

Otto Marseus van Schrieck

Nymegen 1619/20 - 1678 Amsterdam

Roses, Carnations, Lily-of-the-Valley and other Flowers in a Glass Vase on a Marble Ledge with Butterflies

Oil on canvas

67 x 51 cm (26 1/2 by 20 in.)

Signed and dated: Otto Marseus 1660

Provenance:

M. Brian Koetser, London 1969
Private Collection, Germany

Literature:

Bergström (1974) p. 28

In 1648 Otto Marseus (Marcellis) van Schrieck traveled together with Matheus Withoos and four other painters to Italy. In Florence he worked for Ferdinando II de Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany. He also visited Naples and Rome, where the local Dutch association of painters, called *Schildersbent*, dubbed him *de Snuffelaer*" (the sniffer) because - according to Houbraken - *van Schrieck constantly was on the search for the most exotic colored snakes, lizards, caterpillars, spiders, moths and butterflies, rare plants and herbs*. In 1652 Samuel van Hoogstraten met van

Schrieck in Rome and noted his intrigue at the number of strange animals which Marseus bred and tamed in order to study well these creatures.¹ Both authors define as Marseus' speciality the depiction of plants and animals close to the ground. Marseus had a catalytic effect with his forest undergrowth pictures on still life painting through the centuries (pl.1). This subject is also called *sous-bois* or *sottobosco*. Marseus had many followers, including Willem van Aelst, Matthias Withoos, Abraham Mignon, Rachel Ruysch and Elias van den Broeck. Amongst many other followers, the most predominant one in Italy was Paolo Porpora. Houbraken states, that Marseus lived in France and England. Around 1656/57 after having exhausted his drive to travel, Marseus and his pupil Willem van Aelst returned from Florence to Holland. A Dutch contemporary writer Jan Vos, commented on Marseus' travel: *He has seen all of Europe, but he did not travel to the isle of Malta, because there are no reptiles.*²

For his personal interest and studies of plants and animals Marseus maintained outside the Amsterdam Muiderpoort a trenched and fenced area, where he could stay over night. De Monconys, the French traveler, visited him there,

1) Houbraken (1943) p.282
Hoogstraten (1678) p.169

2) Jan Vos, *Alle de gedichten*, Amsterdam 1662 - 1671, p. 383
compare also: Bergström (1974); Bol (1982) p.97-105; Weber (1993)



cat. no. XXII

while on his search for *hommes curieux*, after his visits to Johannes Vermeer in Delft. Marseus' inventory includes a cabinet containing dead animals which he most surely used as models. After his own death, many boxes with dead moths and butterflies were found in his studio, indicating that he used the same technique of skinning the scales from the animals and then applying them to the surface of his paintings as it was done by other contemporary artists.³

*Roses, Carnations, Lily-of-the-Valley and other
Flowers in a Glass Vase on a Marble Ledge
with Butterflies*

It seems that Marseus only executed this type of flower still life until the early '60s. The present picture, dated 1660, documents the compositional scheme of an ascending diagonal axis whereby the elegantly painted flowers strive towards a butterfly in the upper right corner. The composition and the choice of objects such as the marble plinth and the precious glass vase lead to Willem van Aelst. In these details, the pupil evidently influenced the master. Roses dominate the arrangement in their abundance, sprawling all over the picture. Additional, there are carnations and one totally isolated marigold. Similar entangling compositional axis are applied by Marseus in other flower still lives of this period. The same chromatic scale of reddish-purple is dominant in these paintings.⁴

Gregor Weber

- Pl.2 Willem van Aelst, *Fruit and Insects on a Ledge*
canvas 25,5 x 33,5 cm, signed and dated 1649
Private Collection Friedrichshafen



Pl.1 Willem van Aelst, *Flowers and Insects on a Ledge*
canvas 64,5 x 51,5 cm, signed and dated 1659
Private Collection Paris



- 3) Weber (1993) pp.27-29
Beier (1987) pp.35-39
4) compare: Bol (1982) p.97; Gammelbo (1960) p.93, pl.35; Exhibition catalogue: *Holländische Malerei aus Berliner Privatbesitz*, Berlin 1984, p.84, cat.no.41, illustrated (dated 1658)

