creates rhythms through his greatly elongated plant stems.

Finally, as did his predecessors, De Heem includes many types of flowers from different seasons of the year. Such artfully constructed compilations of elements that could never be seen together in nature gave still-life painting a status it could never have achieved if the artist had remained servile to the specifics of the natural world. Such a composition as this, while built upon careful observation of God's wonders, emphasized the importance of the role of the artist's imagination. The symbolic associations De Heem brought to the work confirm that such a still life was far more than a mere display of craft. The transient beauty of flowers, for example, was a common metaphor used to remind the viewer of the temporality of life. The bugs and snails that climb about the blossoms were understood allegorically to represent forces that help hasten the demise of temporal beauty. While De Heem clearly wished to convey this concept, by including such a wide range of seasons he also sought to make a statement about the value of art. These flowers will continue to blossom after nature's flowers have withered and died. Indeed, the concept *Ars longa, vita brevis* was fundamental to seventeenth-century Northern still-life painting.

De Heem's flower still lifes often had specific moral, and even religious, connotations. Occasionally this Catholic artist included a skull and the words *memento mori* adjacent to a flower piece [fig. 1]; in other instances he added a crucifix. In such cases, careful analyses of the flowers and grains he has included in his composition indicate that they were chosen because of the religious symbolism associated with them.[3] The question then arises whether the flowers and other plants in paintings with no explicit symbols of death or resurrection still carry similar associations.[4] In the case of the National Gallery's painting the answer is most certainly yes.

This bouquet was not only a compilation of the beauties of God's creations, a statement of the value of art, and a reminder of the transience of life, but it also put forth the hope of salvation and resurrection. Although no crucifix appears in this

work, the allusion to the cross in the reflection of the window on the glass vase serves the same purpose. Within such a context the prominent position of the white poppy upon which a butterfly alights has to be understood symbolically.[5] The poppy, which was associated with sleep and death, often alluded to the Passion of Christ, and the butterfly to the Resurrection. Other flowers, grains, fruits, and vegetables reinforce this message. The morning glory, for example, symbolizes the light of truth, for it opens at the break of day and closes in the evening. The bramble, believed to be the burning bush in which the angel of the Lord appeared to Moses, was associated with divine love that cannot be consumed. Grains of wheat can allude to the bread of the Last Supper, but they can also symbolize resurrection because the grain must fall to earth to regenerate. Like wheat, or peas, man must die and be buried before achieving eternal life.

Vase of Flowers is signed but not dated. Although De Heem's chronology is not easy to reconstruct, he probably executed this painting in Utrecht around 1660.[6] The painting has more elaborate rhythms in its forms and a more complex iconography than does De Heem's similar composition in the Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena, also entitled *Vase of Flowers*, which is signed and dated 1654. However, it cannot date too much later than the Dresden painting from the mid-1650s [fig. 1], which contains many like elements, including a poppy at the top of the composition and the image of a cross in the reflection on the vase. In any event, the composition must have been known by Abraham Mignon (German, 1640 - 1679) in Utrecht, for after he joined De Heem's workshop in 1669 he executed a *Vase of Flowers* that shares many similar elements.[7]

The blue hyacinth seen in the upper left of De Heem's *Vase of Flowers* is the one flower lacking in Mignon's painting, and for good reason. As Fred Meijer has astutely observed, a cluster of flowers in this area—including the hyacinth, hollyhock, and auricula in the upper left, the red-and-white carnation in the lower left, and the pink rosebud in between—were not part of De Heem's original composition. They were almost certainly added later by Jan van Huysum (Dutch, 1682 - 1749), probably because an early eighteenth-century owner wanted to have a fuller and denser composition. Meijer based his conclusion on the fact that virtually the same flowers appear in similar positions in Van Huysum's *Still Life of Flowers and Fruit in a Niche*, c. 1717, in the Speelman Collection [fig. 2].[8]

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

April 24, 2014

COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Jan Davidsz de Heem, *Memento Mori*, c. 1653, oil on canvas, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden. Photo: Hans-Peter Klut



fig. 2 Jan van Huysum, *Still Life of Flowers and Fruit in a Niche*, c. 1710–1715, oil on panel, The Edward and Sally Speelman Collection, on long term loan to the Houston Museum of Fine Arts

NOTES

- [1] See Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., “Still Life: Its Visual Appeal and Theoretical Status in the Seventeenth-Century,” in *Still Lifes of the Golden Age: Northern European Paintings from the Heinz Family Collection* (Washington, DC, 1989), 14–15.
- [2] See Lawrence Otto Goedde, “A Little World Made Cunningly: Dutch Still Life and Ekphrasis,” in *Still Lifes of the Golden Age: Northern European Paintings from the Heinz Family Collection* (Washington, DC, 1989), 40.
- [3] For an analysis of the *Flower Piece with Shell and Skull* in Dresden, see Sam Segal and Liesbeth M. Helmus, *Jan Davidsz. de Heem en zijn kring* (Utrecht, 1991), no. 28, 181–184.
- [4] For the identification of the plants and animals in this painting, see Sam Segal and Liesbeth M. Helmus, *Jan Davidsz. de Heem en zijn kring* (Utrecht, 1991), 187.
- [5] Much has been written on the symbolism of flowers in Dutch art. For an excellent overview of the problem, see Sam Segal, “The Symbolic Meaning of Flowers,” in *A Flowery Past: A Survey of Dutch and Flemish Flower Painting from 1600 until the Present* (Amsterdam, 1982), 12–25; see also Sam Segal and Liesbeth M. Helmus, *Jan Davidsz. de Heem en zijn kring* (Utrecht, 1991), 182–184.
- [6] For a similar De Heem composition, also undated, see E. U. Fechner, *Hollandskii naturmort XVII weka* (Moscow, 1981), 28, 169, pls. 62–63.
- [7] For this painting, see Fred G. Meijer, *Stillevens uit de Gouden Eeuw* (Rotterdam, 1989), no. 23, 94–95.

