



Jan van Huysum
Dutch, 1682 - 1749

Flowers in an Urn

c. 1720/1722

oil on panel

overall: 79.9 x 60 cm (31 7/16 x 23 5/8 in.)

framed: 99.7 x 80.6 x 8.2 cm (39 1/4 x 31 3/4 x 3 1/4 in.)

Inscription: lower left on front of marble tabletop: Jan Van Huysum fecit

Adolph Caspar Miller Fund 1977.7.1

ENTRY

Situated as they are against a pale greenish-ocher background, the subtle colors and organic rhythms of Van Huysum's exuberant floral display create an elegant ensemble. The poppy, morning glory, and ranunculus tendrils that weave in and out of the densely massed rose, vinca, carnation, iris, and tulip blossoms carry the eye throughout the bouquet, so that the viewer takes in the entire arrangement without focusing unduly upon any individual blossom. The image's decorative character is further enhanced by the terra-cotta vase embellished with playful cupids and the precariously perched nest containing three pale blue eggs.

Van Huysum is known to have studied with his father, Justus van Huysum (1659–1716), yet in this work the primary artistic inspiration must have been that of Jan Davidsz de Heem (Dutch, 1606 - 1684). De Heem, whose realistic depictions of natural forms were greatly admired in the early eighteenth century, [1] similarly organized his flower bouquets with sweeping rhythms that draw the eye in a circular pattern throughout the composition (see *Vase of Flowers*). His remarkable painting techniques allowed him to create illusionistic images of individual blossoms. De Heem's complex bouquets included flowers that would never be in bloom at the same time, for example, tulips and morning glories, and Van Huysum likewise took pleasure in including such improbable combinations in his paintings. Perhaps following De Heem's lead, Van Huysum similarly depicted both tightly formed blossoms at the height of their beauty and tulips with wide opened petals, indicative of flowers past their prime. Moreover, like De Heem, Van Huysum enlivened his scenes with insects of various types, such as small ants crawling on (and occasionally eating) petals and butterflies alighting on the uppermost

blossoms. Finally, whether as an artistic conceit or to emphasize the freshness of the bouquet, both artists delighted in depicting dewdrops gathered on the green leaves. The water droplets act as a foil to the delicate colors and shapes of the blossoms and also add small accents of light that further activate the compositions.

Despite the similarities in concept apparent in the works of these two men, great differences also exist. De Heem preferred a dark background against which he could contrast the whites and vibrant colors of his bouquet and concentrate the energy of his composition. Van Huysum, by contrast, chose later in his career to use backgrounds with a light tonality so that he could create a more delicate and, ultimately, more decorative image. De Heem often included nonfloral elements, such as stalks of grain and bean pods, that were instrumental in conveying an underlying religious meaning for his paintings. Van Huysum, on the other hand, does not appear to have chosen specific types of plants for their symbolic associations. Rather, he seems to have designed floral arrangements to suggest both the richness and fertility of nature and, through allusions to the cycle of life, the transience of earthly existence.

The chronological evolution of Van Huysum's style is difficult to determine because of the relative paucity of dated still lifes. This work, however, with its light background, must date shortly after *Still Life with Flowers and Fruit* and belong to the early part of Van Huysum's mature phase, which began around 1720. Infrared reflectography seems to confirm this, as it reveals in the upper right corner a sharply defined vertical element resembling a pilaster—an architectural element that began to appear in his work in that decade. [2] During the early 1720s he tended to place his flowers in terra-cotta vases decorated with playful putti fashioned after the relief sculptures of François Duquesnoy. [3] This work is more lyrically composed than his early flower still life in Karlsruhe dated 1714 [fig. 1], but is not as complex as, for example, the asymmetrically conceived *Bouquet of Flowers in an Urn*, 1724, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art [fig. 2]. Other characteristics of the somewhat later style of the Los Angeles painting are the ornately shaped stone ledge and the outdoor setting. [4]

With his technical virtuosity and precise observations of flowers and fruit, Van Huysum was able to convey both the varied rhythms of a striped tulip's petal and the glistening sheen of its variegated surface. Just how he achieved these effects has never been precisely determined because he was a secretive artist who hid his artistic techniques from others. Nevertheless, it would seem that his paintings combine blossoms rendered from life and those derived from drawn models. In a

CC NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS
Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century

letter to a patron in 1742, Van Huysum complained that he could not complete a still life that included a yellow rose until the flower blossomed the following spring. [5] The rose in question was presumably similar to the hybrid known as *Rosa huysumiana* seen in the left center of this painting. Indeed, certain of his paintings carry two dates from consecutive years. [6] While it is not known whether Van Huysum painted this work over an extended period of time, Pentimenti, particularly near the poppies at the top of the bouquet, indicate that he made significant changes in the arrangement of these compositional elements.

