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Ambrosius Bosschaert the  
Elder and Studio  
(Antwerp 1573 – 1621 The Hague)

*A vase of flowers in a stone niche*

Oil on panel  
93 x 68 cm  
36 1/2 x 26 3/4 in.

Dated lower left: 1622

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## Provenance

John Robinson Harrison (1865-1923), Scalesceugh Hall, Scotland;  
Thence by descent;  
Anonymous sale, Christie's, London, 5 July 2018, lot 17 (unsold);  
Private Collection, United Kingdom, until present.

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## Exhibited

Glasgow, Glasgow Art Gallery and Museum, 1975.

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A magnificent vase of flowers stands in a stone niche. A stem of Madonna lilies, with gleaming white trumpets, appears at the top of the bouquet, flanked by red roses and hollyhocks, blue bearded irises and vibrant orange Martagon lilies. Further down, smaller flowers form a mass of brilliant colours and varied shapes that includes costly striped tulips, pink and white roses, narcissi, aquilegia, marigolds, snake's head fritillary, marigolds, hyacinths, grape hyacinths and forget-me-nots. At the base of the globular-shaped glass vase, which is embellished with gilded lions' masks biting on small gold rings, lie a stem of marigolds, a tulip and a pink rose. A Red Admiral butterfly has come to rest on the tulip: a dragonfly and a damselfly on the wing further enliven the flora. Strong illumination entering from the left causes the brightly coloured flowers to emerge boldly from the dark interior of the niche, while a subtle play of light and shadow down its right side heightens the sense of volume and depth. The illusionistic qualities of the arrangement are further enhanced by the little chips and cracks in the stonework and the tulip and marigold lying near the edge of the ledge, which seem to project forward into the viewer's space.

Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder was a key figure in the development of Dutch flower painting. Originally from Antwerp, he moved with his family to Middelburg, the capital of Zeeland, when he was in his teens and remained there for much of his working life. From 1593 to 1613, he was a member, and at times dean, of the Middelburg Guild of St. Luke in which he was recorded both as a painter and an art dealer. Towards the end of his life, however, he seems to have become rather restless: leaving Middelburg around 1614, he lived briefly in Amsterdam, then in Bergen-op-Zoom, in Utrecht from 1615 to 1619, and finally in Breda from 1619. Bosschaert died suddenly in 1621 while visiting The Hague to deliver a *blompot* (flower piece) to a member of Prince Maurits's household, for which he received the extraordinary sum of 1000 guilders. Although he left a relatively small oeuvre comprising around fifty paintings, the influence he exerted through his pupil Balthasar van der Ast (c. 1593-1657), and his three sons, Johannes (c. 1607-28), Ambrosius the Younger (1609-45), and Abraham (1612/13-43), was long lasting.

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There are a few isolated examples of autonomous flower paintings from before 1600, but the floral still lifes only emerged as a fully-fledged genre in the first decade of the seventeenth century. Bosschaert was one of the first artists to specialise in this new branch of painting. His earliest flower pieces date from 1605, but he probably painted others before then. However, he was not alone in the field. Several other painters working in different artistic centres began to produce flower paintings around the same time. We do not know who initiated the trend, but it is likely that some degree of interaction and an exchange of ideas occurred between the early pioneers of the genre. Writing in 1604, Karel van Mander described the first attempts of Jacques de Gheyn II (c. 1565-1629), who had been working in The Hague or Leiden, at painting “a small flowerpot from life”, which he said was “very precisely done and amazing as a first effort”<sup>i</sup>. Van Mander also mentioned a larger bouquet of flowers painted by de Gheyn “with much patience and precision” that had been acquired by the Emperor Rudolf II. It is possible that de Gheyn’s vase of flowers was the inspiration for Roelandt Savery (1576-1639) to try his hand at flower painting in the early 1600s. His earliest floral still life, dated 1603, was executed either in Amsterdam or in Prague, where he entered the service of Rudolf II in around 1603 to 1604. It is likewise probably not coincidental that Jan Brueghel the Elder dated his first flower piece in the year after his visit in 1604 to the imperial court in Prague. We also have good reason to believe that Bosschaert had access to the flower paintings of Brueghel, and even possibly met the artist, sometime around 1606-07, as Brueghel’s influence becomes apparent in his work around then<sup>ii</sup>.

