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Rare Arcimboldo Painting Acquired by National Gallery of Art, Washington, On View in First U.S. Exhibition Devoted to Artist's Composite Heads, September 19, 2010 through January 9, 2011



Giuseppe Arcimboldo

Four Seasons in One Head, c. 1589-1591

oil on panel

60.4 x 44.7 cm (23 3/4 x 17 5/8 in.) Framed: 94 x 75 cm

National Gallery of Art, Washington, Paul Mellon Fund

The National Gallery of Art has acquired the *Four Seasons in One Head* (c. 1590), a rare and important masterpiece by Giuseppe Arcimboldo, on the occasion of the exhibition *Arcimboldo, 1526 -1593: Nature and Fantasy*, on view in the East Building, September 19, 2010 through January 9, 2011. The artist's delightfully bizarre heads have been frequently copied and imitated. The *Four Seasons in One Head* is one of

fewer than 20 examples by the master in existence. The purchase, which was made possible by the Gallery's Paul Mellon Fund, makes this work the only undisputed painting by Arcimboldo in a public collection in the United States. The painting was presented publicly for the first time in the 2007-2008 Arcimboldo retrospective held at the Musée du Luxembourg, Paris, and the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

"No one who has ever seen one of Arcimboldo's amazing heads—in a museum, a surrealist spoof, or a commercial advertisement—is likely to forget it," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art. "The *Four Seasons in One Head* was clearly inspired by the work of Leonardo da Vinci, the artist's predecessor in Milan." (The Gallery's *Ginevra de' Benci* is the only painting by Leonardo in the Americas.)

The exceptional importance of the *Four Seasons in One Head* was established in the 2007–2008 exhibition, and its status as a late autograph masterwork by the artist was reconfirmed by Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, who hailed it as "one of the most startling discoveries of works by Arcimboldo in recent years" in his monograph published by the University of Chicago Press in 2009.

Arcimboldo was famous for his composite heads in his own time as court painter to the Habsburg Emperors Maximilian II and Rudolf II in Vienna and Prague. Later, after he was rediscovered in the 1930s, the heads inspired the surrealists. Painted singly or in series, they combine plants, animals, and other objects appropriate to the themes Arcimboldo treated, such as the Four Seasons and the Four Elements (Earth, Air, Fire, and Water).

Arcimboldo made the *Four Seasons in One Head* for his friend, the writer Gregorio Comanini, who first describes it. The painting is practically alone among the composite heads in that it does not appear to be associated with the artist's Habsburg patrons and, accordingly, it was not in Prague when the city was sacked by Swedish troops in 1648. Instead, the painting is mentioned in the 1656 inventory of the famous Cortoni collection in Verona. After that, the painting disappeared until the 21st century when it resurfaced in an English private collection. The agent for sale of the painting is Pandora Old Masters, Inc.

The newly acquired panel is signed "ARCIMBOLDUS F," where the bark has peeled away on the branch at the right. Though consistent with Arcimboldo's other signatures, the "F" (stands for the Latin *fecit*, or *made this*) was previously mistaken for a "P" (*pinxit* or *painted this*).

The painting is also the subject of a lengthy description in a literary dialogue entitled // *Figino*, written by Gregorio Comanini and published in 1591. The interlocutor of the Milanese artist Ambrogio Figino advises him to:

Have Comanini show you Arcimboldo's playful treatment of the Four Seasons; you will see a lovely work. A knotty tree trunk forms the chest and the head in which certain cavities serve as mouth and eyes and a protruding knob as the nose. Knots covered with moss form the beard, and some branches in front form the horns. This stump, stripped of its own leaves and fruit, represents Winter, which produces nothing but enjoys what is produced by other seasons. Some flowers placed on the breast and over the shoulder signify Spring. Summer is represented by bundles of wheat and a few attached twigs, a straw cloak that covers the shoulders, two cherries hanging from a branch that forms the ear, and two plums arranged behind the head. Autumn is represented by two bunches of grapes, one white and one red, hanging from a branch, and by some apples showing among green ivy branches that spring from the top of the head. One of the branches of the head has been peeled slightly from around the middle, and the little scraps of bark curl back from the white part which is inscribed ARCIMBOLDUS P. All in all the work will please you wonderfully when you see it.¹

The signature and the literary testimony from the artist's own time are of great value in assessing the *Four Seasons in One Head*. Equally significant, according to Brown, is the splendid execution of the picture. The flowers and fruit (apples, plums, grapes, and cherries) compare with the same or similar nature motifs in Arcimboldo's most famous work, the portrait of his patron Rudolf II as Vertumnus, the ancient god of vegetation, at Skokloster Castle, Sweden. Likewise, the gnarled and rather menacing tree trunk and branches find exact parallels in Arcimboldo's versions of *Winter* in the Louvre and in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

The *Four Seasons in One Head* has the additional interest of the more engaging three-quarter view, unlike the strict profile Arcimboldo adopted for the series of paintings he did of the Seasons and the Elements. The painting stands out in other respects as well. By contrast to the whimsical character of much of Arcimboldo's work, the mood of *Four Seasons* is darker and more somber. The *Four Seasons in One Head* is the most closely related of all of the composite heads to Leonardo's physiognomic studies. It appears to be like one of Leonardo's "old men, covered in bark," as described by Sylvia Ferino-Pagden in *Arcimboldo, 1526-1593*, published by Skira, Milan in 2007. Ferino-Pagden is curator of Italian Renaissance painting at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, and is also guest curator of the current exhibition of Arcimboldo's work at the National Gallery of Art, which travels to the Palazzo Reale, Milan—Arcimboldo's birthplace—from February 27 through May 8, 2011.

Like the *Vertumnus*, the *Four Seasons* is a late work, painted around 1590 after Arcimboldo had returned to his native Milan. Comanini's contemporary description provides the title for the painting, but its exact meaning remains elusive. It might be a self-portrait of the artist, as the "facial features" are not dissimilar from those found in two drawings the artist made of himself, one preserved in Genoa and the other in Prague. If not a self-portrait of Arcimboldo in the "winter" of his life, the painting may depict the god Vertumnus, who in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* disguises himself as an old woman to approach the lovely young Pomona and, having won her trust, woos and seduces her. In either case, the painting marks the culmination of Arcimboldo's career.

¹ Comanini, Gregorio, *The Figino, or On the purpose of Painting: Art Theory in the Late Renaissance*. Trans. and ed. Ann Doyle-Anderson and Giancarlo Maiorino. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001 (pp. 27-28).

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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.

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