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Rachel Ruysch

(The Hague 1664 – 1750 Amsterdam)

*Bouquet of flowers in a glass
vase on a marble table*

oil on panel

29.5 x 24 cm.;

11 5/8 x 9 1/2 in.

signed, dated and inscribed (lower right):

Rachel Ruysch 1748 / A 84 / 85

Provenance

Private collection, Aix-en-Provence, France;

Sale, Aix-en-Provence, France, 11 October 2008;

Where acquired by David Koetser Gallery, Zurich / New York;

From whom acquired by the present owners, private collection, UK, in March 2009.

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This lovely small bouquet of flowers nestled snugly in a round glass vase is the last known work by Holland's most celebrated woman artist, and one of its greatest flower painters, Rachel Ruysch (1664-1750). In addition to signing and dating the still life to 1748 at lower right, the artist also inscribed her age of 84 in the same location, an unabashed gesture of pride at still being at the easel some 70 years after starting her career as a student of Willem van Aelst, an internationally recognized master of the floral genre. In fact, very close inspection of the panel reveals a surprise second inscription just below her 84. It reads 85! Rachel Ruysch would have turned 84 in June of 1748 (she was baptized on June 3, 1664), so by adding '85' she indicated that she continued to work on this picture into her 85th year (which would date its completion after her birthday in June 1749). Beginning in her late 70s, the artist began annotating her paintings with her age, but never — with the exception of the present work — did she record on the painting itself that she worked on it over the course of years. She would just inscribe the date of completion.

Indeed, when Ruysch's first biographer, the painter Jan van Gool, visited the elderly artist in her Amsterdam home for an interview in 1748, two years before her death, he, too, found it remarkable that she was still at work. During their visit, the artist showed van Gool a selection of six works from her greatest period — the meticulous florals created with astonishing verisimilitude and buzzing with insect life which she sold for high sums to kings, princes, aristocrats and wealthy merchants and cemented her fame. But she also pointed out to him more recent efforts from the 1740s that were still on the easel. As van Gool noted:

'She is, as I write this, a woman of 84 years, having her judgment and sight, still wonderful ... I saw a little painting in her house, which she had painted on her 80th birthday; I was most surprised as everything had been so neatly and elaborately worked. At last she showed me a small work from the year 1747, which had just begun, and one she intended to finish, but, as it seemed to me then, this last one will be less than the previous one, and no wonder! For among thousands not one who has attained this advanced age is fit for common things, much less for the practice of such a lofty art.'

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Impressed with Ruysch both as a personality and an artist of great achievement, van Gool devoted one of the longest biographies in *De nieuwe schouburg der Nederlantsche Kunstschilders en Schilderessen* [The New Theater of Dutch painters] (1750) to her, and also included a collection of laudatory poetry about her gifts that had been written over the years.

It is always a moving experience to examine the last known work by a highly accomplished artist, and this bouquet is a prime example of that. The very human desire to see a sort of 'summing up' in the work is at play, and while summing up one's career is without a doubt not even remotely what the artist was intending when painting it, we still feel a jolt of romance about a painting's 'lastness.' This is particularly true for a case like Ruysch who was painting at an advanced age, just for herself. She was internationally famous, wealthy, recently widowed, a grandmother several times over, and not in need of anything except doing what she loved to do all her life — paint flowers. From the time she was a young girl, Ruysch was immersed in an environment which gave her unprecedented access to the botanical and scientific world. Her father, Dr. Frederik Ruysch, was a famed anatomist who created a *Wunderkammer* of human specimens he expertly embalmed, and the whole family was involved in the enterprise. The human skeletons and preparations were formed into displays along with shells, fish, plants and other natural curiosities. In addition, Rachel's father was head of the Amsterdam Botanical Garden which gave her access to one of the most richly-stocked gardens of rare and medicinal plants in the world. It was an incredible encyclopedic resource for a flower painter.

