

JOHNNY VAN HAEFTEN

OLD MASTER PAINTINGS

VP4831

OTTMAR ELLIGER THE ELDER

(Copenhagen 1633 – 1679 Berlin)

A Garland of Flowers and Fruit surrounding a stone Niche

On canvas, 55½ x 42 ¾ ins. (141 x 108.5 cm)



PROVENANCE

Fritz Schmid (b. *circa* 1860), married to Amalia Paganini

Thence by family descent to Nicolas Bischoff-Schmid, Basle (1928-87)

Thence by inheritance to the previous owner

Private collection, Switzerland, until 2017

A red curtain is swept back to reveal an exuberant garland of flowers and fruit displayed before a stone niche. The upper part is filled with vibrant-coloured roses, lilies, tulips, and the snowy-white flowers of *Viburnum* and *Leucojum*, while lower down, huge clusters of red and white currants, gooseberries, grapes and cherries vie for attention with branches of peaches, apricots, oranges and lemons, quinces and corn cobs, ears of barley, and more. Against the dark void at the centre of the composition a spider hangs from a silken thread. Close observation reveals a host of other small creatures mingling with the flowers and foliage: two Red Admiral butterflies, a Scarlet tiger moth, some beetles, a chafer bug and a lizard. A snake slithers silently across the bottom ledge, while a small brown mouse sniffs out a meal.

The Danish-born painter Ottmar Elliger the Elder led a peripatetic life, which took him from his native Copenhagen, to Antwerp, Amsterdam and Hamburg, before finally settling in Berlin, where he served as court painter to the Elector of Brandenburg. Primarily a still-life painter of flowers and fruit, Elliger reportedly trained with the flower painter Daniel Seghers (1590-1661) in Antwerp, but his early still lifes suggest a familiarity with the work of Jacob Marrell (1613/14–1681), who was in Frankfurt at that time.

This splendid composition dates from Elliger's maturity and was probably painted during his time in Hamburg or Berlin. His still lifes from this period are characterised by a profusion of ripe fruits and leaves, and occasionally vegetables, arranged in huge, tightly-packed swags or garlands. He had a penchant for filling almost the entire surface of the canvas with clusters of fruit and foliage, allowing very little space between or around his objects. This love of opulence, combined with a palette of rich autumnal tones, achieves an extremely decorative effect. Our painting can be compared with a similarly conceived garland of fruit surrounding a goblet of wine in the Pushkin Museum, Moscowⁱ.

Whilst such a sumptuous display was no doubt intended above all to showcase the artist's virtuosity, it may be that he intended to enrich his composition with a deeper meaning. Besides the obvious celebration of nature's abundance, components of the painting contain *Vanitas* associations that would have invited the seventeenth-century viewer to contemplate the transitory nature of life. Ripe fruit and blossoming flowers indicate maturity, but some of the grapes are past their best, an overripe fig has split open, and many of the leaves have been ravaged by insects, or are turning brown, all elements suggesting the passage of time, decay and death. Such associations were not, however, entirely pessimistic, since also inherent in such imagery was the notion of the natural cycle of life. The butterflies, for example, by virtue of their extraordinary metamorphosis, and the golden ear of corn, whose grains will fall to the ground as seed and germinate and grow, can be seen as symbols of renewal, rebirth and resurrection.

BIOGRAPHY

The son of a medical doctor, Ottmar Elliger the Elder was born in Copenhagen in 1633ⁱⁱ, not in Gothenburg, as his biographer Arnold Houbraken stated. Houbraken also claimed that he was a pupil of Daniel Seghers in Antwerpⁱⁱⁱ, but he may have been misinformed. Elliger worked in Copenhagen for a period in the mid-1650s, later moving to Amsterdam where, in 1660, he married the sister of the still-life painter Jacob van Walscapelle (1644–1727). In 1665, he

moved from Amsterdam to Hamburg, where his son Ottmar Elliger the Younger was born in 1666. In 1670, he took up an appointment as court painter to the Elector of Brandenburg in Berlin, where he died prematurely in 1679. Primarily a still-life painter of flowers and fruit, Elliger also produced a few portraits. Dated works are known from 1653 to 1678. His son Ottmar Elliger the Younger (1666-1735) also became a painter.

P.M.

ⁱ Ottmar Elliger, I, *Garland of Fruit surrounding a Goblet of Wine*, on canvas, 141 x 104 cm, Pushkin Museum, Moscow.

ⁱⁱ According to the RKD, Netherlands Institute for Art History, The Hague.

ⁱⁱⁱ A. Houbraken, *De Grootte Schouburgh ...*, The Hague, 1753, vol. II, p. 293.