

S P H I N X F I N E A R T



Frans Snyders (Antwerp 1579 - Antwerp 1657)

A Buck, a Lobster on a China Plate, a Squirrel in a Basket of Fruit, Artichokes and a Boar's Head in a Tureen, with Birds, a White Napkin and Asparagus on a Draped Table

bearing a collection inventory number (lower right)

oil on canvas

117 x 179 cm (46 x 70½ in)

On a table draped with a scarlet cloth, the imposing figure of a dead buck deer occupies the centre of the composition. Around the magnificent animal, which has been gutted ready for quartering and hanging, manifestations of plenty take the form of overflowing baskets of fruit and vegetables, an enormous boar's head, a red lobster, and a string of small birds. The dark, neutral wall behind the table serves as a sober backdrop to emphasize still more the exuberant feast of colour and form inherent to this still-life. A tall basket to the left of the composition overflows with grapes, peaches and apricots, their leaves and tendrils creating a swirling pattern around it: a red squirrel balances atop the fruit, stretching towards the most inaccessible apricot with delightful illogicality. To the right, another receptacle holds, among oranges and artichokes, the gigantic severed head of a wild boar, probably hunted at the same time as the buck. On the table next to the deer's head are bunches of asparagus, and further left a dead partridge, a woodcock, and a string of small birds such as bullfinches. A black cat, bearing a peculiarly malevolent expression in its orange eyes, prepares to pounce over the stag's neck to scavenge one of the birds.

Frans Snyders specialised in still-life and animal paintings, and created many similar works to the present composition. In all these, as in the present work, the predominant theme is abundance, commonly represented in Renaissance and Mannerist paintings by allegorical cornucopias, based on classical Greek symbolism, but here given a new face, in line with the Baroque tendencies of the Snyders' age. In Snyders' painting, the expression is bold and literal, and embodies the richness and exuberant sensuality of Baroque art. This work is a direct appeal to the senses: not only sight, but also touch, with the smooth pelt of the dead deer, and hearing, with the rustling of leaves as the squirrel chooses a fruit to eat; the pungent odour of game appeals to our sense of smell, and that of taste is amply solicited through the sheer profusion of food-stuffs displayed.

S P H I N X F I N E A R T



The word Baroque derives from the Portuguese *barroco*, meaning 'irregular pearl', but nothing in this painting suggests an element of chance such as in the formation of the pearl: the composition is carefully planned to maximum effect. The body of the hunted deer lies on its back across the table, and the line of its forelegs is prolonged through the now-stiff muscles in its abdomen to its left leg, and forms a great diagonal across the canvas, defining the composition. The immaculate white napkin negligently thrown on the table acts as a repoussoir for the baskets piled high behind the buck, breaks the monotony of the red table-cloth and thus stabilises the composition. The immense heaps of food-stuffs are consistent with the pyramidal forms, indicating abundance, favoured by Snyder in many of his compositions, such as *Fruit Piece with a Squirrel and a Cat*, (c.1630-1650, Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz Museum). This latter piece is an example of one of Snyder's later compositions that still retains the relative simplicity of his earlier, smaller works. Indeed, as from 1620 approximately, Snyder, who was already a well-established and highly-regarded artist, produced a large number of truly monumental compositions, for instance the four huge *Markets* of 1618-1621 (St. Petersburg, The Hermitage) or the *Larder* of circa. 1640 (Caen, France, Musée des Beaux-Arts).