Van Huysum's dynamic painting process is further revealed through infrared reflectography, which shows that he both left reserves for flowers and stalks that were never included in the final composition and also painted blooms for which he did not make a reserve, only to paint them out at a later stage. While such alterations and revisions may complicate our understanding of Van Huysum's process, it is precisely the complex evolution of the present work that lends the floral arrangement such vigor and spontaneity.

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

COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Jan van Huysum, *Floral Still Life*, 1714, oil on panel, Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe. © Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe 2010. Photo: W. Pankoke



fig. 2 Jan van Huysum, *Bouquet of Flowers in an Urn*, 1724, oil on panel, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Edward William Carter

NOTES

- [1] See Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen*, 3 vols. (The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1980), 1:209–211.
- [2] See Technical Summary, and also Sam Segal, Mariël Ellens, and Joris Dik, *The Temptations of Flora: Jan Van Huysum, 1682–1749* (Zwolle, 2006).
- [3] For Duquesnoy's relief sculpture, see Mariette Fransolet, *François du Quesnoy: Sculpteur d'Urbain VIII, 1597–1643* (Brussels, 1942). John Walsh Jr. and Cynthia P. Schneider, in *A Mirror of Nature: Dutch Paintings from the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Edward William Carter* (Los Angeles, 1981), 66, believe that although the figures were inspired by Duquesnoy, the vases

were actually designed by Van Huysum himself.

- [4] John Walsh Jr. and Cynthia P. Schneider, in *A Mirror of Nature: Dutch Paintings from the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Edward William Carter* (Los Angeles, 1981), 66 n. 9, have determined that the first dated painting by Van Huysum with an outdoor background is from 1720.
- [5] Friedrich Schlie, "Sieben Briefe und eine Quittung von Jan van Huijsum," *Oud-Holland* 18, no. 3 (1900): 141. The letter, dated July 17, 1742, was written to A. N. van Haften, agent for the Duke of Mecklenburg.
- [6] Maurice Harold Grant, *Jan van Huysum, 1682–1749* (Leigh-on-Sea, 1954), no. 19, *Vase of Flowers, 1723/1724*; no. 162, *Fruits and Flowers, 1732/1733*.
-

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The wood support is a single vertically grained plank that was thinned and cradled during a previous treatment. [1] A thin, white, smooth ground was applied overall. The paint is of a medium paste consistency with slight impasto used to create specific flower petals. The paint layering is complex and varies depending on how much a particular area was reworked by the artist. The background is composed of at least five to six layers. The lighter and more yellow paint in the background was only applied on the right side of the composition and ends at the top center near the stem of the red and white poppy. This partial layer was applied when the composition was close to completion. It was carefully painted up to and around many of the elements in the right side of the bouquet, helping to further define their shape. In comparison, most of the leaves and flowers on the left side of the composition were painted directly on the darker earth-colored layer.

Multispectral infrared reflectography (MS-IRR) helped to reveal numerous changes in the composition. [2] Reserves were left for a number of flowers, stalks, and leaves, but some of these elements were never incorporated into the final composition. Other flowers and leaves, for which no reserve was left in the initial blocking out of the composition, were brought to a more finished state and then painted out, either covered up by another part of the bouquet or incorporated into the background. Several adjustments were made to both the size and shape of the putti on the terra-cotta vase, as well as to the angle and shape of the marble pediment. Many of these changes, especially those to the bouquet itself, resulted in a more vibrant and lively composition, rather than a full, symmetrical bouquet. Also visible in MS-IRR are a number of sharply drawn, bold lines that may have

been made using a wet medium such as ink. While two of those lines form the front edge of the marble slab, there are a few other lines that don't appear to correlate with any other elements within the final composition. Lastly there is a vertical cylindrical form on the right side of the painting, possibly representing a column or tree trunk, which may indicate Van Huysum was considering a landscape or outdoor scene for the background rather than gradated color.

