

Jan van Kessel and Workshop

1626 - Antwerp - 1679

Four Still Lives

Oil on copper

27 x 31,5 cm (10²/₃ by 8 in.)

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 became painters too.

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.

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 animals¹.



Pl.1 Jan van Kessel, *A Game Piece with a Cat*
oil on copper 27 x 31,5 cm, cat.no. XXXXIV

Van Kessel's work also included still lives with shells, fruits, flowers and creatures of all kinds, garlands, cartouches and allegories of the Five Senses. However, smaller breakfast and kitchen pictures became Van Kessel's speciality.

1) 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



cat. no. XXXXIII

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 sophisticated aspects of his art.



Pl.2 Jan van Kessel, *A Game Piece with a Dog*
oil on copper 27 x 31,5 cm

Our works, like the two paintings illustrated here from the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest, display the artist's characteristically precise technique in the elaboration of the lively and colorful ensemble of animals, fish, vegetables, fruits, flowers and objects. These works are, in effect monumental baroque kitchen pieces that have been miniaturized. They were very popular and are often recorded in seventeenth century Antwerp private collections.

On stone ledges and stools of various heights, in wicker baskets and porcelain bowls, suspended from the ceiling and scattered all around is an array of vegetables, fruit, game and fish. By adopting a viewpoint from slightly above to enhance the effect of picturesque disarray, Van Kessel succeeds in evoking a sense of overflowing abundance despite the small size of the pictures.²



Pl.5/6 Jan van Kessel, *A Pair of Still Lives*
oil on copper 35,4 x 47 cm (13 ⁷/₈ by 18 ¹/₂ in.)
Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest
inv.no. 58.6 & 58.7

2) Ember (1989) p.90



cat. no. XXXXIV