Abraham Mignon
Frankfurt am Main 1640 - 1679 Utrecht

Roses, Lilies, Foxgloves and other Flowers with Birds and Insects, Frogs and a Mouse by a Woodland Stream

Oil on canvas
101 x 84 cm (39 7/8 by 33 in.)

Signed lower center (on the rock):
AB Mignon fec

Provenance:
Private Collection, England
Sale London (Sotheby's), 11th December 1991

Abraham Mignon was part of an old Calvinist family, which fled the Southern Netherlands for religious reasons. His first apprenticeship was with Jacob Marrel, still life painter and art dealer in Frankfurt. In 1664 both master and pupil went to Utrecht, where Abraham Mignon entered the guild in 1669. He also joined the workshop of Jan Davidsz. de Heem, who was active in Utrecht from 1667 until 1672. In 1675 Abraham Mignon married Maria Willaerts, a grandchild of the marine painter Adam Willaerts. He became the Dean of the Wallon community at Utrecht from 1672 to 1677. Two years later he died in Utrecht at the age of 39.

Most important for the artistic development of Abraham Mignon were the years he spent with Jan Davidsz. de Heem. De Heem's compositions became the Leitmotiv for Mignon. Yet Mignon exaggerated the description of nature, which he had learned from De Heem, in a cooler, more distant and sterile manner, arriving at a depiction of an almost perfect flora and fauna. Mignon's talent led to a production of paintings of fruits, flowers and forest undergrowth, which were to be the most highly sought after still lives in the eighteenth century for European noble collections (the gallery in Dresden once owned thirteen paintings by him). But his fame also attracted followers such as Conraet Roepel, Jan Mortel and Jacob Bart, imitators and fakers to participate in his success.¹

¹ Segal (1991) p. 213, note 2

1) to study the many followers until the 19th century, see: Weber (1993) especially p. 29, notes 8, 11
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Roses, Lilies, Foxgloves and other Flowers with Birds and Insects, Frogs and a Mouse by a Woodland Stream

With the present picture Mignon shows an abundant arrangement of animals and plants in a forest undergrowth placed in front of a partly dilapidated niche. Along a small woodland stream and near to a tree trunk which is partly covered with mould, a colony of plentifully blossoming flowers has settled. Poppies, peonies, light red provins roses, yellow roses, foxgloves, light blue hibiscus, blue iris, a sunflower and white Madonna lilies with various smaller plants, mushrooms and some berries well represent the diversity of the flora and nearly dumb-found the beholder. This is also in reference to the depicted fauna with a mouse, frogs and snails, insects like moths, caterpillars, beet-les, spiders, ants and a fine ladybug. Numerous waterdrops glitter on the leaves, creating an almost perfect illusion. The whole scenario is animated by a pair of birds feeding their breed.

In the Netherlands Otto Marseus van Schrieck had promoted still life depiction of forest undergrowth with animals (pl.1). But it was Jan Davidsz. de Heem who equipped these sottobosci with conventional compositions of fruits and flowers, which allowed for the inclusion of all kinds of animals.

A model example of this kind was made ca. 1670 in the workshop of De Heem and most likely with the collaboration of Abraham Mignon (pl.2). The right part of De Heem’s picture set a standard for the present painting, concerning the selection of objects and their composition. Although the elegance of De Heem’s compositions is evident in Mignon’s work, Mignon abounds the space of magnificent horticulture.

Pl.1 Otto Marseus van Schrieck, Sottobosco
Oil on canvas 69 x 53 cm
Staatl. Kunstsammlungen, Dresden, inv. no. 1614

2) Segal (1991) pp. 156-159, no. 19, ill. on page 84
3) Apart from the countless number of paintings which entirely depend on this composition, seven replicas and variants of precisely this flower arrangement are known see: Weber (1992) p. 162
compare: Bott (1970) color ill. p. 46; Kraemer-Noble (1973)
Pl. 2 Jan Davidsz. de Heem, *Flowers by a Woodland Stream*, oil on canvas 113 x 131 cm
signed: J. D. De Heem R.
Fürstliche Sammlung des Prinzen von Liechtenstein, Vaduz, inv.no.926
The fascinating detail of nature, although it is subtle and inconspicuous, is as honored in the present still life as it had been a subject of contemporary literature. Texts which followed Vergil's *Georgica*, were also widely distributed in the Netherlands; these are moralizing phrases about flora and fauna alluding to the birth and death in nature. The aim is to praise God, whose greatness could even be detected in the smallest detail of nature. Jacob Westerbaen glorifies in his poem *Ockenburgh* the inconspicuous detail. He even animates bugs, flees, spiders, ants and bees with perception, instincts and a concept for art: *Look, how God can be found in the minute detail, how he dresses the moth in golden and silverish red and jolly blue, and in yellowish clothes...!* God has embodied his greatness in all things, even in an ant's nest his magnitude can be found.

The small world becomes a parable to the large world. In the sottobosei still lives of Abraham Mignon the beholder permanently encounters the diversity of creation through the minute depiction of the small world.

Gregor J.M. Weber

(Translation from the German by EL)

Pl. 3  Elias van den Broeck, Sottobosco
Oil on canvas 68 x 56 cm
Private collection, Belgium
formerly Galerie Lingenauber