



Jan van Huysum, *Flowers in an Urn*, 1977.7.1

1977.7.1 (2705)

## *Flowers in an Urn*

c. 1720

Oil on wood, 79.9 x 60 (31 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 23 $\frac{5}{8}$ )

Adolph Caspar Miller Fund

### Inscriptions

On front of marble tabletop at left: *Jan Van Huysum fecit*

**Technical Notes:** The support, a single vertically grained wood panel, has been thinned and cradled. A small vertical check in the top edge, left of center, has been repaired. Thin paint layers have been applied over a smooth, thin white ground in paste consistency with slight impasto in light passages. The background is composed of two layers, and the artist made numerous changes in the composition while painting, which are visible through the slightly translucent paint. Scattered small losses of paint and ground were retouched prior to acquisition.

**Provenance:** Jacques Goudstikker, Amsterdam, by 1919. Vas Diag, before 1924; (Leggatt Brothers, London); acquired 21 July 1924 by Lord Claud Hamilton; by inheritance to Lady Claud Hamilton; (sale, Christie, Manson & Woods, London, 28 November 1975, no. 23); (Alexander Gallery, London).

**Exhibited:** *Collection Goudstikker d'Amsterdam*, Pulchri Studio, The Hague, 1919, no. 13. *Spring Exhibition*, Alexander Gallery, London, 1976.

SITUATED as they are against a pale greenish ocher background, the subtle colors and organic rhythms of Van Huysum's exuberant floral display create an elegant ensemble. The poppy, morning glory, and ranunculus tendrils that weave in and out of the densely massed rose, vinca, carnation, iris, and tulip blossoms carry the eye throughout the bouquet, so that the viewer takes in the entire arrangement without focusing unduly upon any individual blossom. The image's decorative character is further enhanced by the terracotta vase decorated with playful cupids and the precariously perched nest containing three pale blue eggs.

Van Huysum is known to have studied with his father, Justus van Huysum, yet in this work the primary artistic inspiration must have been that of Jan Davidsz. de Heem (q.v.). De Heem, whose realistic depictions of natural forms were greatly admired in the early eighteenth century,<sup>1</sup> similarly organized his flower bouquets with sweeping rhythms that draw the eye in a circular pattern throughout the composition (see 1961.6.1). His remarkable painting techniques allowed him to create illusionistic images of individual blossoms. De Heem's complex bouquets included flowers that

would never be found together in nature, for example tulips and morning glories, combinations of improbable types that Van Huysum also delighted in including in his paintings. Perhaps following De Heem's lead, Van Huysum also depicted both tightly formed blossoms at the height of their beauty and tulips with wide opened petals, indicative that the blossoms were past their prime. Moreover, as had De Heem, Van Huysum enlivened his scenes with insects of various types, be they small ants crawling on, and occasionally eating, petals, or butterflies alighting on the uppermost blossoms. Finally, whether as an artistic conceit or to emphasize the freshness of the bouquet, both artists delighted in depicting dewdrops gathered on the green leaves that act as a foil to the delicate colors and shapes of the blossoms.

The similarities in concept between the works of these two men also point out profound differences. De Heem preferred a dark background against which he could contrast the whites and vibrant colors of his bouquet and concentrate the energy of his composition. Van Huysum chose a background with a light tonality so that he could create a more delicate and, ultimately, more decorative image. De Heem also included in his composition nonfloral elements, such as stalks of grain and bean pods that were instrumental in conveying the underlying religious meaning of his painting. Indeed, in a manner quite distinct from De Heem, Van Huysum does not appear to have chosen specific types of flowers for their symbolic associations. Rather, it would seem that the combination of elements in Van Huysum's arrangement was more broadly conceived to suggest both the richness and fertility of nature, and, through allusions to the cycle of life, the transience of earthly existence.

The chronological evolution of Van Huysum's style is difficult to determine because of the relative paucity of dated still lifes. This work, however, with its clear references back to compositions by Jan Davidsz. de Heem, apparently belongs to the beginning of Van Huysum's mature phase, around 1720. It seems to have been in the 1720s that Van Huysum developed the light palette so characteristic of this work. It was also during these years that he tended to place his flowers within this type of terracotta vase, decorated with playful putti fashioned after the relief sculptures of Francois Duquesnoy.<sup>2</sup> It is more lyrically composed than an early flower still life in Karlsruhe that is dated 1716,<sup>3</sup> but the composition is not as complex as, for example, the asymmetrically conceived 1624 *Bouquet of Flowers in an Urn* in the Carter Collection (fig. 1). Other charac-

teristics of the somewhat later style of the Carter painting are that the bouquet rests on an ornately shaped stone ledge and is situated in an outdoor setting.<sup>4</sup>

Van Huysum's lasting fame has centered on his technical virtuosity and his precise observations of flowers and fruit. He could convey both the varied rhythms of the petal of a striped tulip, for example, and the glistening sheen of its variegated surface. Just how he achieved these effects has never been determined because he was a secretive artist who isolated himself from the world. Nevertheless, it would seem that in some measure he achieved these effects by painting from life rather than from models. In a letter to one patron in 1742, he complained that he could not complete a still life that included a yellow rose until it blossomed the following spring.<sup>5</sup> The rose in question was presumably similar to the hybrid known as *Rosa huysumiana* seen in the left center of this painting. Indeed, certain of his paintings have dates from consecutive years.<sup>6</sup> While it is not known whether Van Huysum painted this work over an extended period of time, a number of pentimenti do exist, particularly near the poppies at the top of the bouquet, indicating that he made significant changes in the arrangement of these compositional elements.

#### Notes

1. See Houbraken 1753, 209–211.

2. For Duquesnoy's relief sculpture see Fransolet 1942. John Walsh and Cynthia P. Schneider in Los Angeles 1981, 66, believe that although the figures were inspired by Duquesnoy, the vases were actually designed by Van Huysum himself.

3. Lauts 1966, cat. 380, ill.

4. Walsh and Schneider, in Los Angeles 1981, 66, note 9, have determined that the first dated painting by Van Huysum with an outdoor background is 1720.



Fig. 1. Jan van Huysum, *Bouquet of Flowers in an Urn*, 1724, oil on panel, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Edward William Carter

5. Schlie 1900, 141. The letter, dated 17 July 1742, was written to A. N. van Haften, agent for the Duke of Mecklenburg.

6. Grant 1954, cat. 19, *Vase of Flowers*, 1723/ 1724; cat. 162, *Fruits and Flowers*, 1732/ 1733.

#### References

- 1954 Grant: no. 3.  
1985 NGA: 208, repro.

## Willem Kalf

1619–1693

WILLEM KALF, baptized in Rotterdam on 3 November 1619, was one of the foremost still-life painters of the seventeenth century. His father, Jan Jansz. Calff (Kalf), was a well-to-do textile merchant and town council member who died in 1625. Shortly after the death of his mother, Machtelt Gerrits., in 1638, Kalf settled in Paris, where he was active as a

painter until his return to Rotterdam in 1646. Five years later his name appears in the marriage book for the city of Hoorn: "Willem Jansz. Kalf, bachelor of Rotterdam, and Cornelia Pluvier, girl of Vollenhoven, both living at Hoorn, on 22 October 1651." Not long after his marriage he is mentioned as a member of the Saint Luke's Guild in Amsterdam.