

# AMBROSIUS BOSSCHAERT II

(Arnhemuiden 1609 - Utrecht 1645)

*Peaches, Grapes, a Pear and White Currants in a Wan-li Kraak Porcelain Dish,  
with Shells, a Lizard and a Butterfly on a Ledge*

oil on panel  
15 x 18 in (38 x 45½ cm)

**Provenance:** Anonymous sale: Sotheby's, London, 5 July, 1989, lot 36, as Bartolomeus Assteyn,  
where acquired by the previous private collector

**I**N THIS WORK, WHICH HAS BEEN ATTRIBUTED TO Ambrosius Bosschaert the Younger by Fred Meijer of the Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentarie (RKD), The Hague, a sumptuous still life is presented on a ledge. A Kraak porcelain dish overflows with a melange of fruit, including peaches, pears, grapes and currants. In front of the dish, to the left, is a selection of six different shells, and scattered throughout the work are a variety of creatures, including a fly, a lizard, a wasp, an earwig, an ant and a butterfly. There is a solidity and weight to the work, created by the mound of fruit, which is beautifully counterpointed by delicate details such as the butterfly gently settling onto a leaf.



Ambrosius Bosschaert the Younger, *Apples, Pears, Peaches and Walnuts on a Pewter Plate with Fruit, a Roemer, a Melon, Chestnuts and a Grasshopper on a Stone Ledge in a Niche*, Private Collection (Figure 1)



Ambrosius Bosschaert the Younger, *Fruit Still Life with Shells and Insects*, 1630, Private Collection (Figure 2)

The execution of the present work is exemplary, in which Bosschaert demonstrates his remarkable ability. Each element has been individually considered and treated, so that, for example, each grape is at a different stage of ripeness. The soft illumination enhances the rounded forms of the fruit, imbuing them with a sense of weight and heft. One of the most striking aspects of the work is Bosschaert's ability to convey a range of textures, in such a manner that they are almost tangible. Within the cool, smooth porcelain bowl sit the smooth plump grapes, the slightly furred peaches and the crisp brittle leaves, ready to snap. On the ledge the cluster of soft delicate currants is contrasted with the hard surface of the red and white shell, which at first glance is perfectly smooth, but on closer inspection has a faintly rippled surface, having been weathered by the sea. Just beside this is the lizard, its scaled skin glistening. This







Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder, *Peaches, Apples, Apricots and Grapes in a Wanli kraak Porcelain Bowl with Cherries, Pears, Apricots and an Apple on a Ledge*, c.1600-1605, Private Collection (Figure 3)

delight in contrasting textures is a recurring feature in Bosschaert's work, seen elsewhere in a painting such as *Apples, Pears, Peaches and Walnuts on a Pewter Plate with Fruit, a Roemer, a Melon, Chestnuts and a Grasshopper on a Stone Ledge in a Niche* (fig. 1). In that work the pewter and glass are contrasted with the rough dimples of a melon or the hard casing of a nut. An apple has even been chopped in half, so that the viewer can compare the fruit with the skin.

Meijer has suggested that *Peaches, Grapes, a Pear and White Currants in a Wan-li Kraak Porcelain Dish, with Shells, a Lizard and a Butterfly on a Ledge* was executed during the 1630s, by which stage Bosschaert was active in Utrecht. The painting is certainly comparable to another of Bosschaert's fruit pieces, which is dated 1630 (fig. 2). In both these works, the settings are unified by colour, with very little detailing, such as the niche present in *Apples, Pears, Peaches and Walnuts on a Pewter Plate with Fruit, a Roemer, a Melon, Chestnuts and a Grasshopper on a Stone Ledge in a Niche*. In each painting the pile of fruit dominates the composition, filling the picture plane to its edges with very little space framing it, especially in the present work. Many of the elements that make up the works are repeated, from the types of fruit depicted, to the distinctive black and white spotted shell, or the slightly unsettling presence of the lizard, eyeing the fruit hungrily. With the exception of



Balthasar van der Ast, *Still Life with a Basket of Fruit and Seashells*, The Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels (Figure 4)

the rich red of the cherries, the colouring in the dated work is slightly muted in comparison to the warmer palette of the present work, which is enlivened by numerous shades of orange and red. Neither work feels overly staged, with objects overflowing into each other and sometimes spilling over the ledge itself, and this sense of naturalism is a recurring feature of Bosschaert's style.

Bosschaert the Younger was a member of a famous dynasty of still life painters, headed by his father, Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder (1573-1621). Bosschaert the Elder was 'a pioneer in flower painting', but painted only a handful of fruit pieces. However, when one considers one of these fruit pieces, see figure 3, it is clear that Bosschaert the Elder's influence was evident not only in the flower paintings of his son, but also the fruit still lifes. However, arguably it was his uncle, Balthasar van der Ast (1593/4?-1677), who exerted the greater influence on Bosschaert the Younger's fruit painting. Certainly if the present work is compared to van der Ast's *Still Life with a Basket of Fruit and Seashells*, see figure 4, we see many of the elements recurring. The quantity of fruit overflows from the basket that contains it, with leaves rising skyward in contradiction to the bulk beneath. However, it is perhaps the inclusion of the shells and the lizard in *Grapes, a Pear and White Currants in a Wan-li Kraak Porcelain Dish, with Shells, a Lizard and a Butterfly on a Ledge*, where van der Ast's influence is most overt. Jan Sysmus, a seventeenth-century doctor



Balthasar van der Ast, *Still Life with Fruit Bowl and Seashells*, Rijksmuseum Twente, Enschede (Figure 5)

who authored a synoptic booklet on Dutch painters, summarised van der Ast's style by saying 'In flowers, shells and lizards, beautiful'.<sup>1</sup> When these elements occur in the present painting, they can be seen as a direct response and acknowledgement to van der Ast's work. In *Still Life with Fruit Bowl and Seashells*, see figure 5, van der Ast uses a slightly lower viewpoint, and so, as in the present work, the objects fill the picture frame which not only contributes to the impression of abundance, but brings to prominence the subtle shades of light and colour.