A careful look at this painting reveals that while Ruysch's hand is no longer as steady and flexible as it had been in her heyday, the work nonetheless is virtually a textbook of Ruysch's complete mastery of her craft at every turn. The elements of the still life (vase, table and wall with a niche) as well as the floral varieties she included in the bouquet belong to her standard lifelong repertoire. For the container, the painter chose a short round dark glass vase, so that in its simplicity it does not compete with the plants which are the main event. Notice, however, that she brings that vessel to life with the greatest economy of means: one bright flash of white paint is judiciously placed on the base of the glass in front, while a

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fainter second reflection is indicated by a small touch of white pigment on the right side. Those deft strokes capturing glints of light are quick, spare but extremely precise. They create a vase that is completely convincing.

Ruysch always favored a warm palette somewhat instinctively, and as such frequently placed her bouquets that are strong on orange-red, white, yellow and pink flowers on slabs of salmon-pink polished marble. The base and plants are thus united through a warm tonality, which then contrasts with the greenish tint to the background articulated by a niche catching light on the right side of the composition. The greenish hue is both a complement to the ruddy colors in the bouquet (in the flame tulip top right, the opium poppy located front and centre, and the cluster of primulas just to the right of it in shadow), and a correlative to the large expanse of sap green describing the pulpy poppy leaves on the central left side of the bouquet.

While without a doubt Ruysch took some shortcuts in the way she rendered some of the flowers in this bouquet (the white hyacinths, the Persian yellow rose and the orange pot marigolds, for example, are painted quite directly wet-in-wet with highlights popped on top of a deeper tone rather than building them up slowly with series of glazes), she rendered many of the elements with great patience and fastidiousness. She pulled out all the stops to portray that flame tulip at the apex of the bouquet as three dimensionally as possible, with strokes from an exceedingly fine brush following the contour of the form. Notice how subtly she fuzzes the edges of the tulip to give it a shimmer of atmosphere. The petals truly seem to be folding around to the back owing to the way the artist burnished their perimeters into the background tone. The meander of the thick tulip leaf to the left has a reddish cast to its profile, and buckles at the appropriate intervals to give it its trademark leathery appearance. The veining of the marble table is a *tour de force* in this painting. Rather than reading as a painted surface it has a depth of mottling — a stony visual density — that reads as hard and cold. It's remarkable. Additionally, Ruysch rendered the network of vessels that emboss the poppy leaf on the right in such a way that they pucker the leaf in pockets. Ruysch achieved this effect by patiently describing each hollow and bump with fully graduated sweeps of tone from dark to light.

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The artist's unrivalled understanding of the plants she painted for 70 years is perhaps on greatest display in her presentation of the red and white opium poppy drooping over the front of the vase. The draftsmanship of that heavy bloom is extremely accurate in its foreshortening. The individual petals convincingly seem to cup the frilly layers just beneath them. It must have taken the artist a long time to achieve the effect of a flower that is at once so heavy that it nearly bends its stem in two, but so light as to retain its papery texture. While Ruysch had painted poppies before this, she had never portrayed one with this level of expressive drama, arching forward into the viewer's space, head down, stem threatening to snap. The tension she built contrasting the aggressive upward thrust of the tulip with the heavily nodding poppy is quite singular in this work. Not to contradict van Gool too emphatically, but given what Ruysch was able to achieve in this small panel, it seems to me that in her twilight years she has gone far beyond the achievement of something merely common and created one of the most expressive images of her life.

Indeed, it is stunning to behold so much evidence of everything Ruysch mastered over the course of a lifetime in such a modest panel. In its conception as a small round bouquet, with flowers densely nestled together, the work comes closest to the companion flower pieces she painted in 1747 at the age of 83, once in the collection of Willem V, Prince of Orange Nassau in The Hague and now in the Palais des Beaux-Arts, Lille (inv. nos. 1038 and 1052). During the 1740s, the last decade of her life, Rachel Ruysch was especially productive, sometimes painting two and as many as four paintings per year. However, at this time, she tended to work on a smaller scale such as this, and more frequently on panel than she had earlier in her career when she favoured canvas.

Dr. Marianne Berardi