

Balthasar van der Ast

1593/1594–1657

BALTHASAR VAN DER AST was born in Middelburg. Although the date of his birth is not recorded, legal action by his guardian and brother Jacob on 30 June 1618 and on 13 September 1619 indicates that Balthasar turned twenty-five (his maturity) around this time. He was orphaned when his father, Hans, a wealthy widower, died in 1609. After his father's death he may have lived with his older sister Maria and her husband, the still-life painter Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder (1573–1621). The precise technique and symmetrical compositions of Van der Ast's early paintings show the impact of Bosschaert's art, which he could have seen in his brother-in-law's studio. He seems to have accompanied Bosschaert when he moved from Middelburg to Bergen op Zoom and then to Utrecht.

In 1619 Van der Ast joined the Saint Luke's Guild in Utrecht. While there he probably trained Bosschaert's three sons after their father died in 1621. He also taught Jan Davidsz. de Heem (q.v.). There too Van der Ast was influenced by Roelandt Savery (q.v.). As a result he began to paint in a softer, more atmospheric manner than previously and to animate his still lifes with small animals and insects. In 1632 he moved to Delft and joined the town's Saint Luke's Guild. Although most of his still lifes are relatively small, his style loosened during his Delft period when he painted a number of larger scale works. Van der Ast died in December 1657 and was buried in the Oude Kerk in Delft.

Bibliography

Bol 1960.
Bol 1982: 52–56.

1992.51.1

Basket of Fruits

c. 1622
Oil on oak, 18.1 x 22.8 (7 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 9)
Gift of Mrs. Paul Mellon

Inscriptions

At lower right: *.B.vander.ast . . .*

Technical Notes: The support is a single, horizontally grained wood board with thin wood strips attached to edges beveled on the back. Paint is applied over an off-white ground

in thin, opaque, and translucent layers with minimal brushmarking. Discolored retouching covers scattered minor losses, particularly in the fruit. The ground is visible through small areas of moderate abrasion. No conservation has been carried out since acquisition.

Provenance: Probably Princess Amalia van Solms, The Hague, by 1632. Private collection, possibly Mrs. Beaumont. (sale, Christie's, London, 19 March 1906, no. 17). (Fritz Gerstel Gallery, Berlin); his sale, Kunstsalon Keller & Reiner, Berlin, 21–22 January 1908, nos. 36 and 37). (Kunsthandel Gebr. Douwes, Amsterdam, c. 1938). Dr. Hans Wetzlar, Amsterdam, by 1952; (his sale, Sotheby Mak van Waay, Amsterdam, 9 June 1977, no. 5); (John Mitchell & Son, London); sold November 1977 to Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon, Upperville, Virginia.

Exhibited: *Jubileumtentoonstelling Gebroeders Douwes* [Kunsthandel Gebr.], Amsterdam, 1955, nos. 1, 2. *La Nature Morte et son Inspiration*, Galerie André Weil, Paris, 1960, no. 1.

1992.51.2

Basket of Flowers

c. 1622
Oil on oak, 17.8 x 23.5 (7 x 9 $\frac{1}{4}$)
Gift of Mrs. Paul Mellon

Inscriptions

At lower left: *.B.vander.ast . . .*

Technical Notes: The support, a single, horizontally grained wood board, has a slight concave warp. Thin wood strips are attached to edges beveled on the back. Paint is applied over an off-white ground in thin, opaque, and translucent layers with minimal brushmarking. Retouching covers scattered minor losses. Abrasion is moderate throughout, particularly in the darks of the shells. No conservation has been carried out since acquisition.

Provenance: Same as 1992.51.1.

Exhibited: Same as 1992.51.1 (no. 2).

BY THE EARLY 1630s, when an inventory of their possessions was made, the Prince of Orange, Frederik Hendrik, and his wife Amalia van Solms, had formed an imposing collection of contemporary Dutch and Flemish paintings. Their taste led them to collect mythological and allegorical paintings, as well as princely portraits. Only four still lifes are listed, two of which hung in a small room belonging to the princess that also contained two allegorical



Balthasar van der Ast, *Basket of Flowers*, 1692. 51.2

paintings attributed to Rubens and a portrait of Amalia van Solms by Rembrandt. 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, who was trained by his brother-in-law, Ambrosius Bosschaert, had learned from him the fundamentals of painting, in particular the accurate depiction of flowers, fruits, shells, insects, baskets, and Chinese-export ceramics—the 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 He may also have learned from Bosschaert the art of making 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, in his *Basket of Flowers*, softens his forms with diffuse contours and more muted colors. 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, which range from tulips, roses, irises, fritillary, and columbine to an anemone, hyacinth, carnation, and cyclamen leaf, but also with the rare and exotic shells and fruit that lie on the table. Further enlivening the scene is a dragonfly in the upper right and a hermit crab in the lower left.

The same richness within a small scale is evident in the companion piece, *Basket of Fruits*. Here, arranged in an identical wicker basket, are three sorts of grapes, plums, apples, apricots, a Seville orange, and a quince. On the table are many of the same types of fruit, as well as medlars and cherries. Add-

ing elegance and preciousness to the scene are two Wan-Li plates that Van der Ast has placed at a slant on each side of the basket.

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 the abundance and beauty of God’s creation, a prevalent theme in early seventeenth-century still-life painting.⁷ Van der Ast may well have introduced the shells and the Wan-Li china for their exotic appeal, but their presence also allowed him to include all of the four elements; for 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 (q.v.), who had also joined the Utrecht Saint Luke’s Guild in 1619. Van der Ast painted a number of comparable compositions in the early 1620s, where the same elements appear. Segal has noted that the Batavian rose, visible here in the front of the *Basket of Flowers*, was replaced in Van der Ast’s repertoire by the Provins rose around 1623, further confirmation for the early dating of these paintings.⁸

Notes

1. Drossaers 1930, 212, cat. no. 76, 77: “Twee cleyne schilderikens met ebben lijsten, het een een mandeken met fruyten ende het ander een mandeken met bloemen, door [Balthasar] van der Ast gedaen.” The inventory was made in August 1632.

2. The connection between the description in this inventory and these two paintings was first made by Bol 1955, 146, note 36. Bol 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.

4. See Bergström 1984–1985, 66–75.

5. See Bergström 1983–1984, 66, fig. 1.

6. Bol 1960 has identified this tulip, known as a “Summer Beauty,” in at least nine other compositions: (cat. nos. 18, 20, 26, 46, 63, 116).

7. See Washington 1989a, 11–25.

8. Segal in Osaka 1990, 190.

References

- 1952 Friedländer: 8, nos. 2, 3, repros.
 1955 Bol: 138–154.
 1960 Bol: 38, 74 no. 38, 79 no. 72, pl. 39b, 102, note 85.
 1990 Segal in Osaka: 191.