[8] Fred G. Meijer, "The 'Temptations of Flora': Jan van Huysum (1682–1749)," *Burlington Magazine* 149, no. 1247 (2007): 134–135.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support, a medium-weight, plain-weave fabric with irregularly spun threads, has been lined with the tacking margins trimmed. Cusping is visible along all edges. Paint is applied over a thin, smooth off-white ground in thin, liquid layers blended wet-into-wet. Outer flowers are painted over the dark background, while the central bouquet is painted directly over the white ground. The red-and-white poppy is painted over a light green underlayer. Reserves were left for details when final glazes were applied. Thin glazes are slightly abraded. Small losses in the background have been inpainted. No major treatment has been carried out since acquisition.

PROVENANCE

Baron Lionel Nathan de Rothschild [1808-1879], London; by inheritance to his son, Leopold de Rothschild [1845-1917]; by inheritance to his son, Lionel Nathan de Rothschild [1882-1942], Exbury, Hampshire; by inheritance to his son, Edmund Leopold de Rothschild [1916-2009], Exbury; sold 1947 to (Frank Partridge and Sons, London).[1] Mr. McIntosh, Bridge Allen, Scotland.[2] (William Hallsborough Gallery, London, 1958). (Fritz Nathan and Peter Nathan, Zurich, 1959); (Paul Rosenberg & Co., New York); purchased 17 May 1961 by NGA.

[1] The Rothschild provenance information was kindly provided by Michael Hall, curator to Edmund de Rothschild; see his "Rothschild Picture Provenances" from 1999 and letter of 27 February 2002, in NGA curatorial files, in which he cites relevant documents in The Rothschild Archive, London.

[2] The McIntosh name is provided by Nathan and Nathan; see their letter of 24 September 1959, in NGA curatorial files.

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1958 Exhibition of Fine Paintings and Drawings of Four Centuries, William Hallsborough Gallery, London, 1958.

1991 Jan Davidsz. de Heem en zijn kring, Centraal Museum, Utrecht; Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig, 1991, no. 30.

1991 The Age of the Marvelous, Hood Museum of Art, Hanover, New Hampshire; North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, 1991-1992, no. 157, repro.

1995 Dutch Cabinet Galleries, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1995-1996, no catalogue.

1998 A Collector's Cabinet, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1998, no. 25.

1999 From Botany to Bouquets: Flowers in Northern Art, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1999, no. 16, fig. 55.

2006 De verleiding van Flora: Jan van Huysum 1682-1749 (The Temptations of Flora: Jan van Huysum 1682-1749), Stedelijk Museum Het Prinsenhof, Delft; The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2006-2007, no. P4, repro., as *Flower Piece with White Opium Poppy and Peapods*.


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- 1965 *Summary Catalogue of European Paintings and Sculpture*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1965: 66.
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- 1982 Segal, Sam. *A Flowery Past: A Survey of Dutch and Flemish Flower Painting from 1600 until the Present*. Exh. cat. Kunsthandel P. de Boer, Amsterdam; Noordbrabants Museum, 's-Hertogenbosch. Mijdrecht, 1982: 12-25.
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- 1984 Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr. *Dutch Painting in the National Gallery of Art*. Washington, D.C., 1984: 18-19, color repro.
- 1985 National Gallery of Art. *European Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. Washington, 1985: 199, repro.
- 1988 Grimm, Claus. *Stilleben: Die niederländischen und deutschen Meister*. Stuttgart, 1988: 143.
- 1989 Meijer, Fred G. *Stillebens uit de Gouden Eeuw*. Exh. cat. Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, 1989: no. 23.
- 1989 Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr. "Still Life: Its Visual Appeal and Theoretical Status in the Seventeenth Century." In *Still Lives of the Golden Age: Northern European Paintings from the Heinz Family Collection*. Edited by Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr. and Ingvar Bergström. Exh. cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Washington, 1989: 14-15.
- 1991 *The Age of the Marvelous*. Exh. cat. Hood Museum of Art, Hanover, New Hampshire; North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, 1991-1992: 381, no. 157, repro.
- 1991 Segal, Sam. *Jan Davidsz de Heem en zijn kring*. Exh. cat. Centraal Museum, Utrecht; Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig. The Hague, 1991: no. 30.
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- 2007 Meijer, F. G. "Exhibition Reviews: The 'Temptations of Flora': Jan van Huysum (1682-1749)." *Burlington Magazine* 149, no. 1247 (2007): 134-135.
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- 2012 Paul, Tanya, et al. *Elegance and Refinement: The still-life paintings of Willem van Aelst*. Exh. cat. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; National Gallery of Art, Washington. New York, 2012: 42-43, fig. 7.

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