

# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Iphigénie Decaux, née Milet-Moreau  
(Paris, 1780 - 1862)

*Still life of fruits in a basket on  
a stone ledge*

c. 1815

oil on canvas

40 x 32.5 cm.;

15 3/4 x 12 3/4 in.

signed (bottom right, on the ledge):

*I.Milet-DeCaux*

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## Provenance

Private collection, Europe.

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## Literature

E. Bénézit, *Dictionnaire critique et documentaire des peintres, sculpteurs, Dessinateurs et Graveurs*, vol. III, Saint-Ouen 1962, p. 97;

E. Hardouin-Fugier & E. Grafe, *French Flower Painters of the 19th century*, London 1989, p. 162.

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The French still life painter Iphigénie Milet-Moreau, Viscountess Decaux, was born in 1780 as the daughter of General Milet-Moreau. In 1800 she married Louis Victor de Blacquetot de Caux and thereafter went by the name Vicomtesse Iphigénie Decaux. It is under this name that she became known in art historical literature, although she signed her paintings with both names.

Iphigénie learned the art of painting from the Antwerp flower painter Jan Frans (Jean François) van Dael (1764-1840), who was active in Paris from 1786. Van Dael, who in turn was a pupil of the famous painter Gerard van Spaendonck (1746-1822), was recognised as one of the most important flower painters of his time. He had a large studio at the Louvre with numerous pupils, where Iphigénie also took lessons. Following her teacher, she specialised in still life paintings of flowers and fruits. In the years 1808, 1812 and 1819 she exhibited works at the Salon in Paris. Today, paintings by her hand are extremely rare.

This refined *Still life of fruits in a basket on a stone ledge* depicts an elegant arrangement of typical summer fruits. The apricots and a bunch of blue grapes lie in a woven basket, the other fruits - peaches, plums, bunches of white grapes and currants - are displayed on a marble tabletop. The peaches are the most eye-catching component. One is cut in half, enhancing not only the attractiveness of the fruit but also its scenic beauty. The material expression of different textures apparently had a special charm for Iphigénie. The soft, velvety skin of the peaches and apricots and the glossy skins of the plums and grapes, as well as the deep-veined vine leaves, are beautifully rendered. The pastel shades employed by the artist further enhance the elegance of the painting.

This type of still life, where only a few large fruits are shown inside a basket on a table, came back into fashion in the second half of the 18th century. Artists followed a tradition that had its roots in 16th-century still life painting, when French and German painters such as Daniel Soreau (1586-1619), Peter Binoit (1590-1632) and Louyse Moillon (1609/1616 -1674/1696) made a name for themselves with compositions where fruits were displayed precisely inside a basket on a table top, sometimes surrounded by other wonders of nature such as shells, nuts and small insects. In the northern Netherlands, Jan van Os (1744-1808) was the most



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important 18th-century representative of this genre. This constitutes a sharp contrast with the contemporary, very exuberant flower and fruit still lifes, which instead followed the tradition of the famous Jan van Huysen (1682-1749).

In the 17th century, still lifes of flowers and fruit were often associated with a deeper meaning. Since a fruit only lasts for a few days and a flower quickly withers, they symbolised the transience of earthly life, or the vanitas of beauty. From the middle of the 18th century, however, a scientific interest in the products of nature also developed. That was the era that saw the production of the first encyclopaedias and natural history atlases, which initiated the ordering of the visible world according to scientific principles. It is therefore not surprising that the flower painters of that period were also erudite botanists. The painter Gerard van Spaendonck from Tilburg worked at the *Jardin des Plantes* in Paris, and after the French Revolution was appointed *Professeur d'Iconographie Naturelle* (Professor in Natural Iconography). Jan Frans van Dael, Iphigénie Milet-Moreau's teacher, also had considerable botanical knowledge. In his old age, for instance, he even retired to the countryside to devote the rest of his life to the cultivation of rare flower varieties.

This delicate *Still life of fruits in a basket on a stone ledge* is one of the very rare pieces realised by Iphigénie Milet-Moreau, Viscountess Decaux. She was an excellent representative of a long, rich still-life tradition, which in the Empire era reached a high degree of elegance and particular refinement.