

# Jan van Kessel the Elder

1626 - Antwerp - 1679

## *A Garland of Flowers Surrounding a Cartouche*

Oil on canvas

66 x 50 cm (26 by 16 <sup>2</sup>/<sub>3</sub> in.)

Signed and dated: J.v.Kessel fecit 1654

*Provenance:*

Private Collection, Belgium

*Exhibitions:*

*Natura in Posa*, Galleria Lorenzelli 1971

*Literature:*

Bergström (1971) pl.8

Veca (1989) p.47, p.33

Art historians have frequently expressed their amazement at Jan van Kessel the Elder's productivity. *Outre une abondante production de corbeilles et guirlandes des fleurs, des concerts d'oiseau et meme de combats d'animaux, Jan van Kessel l'Ancien a créé quantité de figurations de poissons, insectes et fruits et plus rarement des natures mortes appelées "tables servies"*.<sup>1</sup> Another art historian who laid the foundation for

the research on the Flemish still life artist can but held her breath in wonder at the almost inconceivable output of this master's studio. *Le catalogue de Jan van Kessel abonde et surprend par le variété des sujets et le charme qu'il leur confère.*<sup>2</sup>

Jan van Kessel, a well known Flemish still life painter, was a descendant from the illustrious Breughel dynasty. Jan was the son of Paschaise Breughel, daughter of Jan 'Velvet' Breughel, and Hieronymos Kessel, also a painter. In 1647 he married Maria van Apshoven who, like himself, came from a family of painters. Two of Jan van Kessel's thirteen children, Ferdinand and Jan The Younger, followed the family tradition and also became painters.

Jan van Kessel was an extremely accomplished artist, whose reputation rests on his remarkable talent as a flower painter. By the age of ten, he was apprenticed to Simon de Vos, and later he studied with his uncle Jan Breughel, the Younger. In 1644 he was admitted to the Guild of St. Luke in Antwerp as a flower painter and in 1645, became a Master of the Antwerp Guild. That year he was also appointed Captain of the Civil Guard in the same city.

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1) Greindl (1983) p.156

2) Hairs (1985) p.287



cat. no. XXIX

A highly versatile and productive artist, Van Kessel painted flowers and animals in the meticulous style of herbal and animal identification handbooks. He made good use of his profound knowledge of nature in various series of paintings representing the elements and the continents, as well as birds and fighting animals.<sup>3</sup> Van Kessel's work also included still lifes with shells, fruits, flowers, creatures of all kinds, garlands and cartouches and allegories of the Five Senses. But smaller breakfast and kitchen pictures became Van Kessel's studio speciality. Most of these works are miniature compositions on panel or copper with insects, small animals, or a few flowers represented against an even white background. They display the highest degree of perception and belong to the sixteenth century tradition of scientific naturalism. These small pictures were executed fluently with loaded, quick working brushes. Van Kessel's work commanded good prices in Flanders and when they were exported to Vienna and Madrid. He led a comfortable and prosperous life in his native Antwerp.

His oeuvre is of particular interest, for it reflects the influence of two major artists, Jan 'Velvet' Breughel, who inspired the 'archaic' traditional style of his painting, and Daniel Seghers, who influenced the more 'modern' and intellectual aspects of his art.

### *A Garland of Flowers Surrounding a Cartouche*

The present picture belongs to the other artistic world of Jan van Kessel, where no studio work or studio participation can be detected. Significantly he usually signed only these paintings.

The present painting forms a strong contrast to the set of four studio works (cat.no. XX). Around an empty cartouche three meticulously observed bouquets of flowers are painted with perfect finish. Their representation is precise but not tedious. Their colors are lively and varied according to the many different species of flowers. A number of insects are attracted by these richly blossoming flowers.

The present painting is a good example of Jan van Kessel's individual artistic character. Considering that he was a descendant from the Breughel dynasty, in these paintings he shakes off the artistic heritage of his grandfather Jan Breughel the Elder and applies a different brushwork. In this work Jan van Kessel is much closer to Daniel Seghers and the latter's purity of his drawing, as it can be admired in a painting by Seghers conserved at the Museum in Gent. (pl.1)<sup>4</sup> The composition is as pure as the drawing. The seemingly casual arrangement of the flowers gives an impression of spontaneity, but the pictorial devices employed are highly sophisticated.

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3) The '*Animals*' series in the Museo del Prado, Madrid, comprises forty works.

The '*Continents*' series in the Alte Pinacothek, Munich, includes forty-six small pictures  
4) compare also: Hairs (1985) pp.117-187



Pl. 1 Daniel Seghers, *A Garland of Flowers around an empty Cartouche*, oil on canvas 126 x 95 cm  
Gent, Museum voor Schone Kunsten