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SMALL WONDERS: DUTCH STILL LIFES BY ADRIAEN COORTE ON VIEW AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART JUNE 29 THROUGH SEPTEMBER 28, 2003



Adriaen Coorte
Still Life with Shells, 1698
oil on paper on panel, 17 x 22.5 cm (6 11/16 x 8 7/8 inches)
Private collection, Boston

Washington, DC -- Largely unknown until the 1950s, Adriaen Coorte (active 1683-1707) today is considered one of the most compelling still-life painters of the seventeenth century. After nearly three hundred years of obscurity, his luminous still lifes are now recognized as masterpieces. **Small Wonders: Dutch Still Lives by Adriaen Coorte**, on view in the West Building of the National Gallery of Art from June 29 through September 28, 2003, is the first exhibition in the United States of the work of this remarkable yet little-known artist. Organized by the National Gallery of Art to mark the

acquisition of its first painting by Coorte, *Still Life with Asparagus and Red Currants* (1696), the exhibition presents 19 of the artist's rare works.

Coorte's compositions generally consist of a few still-life objects against a dark background. Whether his focus was a bowl of wild strawberries, an arrangement of exotic shells, or a bunch of asparagus, he imbued his scenes with a haunting timelessness. Today he is recognized as a gifted and original master, one whose spare and carefully balanced compositions are highly prized by both public and private collectors.

"We are delighted to celebrate the addition of a Coorte painting to our collections with a larger viewing of his work," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art.

"We are grateful to the Shell Oil Company Foundation and to the private and museum lenders who have made it possible for us to present these rare and special paintings."

Exhibition Support

Shell Oil Company Foundation, on behalf of Shell's employees and customers, appreciates the opportunity to help bring this presentation to the National Gallery of Art.

"We are pleased and proud to help bring **Small Wonders** to the National Gallery of Art and the work of Adriaen Coorte to the attention of the American public," said Lynn Elsenhans, president and country chair of Shell in the United States. "It has been a privilege over the years for Shell to be associated with the National Gallery of Art."

This is the ninth exhibition sponsored by the Shell Oil Company Foundation at the National Gallery of Art. Other recent sponsorships include: **Aelbert Cuyp** (2001-02) and a series of exhibitions in the Dutch Cabinet Galleries, including **Gerrit Dou (1613-1675): Master Painter in the Age of Rembrandt** (2000), **From Botany to Bouquets: Flowers in Northern Art** (1999), and **A Collector's Cabinet** (1998).

The Exhibition

Coorte is a visual poet whose intimate still lifes allow the viewer to see both the familiar and the exotic with wonder and admiration. In his mature paintings, shells, fruits, and vegetables are transformed into images of singular beauty. Coorte generally placed his

objects on a cracked gray stone ledge, but each painting's subjects appear to reach upward toward an unseen light source, giving the work a sense of life and optimism.

Coorte's earliest paintings of 1683, which depict exotic birds in a landscape, are of an entirely different character than his mature works. One example of that early style appears in the exhibition, *A Wooded Rocky Landscape with Swimming Ducks* (1683).

Two years later, Coorte had abandoned this manner of decorative painting and had begun to focus his attention on restrained still lifes of shells, fruits, and vegetables, motifs that would fascinate him for the rest of his career. The exhibition presents some of his finest works, including *Still Life with Medlars and Gooseberries* (1686), *Still Life with Shells* (1698), and *Still Life with Strawberries* (1705).

Although very little is known about Coorte's life, the distinctive qualities of his paintings relate to the character of the place where he lived. From the few clues available, Coorte is assumed to have lived in Middelburg, a prosperous trading city in the province of Zeeland in the Netherlands. Blessed with a temperate climate, Middelburg was the site of many celebrated gardens. Botanists and collectors of the time reveled in the close observation of Middelburg's plants and flowers, finding in them evidence that God was to be found in the smallest of his creations.

