

JOHNNY VAN HAEFTEN

OLD MASTER PAINTINGS

VP5070

BALTHASAR VAN DER AST
(Middelburg 1593/4 – 1657 Delft)

A Still Life of Fruit in a *kraak* porcelain Dish, with
Shells and Roses



Signed, lower right, on the ledge: *B. van der. Ast*
Oil on panel, 26 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 37 $\frac{7}{8}$ ins. (68.3 x 98.7 cm)
Framed dimensions: 35 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 47 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 3 $\frac{3}{8}$ ins. (90 x 120.7 x 8.5 cm)

PROVENANCE

With Eugene Slatter Gallery, London, by 1939

With Richard Green, London, April 1979

Anon. sale, Christie's, London, 6 July 1990, lot 143 [The Property of a Trust], where purchased
by Ann and Gordon Getty

Their sale, Christie's New York, 18 October 2023, lot 82

LITERATURE

The Illustrated London News, CXCIV, 1939, p. 9-n.p., illustrated

S. Segal, "Balthasar van der Ast", *Masters of Middelburg: Exhibition in the Honour of Laurens J. Bol*, Kunsthandel K. & V. Waterman, exhibition catalogue, Amsterdam, 1984, p. 58, captioned
as fig. 16 on p. 59 (but due to a printing error) reproduced as fig. 14 on p. 53.

In his *Schildesregister* (Register of painters), compiled by the Amsterdam doctor and art lover Jan Sysmus, the art of Balthasar van der Ast is neatly characterised with the words: “In flowers, shells and lizards, beautiful”ⁱ. Born in Middelburg, van der Ast was taught to paint by his much older brother-in-law, the celebrated flower painter Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder (1573-1621). In 1615, he moved with the Bosschaert family to Bergen-op-Zoom, and then to Utrecht, where he became a member of the painters’ guild in 1619. In 1632, he settled in Delft, where he remained until his death in 1657.

A highly successful and productive artist, van der Ast left a substantial oeuvre, ranging from very small coppers and panels to large canvases. Besides his flower pieces, he produced still lifes of fruit and shells, as well as more complex compositions in which these elements are combined. In his work, van der Ast built on the achievements of his predecessors, whilst introducing innovations of his own. As the tutor of Bosschaert’s three sons, as well as possibly of Jan Davidsz. de Heem (1606 – 1683/4), he provides an important link between the first and second phases of seventeenth-century Dutch flower painting.

In this imposing still life, a large blue and white Chinese porcelain dish, piled high with apples and peaches, takes pride of place on a wide ledge. Two stems cut from the vine bearing copious bunches of grapes have been laid diagonally across the bowl of fruit. On the left, a couple of quinces appear on a pewter plate, behind which two pink roses have been casually tossed down. Another quince and a collection of exotic seashells are scattered across the front of the ledge. The still life is enlivened by a variety of insect life, including a Red Admiral butterfly on the wing, a hovering wasp, two dragon flies and a grasshopper. A cool light enters from the left, as if flooding through an unseen window, illuminating all the objects in sharp detail. The artist has lavished a great deal of attention on the surface textures of the various fruits, from the bluish bloom on the skin of the grapes to the fuzzy coating on the quinces. He also dwelt upon the intricate forms and patterns of the seashells. The reflection of the two quinces in the polished pewter plate is beautifully realised.

The combination of fruit, flowers and rare shells occurs frequently in van der Ast’s still-life paintings throughout his career, but only occasionally on the scale seen here. Indeed, this impeccably preserved panel can be counted among his largest and most ambitious works. Judging from its size and complexity, as well as the exceptional refinement of its execution, it must have originated quite some time after the artist’s move to Delft, possibly around 1640ⁱⁱ. It is, however, not possible to be more precise because the artist omitted to date any of his paintings after 1628. A chronology of his later oeuvre can thus only be gauged through the careful observation of his style, which evolved subtly over the course of his career. In his early years, van der Ast relied heavily on the example of his teacher. Like Bosschaert, his still lifes from this time are strictly symmetrical and compactly arranged. The individual elements are evenly lit from the front and appear against an almost uniformly dark background, though he differed from his teacher in his use of softer contours and more muted colours. As he matured, van der Ast gradually moved away from Bosschaert’s style, introducing new compositional formats and employing a greater variety of still-life elements. His arrangements became looser and more naturalistic and he developed a more sophisticated grasp of space and atmosphere. Here, the subtle distribution of light and artfully articulated background imbue the composition with a sense of spaciousness and depth, while the airborne insects and the twisting vine leaves, caught in bright light, lend it dynamism.

That van der Ast painted this still life during his years in Delft (1632-57) indicates that he was successful in securing the support of wealthy and sophisticated patrons during his time there. His decision to move from Utrecht to Delft in 1632 had very likely been motivated by the prospect of gaining access to a new clientele since the painter apparently had no personal reasons for moving to the city. However, he seems to have had some influential contacts there as, at the time of his move, he was helped to secure a loan of 200 guilders from a jeweller in Utrecht by the Delft notary Willem de Langue, who was himself a prominent art collectorⁱⁱⁱ. The close proximity of Delft to The Hague, where the stadholder had his court, was probably another reason why the artist chose to settle there. A number of his Utrecht colleagues, including Gerrit van Honthorst (1592-1656), Paulus Moreelse (1571-1638), Cornelis van Poelenburgh (1594-1667) and his close associate, Roelandt Savery (1578-1639), had sold paintings to Frederik Hendrik and Amalia van Solms. Van der Ast presumably must have done so too given that a pair of his small still-life paintings, now in the National Gallery in Washington^{iv}, is recorded in the inventory of the princess's quarters in 1632.

