CS0415

AMBROSIUS BOSSCHAERT the Elder
(Antwerp 1573 – 1621 The Hague)

A Still Life with a Bouquet of Tulips, a Rose, Clover and a Cyclamen in a green glass Bottle. In front, to the left, is a Sprig of Forget-me-not and to the right crawls a Caterpillar. On one of the Tulips, a Damselfly has alighted.

Stamped on the reverse with the hand of Antwerp and the Maker's mark of Peeter Stas.

Oil on copper, 9 x 6 ¾ ins. (23 x 17 cm)
Framed dimensions: 14¾ x 12⅝ x 2⅛ (37.5 x 32 x 5.5 cm)

Dateable *circa* 1609

PROVENANCE
Private collection, France, until 2002
With Johnny Van Haeften Limited, London
Private collection, New York, 2008-2022

EXHIBITED
Dutch and Flemish Old Master Paintings, Catalogue Fourteen, Johnny Van Haeften Limited, London, 2005, cat. no. 4.

Ambrosius Bosschaert was born in Antwerp, the son of another Ambrosius Bosschaert. For religious reasons his family moved to Middleburg around 1587. From 1593 to 1613, Bosschaert was a member (and several times dean) of the Guild of St. Luke in that town, where he was recorded both as a painter and as an art dealer. He married the elder sister of Balthasar van der Ast (1593/4-1657), who would become his foster-son and pupil. By 1614, he had left Middelburg. Subsequently, he was briefly recorded in Amsterdam, then in Bergen-op-Zoom (1615), in Utrecht (1615-19) and in Breda (1619-21). He died suddenly in The Hague, where he was delivering a painting he had executed for Prince Maurits's butler.

A pioneer in flower painting, a genre which he seems to have taken up rather late (around the age of 30), Bosschaert depicted a modest variety of blooms and grouped them together regardless of season. He often painted on copper, which renders to those works a glossy texture reminiscent of enamels. Dated works by Ambrosius Bosschaert are known from 1605 until 1621, the year of his death, but some of his flower paintings must have been executed prior to the earliest dated examples.

Bosschaert spent most of his working life in Middelburg, where floriculture was enthusiastically pursued, and exotic, rare plants were collected and studied. Bosschaert had a following there, but more so in Utrecht, where his three sons, Ambrosius the Younger, Abraham and Johannes, and his brother-in-law, Balthasar van der Ast, continued to be active. His influence on flower and fruit painting can be felt almost until the middle of the seventeenth century.

As with most of Bosschaert's flower paintings, the still life discussed here can be dated quite accurately upon comparison with dated examples. Bosschaert dated quite a few of his paintings and went through a distinct stylistic development. He signed most of his work and there is no firm explanation for the fact that the bouquet discussed he is not, although it may have been one of a pair, of which only one was signed. Whatever the case, despite the absence of a monogram, the style, quality and handling are fully characteristic of Ambrosius Bosschaert's work of about 1609.

A similar example, though smaller, showing four tulips in virtually the same glass bottle, is in the collection of the Museum Bredius, The Hague, which Laurens Bol, in his *The Bosschaert Dynasty,* placed in Bosschaert's Middelburg period (i.e. before 1615), although he did not date it specifically. Strongly coloured yellow and red tulips like the one to the right in this bouquet appear in Bosschaert's work from about 1608.[i] White tulips with a partly transparent red pattern can be found in several of Bosschaert's floral still lifes up to *circa* 1614. The handling of the rose is particularly similar to that of a rose in the much more elaborate bouquet in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, which also features the same cyclamen flower and a very similar cyclamen leaf, while the same crisp handling of the rose leaves, which is characteristic for Bosschaert's work of around 1610, can also be seen similarly in both paintings. In all, a date of origin of about 1609 appears to be highly likely for this bouquet.

At first sight, this bouquet of mainly tulips and a rose looks fully natural, but since tulips belong to the spring and roses blossom later in the year, this is a floral arrangement that

was not likely to be seen as such in real life. It was no doubt composed with the use of studies of individual flowers. The iconography of the picture, if any, seems to be rather subtle. Most of Bosschaert's bouquets contain a great variety of floral species. The interest in such paintings can be explained twofold: the increasingly popularity of botany in the early seventeenth century brought with it a fascination with the variety of species, which variety at the same time could be considered in terms of the versatility of God's creation. However, in this painting, Bosschaert has restricted his choice to a few flowers only. Tulips, of course, were often costly items; speculation in their bulbs would lead to a crash in the market a few decades later, in 1637. The notion of transitoriness and vanity – the lavish flowers that fade quickly – which often plays a role in such pictures, can barely be an aspect here either: the flowers are shown in full bloom, not one is really overblown or losing any petals, apart from the detached flower of the sprig of forget-me-nots on the table. Butterflies juxtaposed with caterpillars can often be understood as symbols of resurrection, but Bosschaert has included only a caterpillar here. In any case, his main aim must have been to please and excite the eye of the viewer with the illusion of a deceptively 'real' bouquet of flowers on a plain table.

(Information based on a report by Fred G. Meijer formerly of the Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie, The Hague, who has seen the painting in person).

The painting's copper support is stamped with the Antwerp hand and the mark of the coppersmith Peeter Stas. Stas began marking his plates from 1602 onwards and eighty plates marked by him are currently known, more than by any other coppersmith. The elite of Antwerp's painters used his plates, among them Otto van Veen (1556-1629), Jan Brueghel I (1568-1625), Frans Francken II (1581-1642) and Abraham Govaerts (1589-1626). Stas sometimes included the date within his stamp, which varied throughout his career (forty such dates are known), but a date is not included in the stamp on the present Bosschaert copper panel.[ii]

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[i] Compare the top tulip in a small bouquet with Richard Green in 1994: London, Richard Green, *Important Old Master Paintings*, cat. no. 3, illus. in colour, where dated probably somewhat too early to *c*. 1607.

[ii] See: Phoenix Art Museum/Kansas City, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art/The Hague, Mauritshuis, *Copper as Canvas: Two Centuries of Masterpiece Painting on Copper 1575-1775*, 1998-9, Chapter 5, Jorgen Wadum, 'Antwerp Copper Plates', pp. 102-110.