EARLY FLOWER PAINTINGS

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In the Low Countries during the turbulent and productive seventeenth century several new kinds of paintings were formulated and developed. The group portrait, foreshadowed only by the stiffly composed arrangements of kneeling donors with their families in renaissance altarpieces, was carried to its highest point by Frans Hals and Rembrandt in such superb creations as the Regents of the Hospital and the Syndics. The conversation piece in a well-lit bourgeois interior was exploited with varying emphases on comfort or luxury by such different practitioners as Pieter de Hooch and Metsu, Terborch, and the great Vermeer. The still life too achieved great popularity at this time and varied from simple, clear assemblages of crockery, clay pipes, bread, and cheese, like those painted by Pieter Claesz. and Floris van Schooten, to tables groaning beneath a lush disorder of goldsmith’s work, lobsters, and grapes, as in the “showpieces” by Abraham van Beyeren and Gerret Heda. Among these new types was the flower piece, which has enjoyed continuous popularity until the present day.

Before 1600 flowers had not often formed the entire subject of a picture. And even during the seventeenth century they were often included in arrangements of other objects, which, though pleasing, cannot be regarded as flower pieces. Many artists practiced both kinds of still life painting, and combinations of flowers with fruit were popular. But, primly placed in a small vase, as in certain works by Velvet Brueghel and Balthasar van der Ast, the flowers were only subordinate decorations for heterogeneous collections of cherries and peaches, jugs, glass beakers, and shells. In the typical flower piece the blossoms and grasses were usually arranged in a jug or vase as for a domestic decoration, and the container disposed on a table or stone ledge, often with fallen petals or buds, snails and insects, sometimes birds’ nests, scattered with an artful casualness about its base. Only at the beginning of the development and again in the eighteenth century was much prominence given to the container. In the splendid flower paintings by Rachel Ruysch and Margareta Haverman, the subject of the picture is the profusion of flowers, and it is their arrangement, rather than the shape of the vase, which determines the composition.

The earliest preserved examples of vases of flowers as the entire subject of a painting happen to be German rather than Netherlandish. In the Landesmuseum at Münster in Westphalia are a pair of upright pictures of iris and lilies, painted in 1582 by Ludger tom Ring the Younger. They bear some
A Bouquet of Flowers, by Nicolas van Veerendael (1640-1691). Flemish. Veerendael also painted dead game and scenes with monkeys. Bequest of Stephen Whitney Phoenix, 1881

resemblance to the vases of lilies which are a symbolical adornment to so many paintings of the Annunciation, but nothing has been recorded to enlighten us as to how this German painter came to paint the vases alone. It is not improbable that there were similar sixteenth-century paintings by Netherlanders which have perished or have not yet been discovered. Van
Plants and Butterflies, by Abraham Jansz. Begeyn (about 1637-1697). Dutch. Purchase, 1871
Mander writes admiringly of a certain Lodewijck Jansz. van den Bosch, who was born at 's Hertogenbosch (Bois-le-Duc) in North Brabant about the same time as Ludger tom Ring. He was very good at painting fruits and flowers, sometimes showing a bouquet in a glass of water, and he spent on these works so much time, patience, and care that everything seemed to be natural. Unfortunately, we have none of his paintings; but since Van Mander refers to
Flowers, by Rachel Ruysch (1664-1750). Dutch. Purchase, 1871

several other painters of flowers, it is fairly safe to assume that before the fine seventeenth-century paintings of the Low Countries were produced, a number of innovators had elaborated the little sketches in their plant and insect notebooks into true flower pieces.

Although the flower piece has come to be regarded as a characteristically Dutch form of painting, the painters who exerted the strongest influence at the beginning of the century
and produced the most charming flower pictures were Flemings. They were Jan, or Velvet, Brueghel, the second son of Pieter the Elder, and his follower Ambrosius Bosschaert. Jan Brueghel’s pictures of flowers suggest that he had marauded a huge, profusely blooming garden patch, adding yet another and another flower, long after the moment had arrived to set to work and paint the armful. Fine sprays of baby’s breath and delicate single clove pinks contrast in his ensembles with crown imperials and sturdy branches of lilies. Much more selection and a greater care for the individuality and appeal of each separate species make Bosschaert’s pictures delightful in a very special way. Sometimes, as in the Mauritshuis picture, which shows a wide vista of Flemish landscape opening behind the vase of flowers, he too fills a large glass full of many quite different kinds of flowers. More often, however, Bosschaert selects four or five large blossoms, cabbage roses and tulips, and composes them with smaller flowers in an appealing and tenderly contrived bouquet. His colors are fresher than Brueghel’s—paler and brighter in their tints—and the petals have smoother and more inviting surfaces. Bosschaert was born in Antwerp but moved in 1593 to Holland; he worked at Middelburg, in Utrecht, and at The Hague, spreading Flemish influence and the precepts of his master Brueghel among the flower painters of the Northern Netherlands.