During his Delft years (1632-57), van der Ast produced other ambitiously conceived still lifes. It must be assumed that such elaborate show-pieces must have been undertaken as commissions rather than for the open market. The largest of all is the monumental still life, now in the museum Douai^v, that depicts an abundance of flowers, fruit and shells displayed on two tiers before an architectural backdrop. The architectural elements in this painting are probably the work of the architect and painter Bartholomeus van Bassen (c. 1590-1652), who worked extensively for the stadholder and served as city architect in The Hague from 1639 to 1652. This association with van Bassen provides a further indication that van der Ast was well connected in courtly circles in The Hague. Another extremely elegant still life, which is almost a floral counterpart to the present painting, is the *Still Life with a Vase of Flowers by a Window*, in the Anhaltische Gemäldegalerie, in Dessau^{vi}. Painted around the same time, on a panel of almost identical dimensions, it depicts a large bouquet of flowers in a Chinese blue and white porcelain vase, standing on a narrow tabletop, flanked by clusters of fruit and seashells. In that painting, the clear light of day enters through a window on the left, which also affords a glimpse of a redbrick house in the street outside. Although no window is visible in our painting, the quality of the lighting, the subtle tonal graduations in the background, and the crisp definition can be closely compared with the painting in Dessau.

Whilst the artist brought together objects here that speak to the beauty and abundance of the natural world, the flowers and fruit are by their very nature also perishable. The insects, too, have only a short lifespan. For the seventeenth-century viewer these elements could have been seen as an allusion to the transience of earthly life, as well as a hymn of praise to the diversity of God's creation. A discerning eye might also have recognised in the painting the Four Elements: Earth (the fruit), Fire (the porcelain dish), Air (the insects) and Water (the shells).

BIOGRAPHY

Balthasar van der Ast was born in Middelburg around 1593 or 1594. After the death of his father Hans van der Ast, a wealthy merchant, in 1609, he went to live with his sister, Maria,

who was married to the flower painter Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder. Van der Ast became his pupil and moved with the Bosschaert family first to Bergen-op-Zoom, where they are recorded in 1615, and then to Utrecht in the following year. He did not join the painters' guild in Utrecht until 1619, two years later than his earliest known dated paintings of 1617. In Utrecht, van der Ast became friendly with Roelandt Savery, who had joined the guild at the same time, and he was reportedly among the artists who visited Savery almost daily at his home on the Boterstraat^{vii}. In May 1632, van der Ast moved to Delft, where he joined the Guild of Saint Luke on 22 June. In 1633, he married Margrieta Jans van Bueren and took out citizenship. The couple had two daughters. A codicil of 1650 records that the family lived on the east side of the Oude Delft, Delft's main canal street^{viii}. Van der Ast remained in Delft until his death in December 1657. He was buried in the Oude Kerk. His pupils may have included Bosschaert's sons Ambrosius the Younger (1609-1645), Johannes (c. 1610/11-1628 or later), and Abraham (1612/13-1643), as well as Johannes Buers (*d.* after 1641) and Jan Davidsz de Heem (1606-1683/84).

ⁱ Jan Sysmus compiled his register of contemporary artists between about 1669 and 1678. See: Dr. A. Bredius, "Het Schildersregister van Jan Sysmus", *Oud Holland*, VIII, 1890, p. 4.

ⁱⁱ I am grateful to Fred Meijer for his opinion on the dating of the picture. In a private communication dated 17 December 2023 he wrote that the painting "stems from his years in Delft, c. 1640, with a rather wide margin is probably correct".

ⁱⁱⁱ J. M. Montias, *Artists and Artisans in Delft: A Socio-Economic Study of the Seventeenth century*, 1982, pp. 236-7.

^{iv} Balthasar van der Ast, *Basket of Flowers*, on panel, 17.8 x 23.5 cm & *Basket of Fruits*, on panel, 18.1 x 22.8 cm, both c. 1622, inv. nos. 1992.51.1&2.

^v Balthasar van der Ast, *Still Life with Flowers, Fruit and Shells*, oil on panel, 134 x 140 cm, c. 1640. Musée de la Chartreuse, Douai, inv. no. 2802.

^{vi} Balthasar van der Ast, *Vase of Flowers by a Window*, oil on panel, 67 x 98 cm, signed: *B. vander. Ast. fe-*, Anhaltische Gemäldegalerie, Dessau.

^{vii} Ger Luiten, et al., *Dawn of the Golden Age. Northern Netherlandish Art, 1580-1620*, exh. cat., 1993, p. 315, note 7. .

^{viii} Laurens J. Bol, *The Bosschaert Dynasty: Painters of Flowers and Fruit*, 1960, p. 40.