This joyous contemplation of nature informs Coorte's paintings. Coorte painted modest delicacies that were edible pleasures -- asparagus, wild strawberries, peaches, and gooseberries. They were not particularly rare foods at the time, but special ones, to be savored at memorable occasions. Wild strawberries, for example, were valued enough to be presented in expensive Chinese bowls, as in *Strawberries in a Wan-Li Bowl* (1704).

Coorte's also painted a number of vanitas scenes during the mid-to-late 1680s. In these paintings Coorte included images of objects that traditionally warned the viewer about the transience of life and the dangers of sensual pleasures. However, as in *Vanitas Still Life in a Niche* (1688), Coorte painted these objects with an objective clarity.

The Artist

Despite careful research by eminent art historians, virtually nothing is known about Coorte except that his signed and dated paintings, which number about 100, range from 1683 to 1707. Not only are his life dates unknown, no information has survived about his artistic training. The scholarly consensus is that he lived and worked in Middelburg, the capital of the province of Zeeland in the southern part of the Netherlands. An "Adriaen Coorte," who could have been his father, lived in Middelburg in 1665, and Coorte's still lifes were collected largely by Middelburg art lovers.

The only document that refers to Coorte during his lifetime concerns a fine for selling paintings in the Middelburg market, levied because he was not a member of the local artists' guild. This fine has led to speculation that Coorte may have lived in the surrounding countryside, and may have been a gentleman "amateur" painter rather than a professional artist.

It was not until the 1950s, and particularly the 1958 exhibition devoted to the painter at the Dordrechts Museum in the Netherlands, that Coorte's unique artistic qualities became known to a wider public. Since then his works have become increasingly appreciated and valued by both private collectors and major museums.

Curator and Related Activities

Arthur Wheelock, curator of northern baroque paintings, National Gallery of Art, Washington, is curator of **Small Wonders: Dutch Still Lifes by Adriaen Coorte** and author of the brochure that will accompany the exhibition. This free brochure is also available in a large-type version.

Wheelock will deliver a lecture, "Adriaen Coorte: A Curator's View" on Sunday, September 7, 2003, at 2:00 p.m. in the East Building Auditorium.

A 50-minute "Gallery Talk" on the exhibition will be given by National Gallery of Art lecturer J. Russell Sale on July 8, 12, and 15 at noon and on July 17 and 18 at 1:00 p.m. in the West Building, meeting in the Rotunda.

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General Information

The National Gallery of Art and its Sculpture Garden are at all times free to the public. They are located on the National Mall between 3rd and 9th Streets along Constitution Avenue NW and are open Monday through Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. With the exception of the atrium and library, the galleries in the East Building will be closing gradually beginning in July 2013 and will remain closed for approximately three years for Master Facilities Plan and renovations. For specific updates on gallery closings, visit www.nga.gov/renovation (<http://www.nga.gov/renovation>) .

For information call (202) 737-4215 or the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) at (202) 842-6176, or visit the Gallery's website at www.nga.gov. Follow the Gallery on Facebook at www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt and on Twitter at twitter.com/ngadc.

Visitors will be asked to present all carried items for inspection upon entering. Checkrooms are free of charge and located at each entrance. Luggage and other oversized bags must be presented at the 4th Street entrances to the East or West Building to permit x-ray screening and must be deposited in the checkrooms at those entrances. For the safety of visitors and the works of art, nothing may be carried into the Gallery on a visitor's back. Any bag or other items that cannot be carried reasonably and safely in some other manner must be left in the checkrooms. Items larger than 17 by 26 inches cannot be accepted by the Gallery or its checkrooms.

For additional press information please call or send inquiries to:

Press Office

National Gallery of Art

2000B South Club Drive

Landover, MD 20785

phone: (202) 842-6353 e-mail: pressinfo@nga.gov

Deborah Ziska

Chief of Press and Public Information

(202) 842-6353

ds-ziska@nga.gov