The Museum owns seven flower pictures painted in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the Low Countries, all but one of them signed works. Two are Flemish, one a bouquet by Nicolas van Veerendael made in 1662, the other a decorative piece signed by Willem van Leen, who lived on into the first quarter of the nineteenth century. The Veerendael is an extraordinarily pleasing picture, with a freshness and gaiety of color that places it very clearly in the Bosschaert tradition. Pink, blue, dark reds of varying intensities, and even yellows and oranges are mingled with delightful success. The flowers include, besides the usual roses, tulips, and iris, scabiosa, jasmine, hypericum, marigolds, mallows, the graceful, sparsely flowered French hyacinth, and a sprig of rosemary. The crystal vase shows a reflection of a many-paned window on its curving globe, and itself casts a bright reflection on the stone table at its base. There is a delicious crispness, almost stiffness, which is part of the flowers' freshness and of the painting's charm. On the other hand, the decoration by Van Leen, quite probably meant to be inserted in a wall, is handsome and masterly, full of facile grace. It shows a huge blue urn with fruit heaped about its base and a casual, curving profusion of flowers. Van Leen did much of his work in Paris, where his rich style made him a popular decorative painter.

The painting illustrated on the cover is by the Dutch artist Jacob Vosmaer. It is dated 1615 and is the earliest of all the Museum’s flower paintings. Vosmaer, who belonged to a large family of painters in Delft, had made a trip to Italy in his youth, returning to Holland in 1608. His works, which are extremely rare, give clear evidence that he had absorbed much of his art in Italy; for, instead of following in the tradition of Jan Brueghel with his multifarious assortments, they are completely ordered and...
shaped to a compositional unity. The Museum’s picture shows peonies, tulips, roses, and iris, but no one species dominates, and each plays its part quietly in the arrangement of the whole. The roundness and convexity of the tulip petals matches that of the peonies and iris, so that individuality is subordinated to harmony. While the Brueghel school gave exact portraits of flowers and evidenced botanical interest, as Alphonse Vorenkamp observes in an excellent study of the Dutch still life in the seventeenth century, Jacob Vosmaer was primarily concerned with composition.

All the Museum’s other flower pictures are considerably later than the Vosmaer. A tiny panel that shows a pink flower, perhaps a kind of wild geranium, a cluster of mushrooms, and some lovely moths against a landscape background is surely not by Rachel Ruysch, to whom it was long attributed, but by Abraham Begeyn, a Dutch artist who spent the last years of his life as court painter in Berlin. The signed painting by Ernst Stuven was ascribed for many years to Maria van Oosterwyck, but a recent cleaning revealed the signature of Stuven at the lower right. He was born about 1660 or a little earlier in Hamburg, where he was a pupil of Johann Georg Hainz. Transferring to Holland as a young man, he continued his studies under the flower painters Willem van Aelst and Abraham Mignon. He worked for the city of Amsterdam, but his civic commissions must have suffered considerably from his wild attacks of insanity, which, according to the eighteenth-century gossip-chronicler Houbraken, seem often to have resulted in violence.

The Museum’s painting of flowers and fruit by Stuven shows a glass vase filled with a few roses, a peony, some marigolds, a striped tulip, and some pink and white striped carnations, as well as thistles, small white pinks, and three moths. The composition is unclear, but the vase appears to be placed on a table covered with a cloth of golden brown velvet, on which lies a great profusion of fruit. There are pale pink-blushed peaches, repeating the roundness of the cabbage roses, as do a pair of orange apricots, the shining white and ruby grapes, and an exquisite spirally striped snail.


The two paintings by Margareta Haverman and Rachel Ruysch bring the Museum’s collection into the end of the seventeenth century and the first quarter of the eighteenth, when the Dutch flower piece achieved its magnificent climax. In both pictures large flowers are massed in such a way that a strong curving baroque line clearly indicates the composition. The Haverman, which is signed and dated 1716, carefully depicts many different species: tulips and iris, primroses and stock, fine flowering grasses, and
the fascinating passion flower. This flower, native to North and South America, took its name from a supposed resemblance of the corona to the crown of thorns, which deeply impressed the Jesuit missionaries. According to Mrs. Allan Marquand and M. F. Baker, they saw in it so many symbols of the Crucifixion that they declared it a sign from Heaven, designed to assist in the conversion of the heathen.

A bluish unifying tone unites all the colors in the Haverman, making an artificial though very handsome effect. There is no such device in the Ruysch, which accordingly has a much more attractive naturalness. Here the globular forms of cabbage roses are clumped together, and from them swirl the curving stems of tulips, a strong branch of white stock, a sprig of hops, a heavily bending peony, and a spray with twining tendrils bearing another of the passion flowers. There are also orange blossoms, dahlias, marigolds, primroses, and a very decorative group of what seem to be double anemones.

Beyond Rachel Ruysch flower painting in Holland had only one step to go to the lush extravagance and splendor of her pupil Jan van Huysum, who unfortunately is not yet represented in the Museum’s collection of flower paintings. A beautiful signed drawing by him, however, has just been acquired. It represents a basket of grapes and peaches, spilling its contents on a table, with a strong woody branch of the grapevine reaching upward from the mass of fruit. Another drawing, by the seventeenth-century French artist Jacques André Portail, which came to the Museum in 1941 in the bequest of George Blumenthal, is a vase of flowers with a very few chastely drawn fruits lying on the table beneath. The clarity of the draughtsmanship, the simplicity and selective style with which the fruit is chosen and placed, even the restraint in the flight of a moth and the crawl of a fly demonstrate that quality which in French art renders any theme, indigenous or borrowed, so indisputably French. Two
large French decorative paintings are equally characteristic. They were painted by some follower of Jean Baptiste Monnoyer, who provided decorations for most of the residences of Louis XIV and later worked in England for Queen Anne and her opulent courtiers. The paintings show large blue urns trimmed with ormolu, heaped lavishly with flowers that cast a strong shadow on a simulated marble background.