

Bartholomeus Assteyn

1607 - Dordrecht - after 1667

Shells, Tulips and Fruits on a Table

Oil on panel

51 x 69 cm (20 by 27 in.)

Signed and dated: B. Asstijn. 1635

Provenance:

Sales - Lempertz, Cologne, 28/29 May 1937 as Baltus van der Ast, signed and dated: B. Assteyn 1636 (At the time Lempertz did not know about the existence of Bartholomeus Assteyn, a rare master. Therefore the auctioneer choose the attribution to Baltus van der Ast.)

Private Collection, Germany

Exhibitions:

Seventeenth Century Still Life Paintings,
Daphne Alazraki, New York, January 1994
The European Fine Art Fair, Maastricht 1994

Bartholomeus Assteyn seems to have spent most of his life in Dordrecht. Nothing is documented about his apprenticeship. Stylistically he belongs along with Balthasar van der Ast to the Bosschaert Dynasty. Laurens Bol presented us with this dynasty and its circle, with Ambrosius Bosschaert

the Elder as Nestor and his three sons.¹ In 1615 Van der Ast followed Bosschaert to Bergen op Zoom and then to Utrecht, where Van der Ast entered Saint Luke's Guild as a master in 1619. It is possible that Johannes Bosschaert and Bartholomeus Assteyn studied there with Balthasar van der Ast even though this is not documented. It is equally possible that Assteyn adopted the "Bosschaert-style" from Johannes, when this son of Ambrosius Bosschaert settled in Rotterdam. Very little research has been carried out on Johannes Bosschaert, but it is documented that he became a master of the guild in Rotterdam in 1626.²

The earliest picture of Assteyn is dated 1628, the latest 1667. In a span of 40 years Assteyn should have produced an ample oeuvre, a thesis which is also stated by Houbraken,³ but little of this is documented today.

In 1631 Bartholomeus Assteyn entered Saint Luke's Guild of Rotterdam as master. In 1651 he was the treasurer of the guild. Homeowner and father of eight children he must have been an industrious painter considering that his paintings were valued between four and ten Guilders at his time. Where are we going to find the rest of his oeuvre, apart from the about 25 known and documented paintings?⁴

- 1) compare: Bol (1960)
- 2) Bol (1960) p.42
- 3) Bol (1953) p.137
- 4) compare: Bol (1953)



cat. no. X

Shells, Tulips and Fruits on a Table

The present picture is dated 1635. It shows a table top, which is half draped with a purple-brown table cloth. A glass vase with three tulips, some exotic shells and fruit are displayed.

As much as flowers were objects to collectors, especially to horticulturalists,⁵ so shells were collected by educated people forming curio cabinets. As much as both objects were the target of passionate collecting, they functioned also as a medium through which the beholder would study and admire the marvellous abundance of nature.

The Bosschaert family, especially Balthasar van der Ast, but also Johannes Bosschaert, had specialized in still life paintings combining the depiction of flowers and fruit with insects. Bartolomeus Assteyn must have illustrated an album with watercolors depicting portraits of flowers and shells, since one sheet of this album with the number 438 is conserved today at the Institut Néerlandais in Paris.⁶ These illustrations probably were highly requested visual aids for collectors. They also served the painter as a pattern for sumptuous still life compositions. Apart from these practical reasons, flowers and shells also carried a religious message. In 1611 Philibert van Borsselen praises in a poem of two thousand lines the beauty of the shell as a document of the wasteful wealth in God's nature.⁷ Fruit too, is a natural gift.

Assteyn's arrangement of flowers, fruits and shells can be best understood - in an ambivalent attitude to the always present motto of *memento mori* - as *carpe diem* !

Carpe-diem (Horace Oden I, 11, 8) reminds us to take advantage of our existence and to appreciate the beauty of "here and today".

Ulrike Middendorf

(Translation from
the German by EL)

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- 5) Bol (1982) mentions letters, which were sent to Carolus Clusius, keeper of the Hortus Botanicus in Leiden, begging for free specimens of seeds and tulipbulbs
6) compare: Segal (1989) p.84
7) compare: Segal (1989) pp.78-79

