



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.

Andrew W. Mellon Fund 1961.6.1

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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]

While the relationship between De Heem and Mignon is clear, the blue hyacinth seen in the upper left of De Heem's *Vase of Flowers* has sparked debate about the possible involvement of another flower painter, Jan van Huysum (1682–1749). Fred Meijer has noted that certain flowers—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—are virtually identical to those found in Van Huysum's *Still Life of Flowers and Fruit in a Niche*, c. 1717, in the Speelman collection (fig. 2), leading him to conclude that they were added by Van Huysum. Recent cross-section analysis of the Washington painting has confirmed the presence of a non-pigmented resinous or oil-resin layer between the blue hyacinth and an earlier paint layer, which is not present in cross-sections taken elsewhere. However, while a resinous or oil resin layer in one cross-section may suggest that the flower was

added at a later time, there was no dirt layer found on top of it to confirm such a passage of time. [9] It is possible that this non-pigmented layer is an oiling out layer—a technique often used by artists to saturate an area as they work. The broader and more generalized articulation of the petals are, moreover, more characteristic of De Heem’s touch than Van Huysum, who employed highly refined brushwork and an exacting attention to detail. Van Huysum also subtly varied the thickness of his paint to create slight relief in his flower petals, thereby giving them their convincing sense of three-dimensionality.

Because these blossoms do not open at the same time of year, artists relied heavily on drawings to build their compositions. It is therefore not impossible that Van Huysum may have come into possession of drawings by De Heem, though no such drawings are known. Indeed, at this time it was common practice for artists to freely borrow discrete elements from each other’s work. Although the exact reason for the connection between these two paintings is unclear, close comparison of Van Huysum’s and De Heem’s flowers reveal how each artist applied their own distinct painting techniques to a shared visual vocabulary.

Original entry by Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., April 24, 2014.

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

December 9, 2019

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## 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

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## 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.

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- [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, *Stillezens 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.
- [9] See Technical Summary.

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### TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The original support is a medium-weight, plain-weave canvas with irregularly spun threads. [1] The painting is lined to a secondary support with the edges covered with brown paper tape. The original tacking margins have been removed. Cusping is visible along all the edges, suggesting that the original dimensions of the painting have been retained. The paint layers are applied over a thin, smooth off-white ground in thin layers blended wet into wet. De Heem took great care with the layering structure of the painting, and each compositional element has been rendered differently to create the desired effect. Reserves were used for some flowers, while in other areas specifically toned underlayers were applied; some flowers and insects were painted directly on top of the dark background.

The support, ground, and paint layers are all in excellent condition. The painting was treated in 2016, during which a grime layer, nonoriginal discolored coatings, and overpaint were removed. There is only minor abrasion throughout the shadowed portion of the marble ledge, the red and white carnation in the bottom left quadrant, and the white flower at the top of the composition, as well as a few scattered pinpoint losses throughout the background. A new varnish was applied

and abrasion and old losses were compensated for using reversible and stable materials.

Cross-section analysis and scanning electron microscopy-energy dispersive x-ray analysis (SEM-EDX) were also conducted during the 2016 treatment to investigate the possibility that Jan van Huysum added flowers to De Heem's composition (see Entry). One of the cross-sections confirmed the presence of a non-pigmented resin or oil-resin layer between the blue hyacinth and the green leaf below. However this non-pigmented layer was absent from the other two cross-sections. While a resin or oil resin layer in one cross-section may suggest the paint layers above were added later, no dirt layer was found on top of the non-pigmented layer to confirm the passage of time. It is possible that the non-pigmented layer is an oiling out layer, often used by artists to saturate an area while they are working. Clear evidence of paint application postdating the attribution to De Heem was not revealed by the samples examined. [2]

Dina Anchin, based on the examination report by Susanna Griswold.

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## TECHNICAL NOTES

- [1] Earlier technical summaries of this work were prepared by Melissa Katz and Catherine Metzger.
- [2] See the analysis report in NGA conservation files: Michael Palmer, WA1381\_De Heem\_Vase of Flowers\_1961.6.1, National Gallery of Art, July 28, 2017.
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## 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.

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## 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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