

bouquets, sometimes focused on flowers, sometimes on fruit.³ Although they are essentially decorative ensembles, complete with requisite insects to add to their illusionistic character, they derive from a tradition that began in a far more serious vein. The origins of such hanging bouquets are to be found at the beginning of the seventeenth century in paintings by Daniel Seghers (1590–1661). By the mid-1620s Seghers had developed a specialty in which he painted garlands of flowers hanging from ribbons around a painted image of an altarpiece.⁴ Seghers, a devout Jesuit, developed his concept from the floral garlands painted by his teacher, Jan Brueghel the Elder, but also from the Church practice of surrounding altarpieces with garlands of live flowers.⁵

Seghers' innovation was widely emulated in Flemish art. Paintings of flowers and fruits surrounding illusionistically painted sculptures and religious scenes were executed by a number of Flemish artists, among them Joris van Son (1623–1667), Jan Pauwels Gillemans I (1618–c.1675), Frans Ykens (1613–c.1679), and, most significantly in this context, Mignon's teacher, Jan Davidsz. de Heem (q.v.). All of these artists, moreover, followed Seghers' practice of choosing flowers and fruits that were imbued with symbolism related to the religious image at the center of their compositions.⁶ De Heem expanded upon this genre in two basic ways. Occasionally he depicted a single bouquet of fruit or flowers, or combination thereof, hanging from a stone niche in which rested various religious objects, thereby shifting the focus of the painting from a centrally placed religious image to the floral/fruit arrangement.⁷ He also occasionally removed the religious component of the scene entirely. A number of his paintings depict garlands of flowers or fruit hanging from blue ribbons before an otherwise empty painted stone niche.⁸

Mignon, in this painting, has removed even those vague references to the origins of this pictorial genre that remained in De Heem's garland paintings. Not only is there no reference to the central devotional character of Seghers' paintings, but he has also eliminated all references to a niche. All that remains from the earlier tradition is the blue ribbon from which the festoon hangs. Despite this adaptation in the character of the motif, the strong relationship this work has with De Heem's paintings suggests that Mignon must have executed it shortly after he left De Heem's workshop, thus probably in the late 1660s. There is absolutely no basis for questioning the attribution as was done by Kraemer-Noble.⁹

Notes

1. Limited pigment analysis is available in the Scientific Research department (17 August 1993).

2. Correspondence from Peter Mitchell, 22 June 1992 (in NGA curatorial files). The painting may have come to Mitchell from a Mr. Phillips, of Hitchin (Antiques) Ltd., for it is noted as having been in his possession by Pavière 1965, 32.

3. For a listing of these see the catalogue of Mignon's paintings in Kraemer-Noble 1973.

4. Seghers collaborated with a number of other artists in these works, including Cornelis Schut the Elder (1597–1655), Gerard Seghers (1591–1651), and Abraham van Diepenbeeck (1596–1675).

5. These observations are made by Ildiko Ember in Wausau 1989, 66.

6. For an assessment of the symbolic relationships of a number of these paintings see Paris, 1987.

7. See Segal in Utrecht 1991, cat. 27, 177–180. In this painting from the National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, signed and dated 1653, a crucifix and a skull rest in the niche from which hangs a garland of fruit. Segal analyzes extensively the symbolic associations of the fruit.

8. Segal in Utrecht 1991, cat. 23, 171–172. According to Segal, De Heem painted more than ten such paintings. One of these is dated 1675. In 1669, however, Cosimo de' Medici acquired such a garland painting, which hangs today in the Palazzo Pitti, Florence.

9. See Kraemer-Noble 1973, 53, cat. no. B142.

References

1965 Pavière: 32, color repro.

1973 Kraemer-Noble: 53, no. B142.

1989.23.1

Still Life with Fruit, Fish, and a Nest

c. 1675

Oil on canvas, 94 x 73.5 (36.7 x 28.7)

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

Technical Notes: The support, a fine-weight, plain-weave fabric, has a double lining. The tacking margins are trimmed but cusping visible along all edges indicates the original dimensions have been retained. 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. A smooth, thin white ground was applied overall, followed by a brown imprimatura also employed as the background tone. Infrared reflectography reveals a grid layout for the transfer of the precise brush-applied underdrawing in the fish and fruits.

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. 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.

Provenance: Private collection, Germany. Mr. and Mrs. H. John Heinz III, Washington.

Exhibited: Washington 1989a: no. 28.

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 cavernous scene. The fishing pole and its case can be seen resting on the fruit piled in the wicker basket. A nest with four eggs, which lies in the branches of the hibiscus, is watched over by a European goldfinch and a great tit perched on branches of a craggy, moss-covered tree, and by a goldfinch standing on the handle of the basket.¹ 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. Mignon has included eggs, which stand for birth, as well as birds, who communicate with each other in a flirtatious way. Ripe fruit and blossoming flowers indicate maturity, while old age is included in the guise of the gnarled tree. The lizard and fish represent death. Complementing these dual aspects of abundance and the life cycle are religious concepts that reflect upon the broader theme of the cycle of life. The wheat and grapes, so prominently displayed in the 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, was clearly inspired by the work of Jan Davidsz. de Heem (q.v.), with whom Mignon worked 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 was presumably active in the master's studio. This still life, 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



Fig. 1. Jan Davidsz. de Heem, *Ruins with Fruit and Bird's Nest*, late 1660s, oil on canvas, Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister

Mignon might not have had an active hand in its execution. In any event, from this basis, Mignon executed a number of related works, which became progressively more decorative and mannered as a result of his luminous colors and crisp articulation of forms. One composition, *Still Life with Flowers, Fish and Bird's Nest* (Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest, inv. no. 3539), is particularly close in concept, the basic difference being that a selection of flowers instead of fruit serves as the primary still-life motif.

The large number of such complex compositions still extant confirms 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. He also painted variants and multiple versions of his most successful works. At least three other versions of 1989.23.1 exist: a signed version (fig. 2) in the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich (inv. no. 53.260); an unsigned version in the Hermitage, Saint Petersburg (inv. no. 1358); and an unsigned version sold on the New York art market (Sotheby's, 12 January 1989, no. 187).



Fig. 2. Abraham Mignon, *Still Life*, c. 1675, oil on canvas, Munich, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen

Fig. 3. Detail of infrared reflectogram of 1989.23.1

The signed Munich version is the prime example of this composition, while the Gallery's painting is most likely an autograph replica. Infrared reflectography reveals an extensive, vigorously executed, underdrawing, outlining the composition (fig. 3). Evidence of a grid pattern in the underdrawing indicates that Mignon transferred the composition from another source, probably a preparatory drawing.² While he had various students who may well have made replicas, and his paintings were reputed to have been copied after his death,³ the quality of this example is so high that one must assume he 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.⁴ The National Gallery's painting,

moreover, is not an exact replica of the Munich version: slight variations exist in the position of the frog and dead lizard in the foreground relative to the other still-life elements.

Notes

1. Dr. Stoor 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.
2. Kraemer-Noble 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.
3. See Segal in Utrecht 1991, 214, 217, note 2.
4. The surety of execution is also evident in the x-radiograph of the painting. The areas where some studio participation may exist are the basket and the background.

References

- 1989a Washington: no. 28.



Abraham Mignon, *Still Life with Fruit, Fish, and a Nest*, 1989. 23.1