

# JOHNNY VAN HAEFTEN

OLD MASTER PAINTINGS

VP4876

## **SIMON PIETERSZ. VERELST**

(The Hague 1644 – between 1710 and 1717 London)

A Still Life of Flowers in a glass Vase

Signed, on the right: *S. Verelst f*

Oil on canvas, 33½ x 26⅞ ins. (85 x 67 cm)



## PROVENANCE

Private Collection, Germany

Sale, Kunsthaus Lempertz, Cologne, 15 November, 2014, lot 97

With Kunsthandel Xaver Scheidwimmer, Munich, 2014

Private collection, Switzerland

With Galerie Sanct Lucas, Vienna, 2018

A glass vase containing an exuberant display of flowers stands on a wooden ledge. The bouquet contains red opium poppies, a bearded iris, a striped tulip, pink and white roses, a double daffodil, a carnation, a peony, cow-parsley, blue convolvulus, and clematis, set amidst a profusion of twisting leaves and stems. A cabbage white and a Peacock butterfly animate the flora. The asymmetrical arrangement fills almost the entire canvas, starting with a pink rosebud in the bottom left-hand corner, and sweeping upwards through a gentle s-curve to a blue iris and a red poppy in the top right. The strong contrast between the brightly lit, colourful blossoms and the surrounding darkness lends the flowers and foliage a hyper-realistic quality and a powerful sense of three-dimensionality. This effect is enhanced by the use of such visual 'tricks' as the broken-stemmed rose and the prominently placed, glaucous poppy leaf at the front of the vase which seem to thrust themselves forward into the viewer's space. Another spectacular feat of illusionism is the partially lit Peacock butterfly, with its eye-catching wing markings, which apparently flutters before the canvas.

Simon Verelst was born and raised in The Hague. After studying with his father Pieter Verelst (1618-1668), he became a member of the *Confrérie Pictura*, the painters' association in The Hague in 1663. Six years later, he left for England, where he spent the rest of his life. He was enormously successful in London, where he garnered a considerable following at the Court. King Charles II owned six of his paintings, while Lord Pomfret, an *arbiter* in artistic matters, owned nine. He also enjoyed the patronage of the Dukes of York and Buckingham, who, according to George Vertue, encouraged Verelst to try his hand at portrait painting. However, success seems to have gone to his head, and contemporary reports relate that he went around calling himself "the God of Flowers". There is evidence to suggest that these delusions of grandeur were brought on by bouts of psychosis, or some other form of mental illness. At any rate, the poor man eventually went mad and died in poverty.

The present painting demonstrates the brilliant qualities that earned Verelst an enthusiastic following in England and doubtless attracted the famous diarist Samuel Pepys to his work. Pepys records a visit on 11<sup>th</sup> April 1669, to "a Dutchman newly come over, one Everelst, who took us to his lodgings close by and did show us a little flower-pott of his doing, the finest thing that ever I think I saw in my life – the drops of Dew hanging on the leaves, so as I was forced again and again to put my finger to it to feel whether my eyes were deceived or no. He doth ask £70 for it; I had the vanity to bid him £20 – but a better picture I never saw in my whole life, and it is worth going twenty miles to see."<sup>i</sup> Verelst likewise won the admiration of the Dutch history painter and art theorist Gerard de Lairesse (1640-1711), who claimed that Simon Verelst was the greatest of all flower painters<sup>ii</sup>.

Some of Verelst's floral still lifes undoubtedly have a symbolic dimension, for example, his *Vase of Flowers*, of 1669, in the Fitzwilliam Museum<sup>iii</sup>, which contains a pocket watch, an explicit reference to the passage of time. It would, however, probably be misguided to try to read too much into the present still life, but for the seventeenth-century viewer, such elements as the snapped stem – a favourite motif of the artist - and discoloured leaf of the foremost rose, denoting fragility and ephemeral beauty, might well have prompted reflections upon the brevity of life. Above all, the artist's primary concern was doubtless to create a convincing illusion of reality and an image to delight the eye.

## BIOGRAPHY

Simon Petersz. Verelst came from a family of painters. The son of the painter Pieter Hermansz. Verelst, he was born in The Hague in 1644. His brothers, Johannes (1648-1700) and Herman (1641/2-1700) also became painters and, like Simon, were trained by their father. In 1663, Simon became a member of the *Confrérie Pictura*, the painters' association in The Hague, and soon afterwards moved to nearby Voorburg with his brother Herman, also a painter of flowers. In 1669, Simon moved to London, where the 2<sup>nd</sup> Duke of Buckingham became his principal patron. According to George Vertue, Verelst was in Paris in 1680, together with his brother Herman and two other painters<sup>iv</sup>. Between 1685 and 1710 he was recorded in London, where he died. His date of death has not been found<sup>v</sup>.

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<sup>i</sup> Samuel Pepys, *Diary*, vol. IX, pp. 514-515.

<sup>ii</sup> G. de Laresse, *Groot Schilderboek ...*, 2 vols, Haarlem 1740, vol. II, p. 356. "Yes, if there has ever been a distinguished Flower painter, he was the man. Neither *Mario de Fiori*, nor Father Seghers, nor de Heem brought the art to such excellence..."

<sup>iii</sup> Simon Verelst, *Vase of Flowers with a Watch*, signed and dated 1669, on canvas, 51.4 x 36.5 cm, The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, inv. No. PD.50-1975.

<sup>iv</sup> H. Walpole, *Anecdotes of Painting in England; with Some Account of the Principal Artists; and Incidental Notes on Other Arts; Collected by the late Mr. George Vertue*, vol. III, London, 1782 (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.), p. 57.

<sup>v</sup> He was still alive in 1710 when Campo Weyerman was in London, but no longer alive in 1717 according to a note by George Vertue.