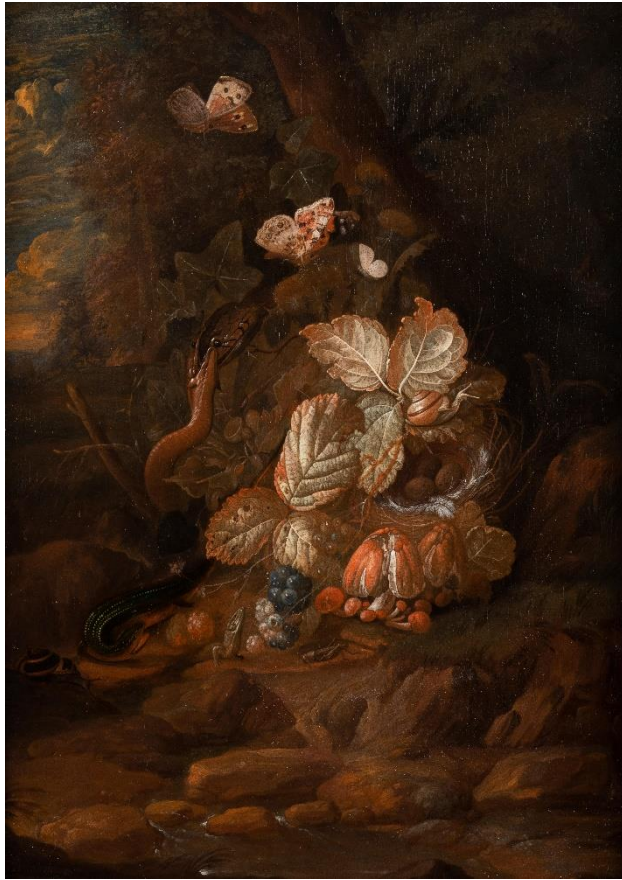


COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Carl Wilhelm de Hamilton

(Brussels 1668 – Augsburg 1754)

*A 'Sottobosco' forest floor
still life with a lizard, snake,
snails, a bird's nest in a landscape*

oil on oak panel

47 x 34 cm.; 18 5/8 x 12 7/8 in

Provenance

Johann Anton Knebel von Katzenelnbogen, prince-bishop of Eichstätt from 1705 to 1725

(According to the printed seal on the back);

Aristocratic collection (According to the 2 different wax seals on the back);

German private collection;

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Carl Wilhelm de Hamilton was the son and pupil of the Scottish artist James de Hamilton (c. 1640 – 1720). The family resided primarily in Brussels. When James was just a boy of approximately ten years old, his parents had fled from Scotland to escape Cromwell's persecution. There are no known paintings securely attributed to James, who was reportedly a painter of flowers and fruit. Carl Wilhelm's brothers, Philipp Ferdinand (c. 1664 – 1750) and Johann Georg (1672 – 1737), also studied painting with their father. Carl Wilhelm is thought to have been court painter in Baden-Baden between 1699 and 1707. Subsequently he worked for Prince-Bishop Alexander Sigismund von Pfalz-Neuburg (1663 – 1737) in Augsburg. He remained there even after the Prince-Bishop's death in 1737.

Carl Wilhelm specialized in forest floors scattered with lizards and butterflies, hence being given the nickname *Thistle Hamilton*. Though the *sottobosco* genre did not originate with de Hamilton, he remains one of its best known exponents. Around 1650, the empirical investigation into the behaviour and physiology of butterflies, snakes, toads, lizards, chameleons, hedgehogs, and other small animals had begun on a pan-European scale. Animals were either collected and housed in jars, observed in their native environment, or kept in specially designed and enclosed habitats.

During the second half of the 17th century, the Dutch painter Otto Marseus van Schrieck (1619/20 – 1678) invented a new genre: so-called 'Nature Pieces' or *bosgrondjes*. These usually consisted of a small, natural microcosm set against an Italianate landscape. Acting almost as a portal into the dark and mysterious undergrowth of forest floors, these paintings offer detailed views of wild flowers, weeds, thistles and mushrooms, and are animated by butterflies, strange insects, reptiles, toads, frogs and lizards. Many painters, including de Hamilton, followed van Schrieck's example in taking up the genre.

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Forest floor paintings of this kind, including the present work, are no stranger to vanitas symbolism. The butterflies represent the spirit or sometimes recklessness, while the snakes, toads, frogs and lizards refer to the transient nature of life.