The support, ground, and paint layers are in good and stable condition. There is a small vertical check in the top edge, left of the center, that has been repaired. There is a fine craquelure pattern throughout, as well as small scattered losses. Previous restorers, in an effort to "reveal" pentimenti, overcleaned and greatly abraded the top background layers. During treatment in 2015, grime and a moderately thick, discolored, nonoriginal varnish layer was removed, as was some old overpaint. The painting was also revarnished and inpainted with stable and reversible materials.

Dina Anchin, based on the examination report by Kay Silberfeld.

December 9, 2019

TECHNICAL NOTES

- [1] Earlier technical summaries of this work were prepared by Melissa Katz and Catherine Metzger.
- [2] Multispectral infrared reflectography: composite of three registered infrared images, in wavelength bands 1100–1400 nm (blue), 1500–1800 nm (green), and 2100–2400 nm (red). Courtesy of John Delaney, Kate Dooley, and Giorgio Trumpy, scientific research department, National Gallery of Art, Washington.
-

PROVENANCE

(Jacques Goudstikker, Amsterdam), by 1919 until at least 1920. Vas Diag, before 1924; (Leggatt Brothers, London); acquired 21 July 1924 by Lord Claud Hamilton;^[1] by inheritance to his widow, Lady Claud Hamilton; (sale, Christie, Manson & Woods, London, 28 November 1975, no. 23); (Alexander Gallery, London); purchased 18 February 1977 by NGA.

[1] The provenance from Vas Diag to Lord Hamilton is given in a letter from Charles Leggatt to Arthur Wheelock, 31 December 1982, in NGA curatorial files. Records of the Leggatt Brothers that might have provided more information about Diag and the purchase from him were destroyed in World War II. “Lord Claud Hamilton” could be one of several people; one possibility is that he was Lord Claud Nigel Hamilton (1889–1975), whose widow (she died 1984) was born Violet Ruby Ashton, and was earlier Mrs. Keith W. Newall.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1919 Collection Goudstikker d'Amsterdam, Pulchri Studio, The Hague, 1919, no. 13.

1920 Collection Goudstikker d'Amsterdam, Kunstkring, Rotterdam, 1920, no. 24.

1976 Spring Exhibition, Alexander Gallery, London, 1976.

1997 Rembrandt and the Golden Age: Dutch Paintings from the National Gallery of Art, The Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, 1997, unnumbered brochure, repro.

1998 The Age of Opulence: Arts of the Baroque, Oklahoma City Art Museum, 1998-1999, brochure, repro.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1919 Goudstikker, Jacques. *Catalogue de la collection Goudstikker d'Amsterdam*. Exh. cat. Pulchri Studio, The Hague. Haarlem, 1919: no. 13.
- 1920 Goudstikker, Jacques. *Catalogue de la collection Goudstikker d'Amsterdam*. Exh. cat. Rotterdamsche Kunstkring. Rotterdam, 1920: no. 24.
- 1954 Grant, Maurice Harold. *Jan van Huysum, 1682–1749*. Leigh-on-Sea, 1954: no. 3.
- 1985 National Gallery of Art. *European Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. Washington, 1985: 208, repro.
- 1995 Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr. *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*. The Collections of the National Gallery of Art Systematic Catalogue. Washington, 1995: 144-145, color repro. 143.

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century

- 1997 Chrysler Museum of Art. *Rembrandt and the Golden Age: Dutch paintings from the National Gallery of Art*. Exh. brochure. Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk. Washington, 1997: unnumbered repro.
- 1998 Oklahoma City Art Museum. *The Age of Opulence: Arts of the Baroque*. Exh. brochure. Oklahoma City Art Museum, Oklahoma City, 1998: unnumbered repro.
- 2006 Segal, Sam, Mariël Ellens, and Joris Dik. *De verleiding van Flora: Jan van Huysum, 1682-1749*. Exh. cat. Museum het Prinsenhof, Delft; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Zwolle, 2006: 173, repro.
- 2007 Segal, Sam. *The Temptations of Flora: Jan van Huysum, 1682-1749*. Translated by Beverly Jackson. Exh. cat. Museum Het Prinsenhof, Delft; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Zwolle, 2007: 173, repro.
-

To cite: Alexandra Libby, Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., “Jan van Huysum/*Flowers in an Urn*/c. 1720/1722,” *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*, NGA Online Editions, <https://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/56255> (accessed April 11, 2025).