It is worthwhile to consider the significance of some of the individual objects which Bosschaert has included in the present work. Objects such as the Kraak porcelain dish convey a sense of luxury and value, reflecting the collecting tastes of the Dutch upper middle classes. With the recent opening of the Dutch East India Company in 1602, Oriental objects started to become available and were highly prized. The inclusion of

<sup>1</sup> Bredius, A., 'Het Schildersregister van Jan Sysmus, Stads Doctor van Amsterdam' in *Oud Holland*, VIII (1890), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Bol, L., *The Bosschaert Dynasty: Painters of Flowers and Fruit*, (F. Lewis, Leigh-on-Sea, 1960), p.39.

seashells also reflects an appetite for collecting. ‘Dutch seafarers brought back foreign ‘horentjes en schulpen’ (shells) from the East and the West and these exotica very soon became collector’s objects’.<sup>2</sup> Like the tulipomania that partly inspired the Bosschaert the Elder’s still lifes, contemporary fashions are reflected in a work such as *Grapes, a Pear and White Currants in a Wan-li Kraak Porcelain Dish, with Shells, a Lizard and a Butterfly on a Ledge*. Additionally they provided an engrossing subject matter for an artist, through which he could demonstrate his ability. When discussing van der Ast, Laurens Bol says that in his work one can discern how ‘the realistic eye of the collector was combined with a poetic vision, how he was enchanted by the diversity of form and colour in these marvels of the distant seas’, sentiments that could equally be applied to the present work.<sup>3</sup>

When viewing a seventeenth-century still life, it is almost inevitable that one considers any potentially symbolic aspects to the work. In the case of Bosschaert the Younger, Bol neatly summarises this aspect of his art by using the subheading ‘Naturalism and a *Touch of Symbolism*’, for



Ambrosius Bosschaert the Younger, *A Vase of Flowers*, 1633, The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (Figure 6)

his chapter on the artist.<sup>4</sup> For example, in the present work there are certainly many elements that can be interpreted as having a symbolic meaning: the bunch of grapes could represent the sacrificial death of Christ; the pear a symbol of the fruits of paradise; the butterfly of the soul; the lizard of the fall of man; and flies, carriers of disease, symbolise sin. On the other hand, flies recur so often in Bosschaert’s work, that it seems clear that he delighted in the illusionistic effect which their presence brings. Indeed he has even been nicknamed ‘Master of the Fly’.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>5</sup> *Masters of Middleburg*, exh. cat. (Waterman Gallery, Amsterdam, 1984), p. 64.

Bol says that ‘Without lapsing into the exaggeration of considering every early seventeenth century still life as a cryptological exercise, I do believe that Ambrosius the Younger employed crypto-symbolic elements more than once in his paintings’, but tempers this by saying that ‘After its secularization Dutch art became more the art of the eye than of thought’, that many of the motifs were used more for their traditional pictorial qualities, than for any inherent symbolism.<sup>6</sup>

Bosschaert the Younger was born in Middleburg into a family of great still life painters. His celebrated father, Bosschaert the Elder was a pioneering figure in the genre, one of the first to paint flowers in oils. Bosschaert the Younger followed in his father’s footsteps, along with his two brothers, Johannes (c. 1607-1628) and Abraham (1612/13-1643), and his uncle, van der Ast. Bosschaert the Younger received his initial training from his father, and although he was only twelve when Bosschaert the Elder died, he had already learnt a great deal from him. His early work adheres closely, both in terms of style and composition, to the elder Bosschaert. The other great influence on his art was van der Ast, who lived in Utrecht from 1616. It was in this city where Bosschaert the Younger also spent most of his working life in Utrecht, and where he was married, when another of the great still life painters of that generation, Roelandt Savery (1576-1629) (see inventory) was his best man.

It is only since 1935 that the works of Bosschaert the Younger have been distinguished from the work of his brother Abraham, thanks to the



Ambrosius Bosschaert the Younger, *Still Life with Fruits in a Cane Basket, a Glass Vase with Flowers and Small Insects on a Table Top*, 1633, Private Collection (Figure 7)

observations of Piet de Boer. Although he certainly painted far more fruit pieces than his father, he was predominantly a flower painter. In *A Vase of Flowers*, see figure 6, there is the sense that the flowers are bursting forth from the restrictions of the vase, just as the fruit spills out from the dish. There is also a comparable effect with soft and subtle *chiaroscuro* effect, emphasising the rounded forms. He also painted works such as *Still Life with Fruits in a Cane Basket, a Glass Vase with Flowers and Small Insects on a Table Top*, see figure 7, which combined fruit and flowers. This again shows the influence of van der Ast, who had developed this format c. 1620. Despite the weighty legacy of his artistic family, Bosschaert the Younger developed his own individualised style, and the present work is an enchanting example of this independent manner.

<sup>6</sup> Bol., pp. 46-47. Bol discusses the role of symbolism throughout his chapter on Bosschaert the Younger, pp. 44-48.