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Giovanna Garzoni

(Ascoli Piceno 1600 - 1670 Rome)

Plate of apricots with a rose

gouache on vellum

26 x 36 cm.;

10 1/4 x 14 1/8 in.

Provenance

Private collection, Europe.

Literature

L. Tongiorgi Tomasi & G. A. Hirschauer, *The Flowering of Florence: Botanical Art for the Medici*, exh. cat., Washington 2002, cat. no. 49, pp. 82, 84, 121.

Exhibited

Washington, National Gallery of Art, *The Flowering of Florence: Botanical Art for the Medici*, 3 March – 27 May 2002.

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The following entry is adapted from Lucia Tongiorgi Tomasi's chapter 'The Flowering of Florence: Botanical Art for the Medici', in the 2002 Washington exhibition catalogue.¹ We are incredibly grateful to Tomasi for this research.

'Next to her floral paintings, Garzoni also executed many charming still lifes consisting of bowls overflowing with fruits or vegetables that ranged from prized delicacies to modest products of the kitchen garden. A series of twenty such works, executed in gouache on vellum between 1650 and 1662 for Ferdinando II, is today in the Galleria Palatina of the Palazzo Pitti (see, for example, fig. 1). These vibrant paintings display a conscious yet subtle balance between scientific realism and decorative beauty, between symbolism and the naturalistic rendition of reality. The subjects include fruits that were particularly sought after in the seventeenth century to grace the tables of the aristocracy, because they were not only a pleasure to the palate but also a delight to the eye. Similar to the works in the Galleria Palatina is Garzoni's [...] *Plate of apricots with a rose*. [Here] she uses a more subdued yet luminous palette of colours applied in fine brush strokes to suggest the soft fleshiness of the fruit.

In [such] works we can retrace the complex technique used by Garzoni, which began with a rapid pencil sketch. This was completed in gouache, perhaps mixed with gum arabic, applied in firm, decided brush strokes or lighter, more minuscule touches and often accompanied by tiny, closely arranged dots in different colours. As the artist herself once lamented with a touch of pride, because of the complexity and slowness of the process her paintings were truly "works of great labour."²

The present work is certainly testament to Garzoni's wealth of scientific knowledge. The apricots are not depicted as perfect specimens; instead, Garzoni has ensured to include the small holes on the surface of some of their skins, as well as their decaying leaves which have begun to turn brown in the vellum's upper right corner. Likewise, the pod of peas lower left has some damage to the surface of its skin. Such hyper-realistic details speak to Garzoni's proximity to the scientific community during her years in Rome in the 1620s.³ The Accademia dei Lincei, founded in 1603 by Federico Cesi, was devoted to the compiling of a

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760

natural history through the collection of everything imaginable: botanical specimens, botanical illustrations, shells, images of two-headed animals, and drawings of specimens seen through a microscope. It is important to bear this cultural context in mind when assessing Garzoni's fruit and flower pieces: these works were not only aesthetically pleasing to their patrons, but also evidenced the burgeoning fields of botany and natural science.

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Figure 1. Giovanna Garzoni, *Bowl with pea-pods, beans and cloves*, c. 1650.
Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti, Florence

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760

Footnotes

¹ L. Tongiorgi Tomasi, 'The Flowering of Florence: Botanical Art for the Medici', in *The Flowering of Florence: Botanical Art for the Medici*, exh. cat., Washington 2002, pp. 15-108, particularly pp. 82, 84 and 121.

² L. Tongiorgi Tomasi, 'The Flowering of Florence: Botanical Art for the Medici', in *The Flowering of Florence: Botanical Art for the Medici*, exh. cat., Washington 2002, p. 82.

³ M. D. Garrard, 'The Not-So-Still Lives of Giovanna Garzoni', in *"The Immensity of the Universe": In the Art of Giovanna Garzoni*, exh. cat., (ed.) S. Barker, Livorno 2020, pp. 62-77.