The rise of flower painting in seventeenth-century Netherlands is closely linked to the contemporary passion for collecting and growing flowers. Interest in botany and horticulture had been growing throughout the sixteenth century. Numerous illustrated herbals had been published and new species of plants had been imported into Western Europe. Many flowers that are common today were in the early seventeenth century still rare and highly sought

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after commodities. Species such as the iris, narcissus, hyacinth, anemone, fritillary and, above all, the tulip had only recently been brought into cultivation and were only to be found in special botanical gardens and those of a few plant enthusiasts. Jan Brueghel the Elder's correspondence with his patron Cardinal Borromeo is most revealing in this respect, providing a valuable insight into the practice of flower painting at that time. In one letter, Brueghel relates that he made a special journey to Brussels in order to portray rare flowers from life that were not available in Antwerp<sup>iii</sup>, while in another, he remarked that certain blooms were "not easy for me to find in gardens, such flowers are too important to have in the house"<sup>iv</sup>.

The young Bosschaert must have benefited from starting his career in Middelburg. In the first half of the seventeenth century, Middelburg grew into the second largest trading centre in the Dutch Republic, after Amsterdam. Situated advantageously near the mouth of the river Scheldt, not far from Antwerp in the south and Holland in the north, the prosperous town also became famous for its botanical gardens. The most important of these was established in the 1590s by the great botanist Matthias Lobelius, a former court physician to the Prince of Orange, who served as the town's doctor during the last decades of the century. Lobelius was also a friend and colleague of the influential horticulturalist Carolus Clusius (Charles de l'Écluse), who was head of the botanical garden in Leiden. Clusius's study and cultivation of tulips in Leiden laid the foundations for the Dutch bulb industry. While we know nothing of Bosschaert's training, it seems likely that his first endeavours were depictions of the precious flowers growing in the gardens of local enthusiasts. It is tempting to think that he might have been the artist commissioned by Johan Somer, a Middelburg garden owner, to make an image of a rare yellow fritillary which he sent to Clusius in 1597<sup>v</sup>. It is perhaps noteworthy that a fritillary of this type features in several of Bosschaert's paintings, including in the present example, where it appears in the lower left of the bouquet above a pink rose.

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Bosschaert dated quite a number of his paintings thus enabling art historians to trace his stylistic development with some degree of accuracy. Bosschaert painted *A Vase of Flowers in a stone Niche* in the last years of his life. In terms of handling, style and composition, it can be compared with several flower pieces dating from the artist's later years in Utrecht, or from his time in Breda, where he lived from 1619 to 1621. During this relatively brief period, Bosschaert produced some of his most important works. The niche format – an effective space-defining device probably adopted from Roelandt Savery – is characteristic of this time. The imposing arch not only frames the arrangement, but serves as a foil for the flowers, providing a contrast between the hard grey surface of the stone and the colourful and fragile beauty of the living plants. Another example that utilises an almost identical stone niche is Bosschaert's *Vase of Flowers in a Niche*, dated 1618, in the Statens Museum for Kunst, in Copenhagen<sup>vi</sup>. The gilded lion's mask mounts with which the artist embellished the vase also occur in other works from this late period of the artist's career. Vases featuring heads of this type appear in at least four other compositions, including *A Still Life with Flowers*<sup>vii</sup>, dated 1617, in the Hallwyl Museum, Stockholm, *A Bouquet of Flowers in a Niche*<sup>viii</sup>, of c. 1618, in the Princely Collections, Liechtenstein, *A Bouquet of Flowers in a stone Niche*<sup>ix</sup>, dated 1618, in the National Gallery of Denmark, in Copenhagen, and a *Still Life of a Bouquet of Flowers*<sup>x</sup>, dated 1621, formerly with Johnny Van Haeften, London.

This picture's unusually large format begs the question whether it was a special commission, however, we will probably never know the answer as the early history of the painting has been lost in the mists of time. Whatever the case, this ambitious project apparently remained unfinished in Bosschaert's studio at the time of his sudden death in 1621 and was subsequently completed by a member of his studio, possibly one of his sons. The date of 1622, which appears on the front edge of the ledge, must have been applied to signify the date of its completion.

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A careful study of the painting indicates the project was well advanced before Bosschaert's demise. Infrared reflectography (Fig. 1) reveals a fully prepared under-drawing, with a high degree of planning, including reserves and a vertical ruled line defining the central axis of the composition. In accordance with Bosschaert's normal practice, as well as that of most flower painters of his time, this bouquet would have been composed using preparatory drawings taken from living specimens. While the under-drawing throughout the bouquet is extensive, the lack of preparation in the flowers on the ledge suggest that they were added later by another hand, possibly one of Bosschaert's sons. Differences in style are also clearly visible between the handling of the flowers in the main body of the bouquet and those on the ledge. While Bosschaert's flowers are characteristically vibrant and sharply defined, by contrast the rose, marigold and tulip on the ledge are rendered with softer, less well-defined contours and more muted colours.

A dendrochronological report carried out by Dr. Ian Tyers in June 2024 (copy available on request) revealed that this panel was constructed from a single exceptionally wide board derived from a huge oak tree that was likely felled after about 1600. Most unusually, the panel has been linked with no less than seventeen other closely related panels that were probably made by an unknown Antwerp panel-maker from the same tree. These include works by Rubens, Jan Brueghel the Elder, Stalbemt, Frans Francken the Younger and others, some of which are signed and dated around 1611-1613. It is likely that Bosschaert procured his panel from the same source in Antwerp as all the others.



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Fig. 1. Infrared photograph showing under-drawing.

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## BIOGRAPHY

Ambrosius Bosschaert was baptised in Antwerp on 18 November 1573. His father, also called Ambrosius Bosschaert, may have been a painter, but none of his work is known today. Following the reconquest of Antwerp by Spanish forces in 1585, he fled with his Protestant family to the Northern Netherlands to escape religious persecution. They settled in Middelburg, the capital of Zeeland, where Bosschaert was to spend much of his career. Between 1593 and 1613, a painter by the name of Ambrosius Bosschaert served several terms as a member of the board and dean of the Middelburg Guild of St. Luke, but it is not clear whether this was the father or the son. Around 1604, Ambrosius the Younger married Maria van der Ast. The couple had at least six children, of whom three sons Johannes (c. 1607-28), Ambrosius the Younger (1609-45), and Abraham (1612/13-43) followed in their father's footsteps, becoming flower painters. In 1627, their daughter Maria married the painter Jeronymus Sweerts (1603-36), son of the famous nurseryman and engraver Emanuel Sweerts (1552-1612). After the death of Maria van der Ast's father in 1609, her younger brother Balthasar van der Ast (c. 1593/4-1657) came to live with his sister and brother-in-law and took instruction from Ambrosius. He too became a still-life painter and worked as an assistant in Bosschaert's studio until he moved to Utrecht around 1618.

In addition to being a painter, Ambrosius Bosschaert was also an art dealer. He is known to have traded with Antwerp, Frankfurt, England and Ireland, sometimes dealing in large cargoes of paintings. His business must have been profitable, enabling him in 1611 to buy a house near the St. Pieterskerk in Middelburg for 4,200 guilders. However, he left Middelburg a few years later and after brief periods in Amsterdam in 1614 and Bergen-op-Zoom in 1615, he moved to Utrecht in late 1615, where he lived until 1619, before settling finally in Breda. Bosschaert fell ill and died in The Hague in 1621 while on a

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visit to deliver “*een blompot*” (“a vase of flowers”) to Prince Maurits’s butler for which he received 1,000 guilders<sup>xi</sup>.

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<sup>i</sup> Karel van Mander, *Het Schilder-Boeck*, Haarlem, 1604, fol. 294v.

<sup>ii</sup> See Karolien De Clippel & David van der Linden, “The genesis of the Netherlandish flower piece: Jan Brueghel, Ambrosius Bosschaert and Middelburg”, *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, 2015-2016, Vol. 38, No. 1/2, pp. 73-76.

<sup>iii</sup> Letter from Brueghel to Ercole Bianchi dated 14 April, 1606. See: Stefania Bedoni, *Jan Brueghel in Italia e il collezionismo del Seicento*, Florence, 1983, p. 109.

<sup>iv</sup> Quoted by Beatrijs Brenninkmeijer-de Rooij in *Roots of seventeenth-century Flower Painting*, 1996, p. 51, note 21. Letter from Brueghel to Ercole Bianchi dated 26 September, 1608.

<sup>v</sup> Laurens J. Bol, *The Bosschaert Dynasty: Painters of Flowers and Fruit*, 1960, p. 18, note 27.

<sup>vi</sup> Ambrosius Bosschaert I, *Vase of Flowers in a Niche*, 1618, oil on copper, 55.5 x 39.5 cm, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, inv. no. 88.

<sup>vii</sup> Ambrosius Bosschaert I, *Still Life with Flowers*, Hallwyl Museum, Stockholm, dated 1617, on copper, 43 x 33 cm, inv. no. T4580.

<sup>viii</sup> Ambrosius Bosschaert I, *Bouquet of Flowers in a Niche*, c. 1618, The Princely Collections, Liechtenstein, Vienna, panel, 34.5 x 22.5 cm, inv. no. GE57.

<sup>ix</sup> Ambrosius Bosschaert I, *Bouquet of Flowers in a stone Niche*, 1618, on copper, 55.5 x 39.5 cm. SMK National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen, inv. no. KMS sp211.

<sup>x</sup> Ambrosius Bosschaert I, *A Still Life of spring and summer Flowers in an ornamental glass Vase*, 1621, oil on copper, 34.2 x 23.4 cm.

<sup>xi</sup> Biographical data from biography in Joaneath A. Spicer, Lynn Federle Orr, et. al, *Masters of Light: Dutch Painters in Utrecht during the Golden Age*, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore & the National Gallery, London 1997-1998, pp. 376-377.