In comparison to Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640), whom Snyder may have met either in Italy or Antwerp, an Englishman, Toby Matthew, wrote about Snyder's talent at portraying animals in a letter to his patron Sir Dudley Carterton regarding a painting of a hunt by Rubens: "In this Peece the beasts are all alive, and in act eyther of escape or resistance, in the expressing whereof Snyder doth infinitelie come short of Rubens [...]. The talent of Snyder is to represent beasts but especiaillie Birds altogether dead, and wholly without anie action". Snyder's skill in this area is yet again proved in this painting: if one compares the treatment of the live cat for instance, to that of the dead partridge in the foreground, one realises the difference in quality between those two depictions: the cat, although its glinting orange eyes are very realistic and impart a look of concentration and longing as the animal eyes up its prey, is far less anatomically correct than the game-bird; the dead partridge's delicate plumage and form are admirably rendered by Snyder in a very detailed depiction, based on close observation of his subject, even to the whitish lower lid covering its eye. This knowledge of nature and anatomical precision are typical of Snyder's work. Matthew's judgement regarding Snyder's alleged ineptitude at portraying living creatures can however be disproved by the large numbers of hunting canvases produced by the artist for the royal courts of Europe, which were an essential part of his *oeuvre* and a major source of his lasting fame.

A recent X-ray examination of the present painting revealed the ghost of a figure standing to the left of the table, identical to that of a page-boy in Snyder's *Pantry Scene with a Page* (c.1612, The Wallace Collection, London). It has been suggested that the figure was never finished, and was thus covered over before the painting was sold. This element can serve as an indication of date, and would set the present work among Snyder's earlier *oeuvre*. Moreover, the scale of this painting is more akin to the artist's first compositions than to the monumental works he executed from the 1620s onwards.

In addition to the canvas in the Wallace Collection, this painting stands comparison to numerous other examples of Snyder's *oeuvre*. Snyder indeed specialised in still-life and animal painting and this work can be seen as a typical example of his favourite subject-matter. In 1609, soon after Snyder's return from Italy,

S P H I N X F I N E A R T



Rubens commissioned him to paint the still-life motifs in the *Recognition of Pimpopoemien* (Madrid, Museo del Prado); this was the first kitchen-market piece to have a baroque format. The composition and preliminary sketch are clearly Rubens' work, but the resulting canvas helps to define Snyder's later oeuvre and pave the way for the acceptance of the still-life genre as a high form of art. The work is characterised by a dark tonality and dramatic lighting, typical of the Caravagesque tradition. A remnant of these features is visible within the present still-life: the surfaces are firmly modelled, the overall tonality is quite shadowy, and strong contrasts are formed for instance by the white napkin on the table or the strong bright form of the buck on the dark wall behind. However, a certain finesse in nuance, a brighter use of colour foretell the luminosity of some of Snyder's later works such as the *Dresden Larder with a Bitch and her Pups* (c.1620-1630, Dresden, Staatliche Kustsammlungen, Gemäldegalerie). Snyder's earliest dated still-life, *Larder with Small Game, Produce and a Dove Taking Flight* (1612, New York, Jack Kilgore & Co., Inc.), demonstrates early in the artist's career the same skill at portraying dead birds as in the present work.

Frans Snyder was born in Antwerp and baptized on November 11, 1579. His parents, inn-keepers by profession, sent him when he was fourteen to study as an apprentice with the celebrated painter Pieter Brueghel the Younger (c.1564- c.1638). However, the master's work and the time Snyder spent under his tutelage had far less impact on his future *oeuvre* than that of Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568-1625), Pieter's younger brother, who returned to Antwerp in October 1596 after a long sojourn in Italy. Nicknamed "Flower" or "Velvet" Brueghel, he was best known for floral pieces, biblical canvases and landscapes, but also practised still-life and animal painting, and may have encouraged Snyder to specialize in these two genres. Snyder also studied in all probability under Hendrick van Balen (1575-1632), but again proved himself impervious to his master's artistic influence. In 1602, at the age of twenty-three, he became a free-master in the Guild of St. Luke in Antwerp. A large gap in the archives in Antwerp suggests that, although he is only documented as such in 1608, Snyder may have travelled to Italy as early as 1603. His sojourn there remains largely mysterious, the only definitive documents attesting to the places he visited and his artistic activity are the letters of Jan Brueghel recommending him to various patrons including Federico Borromeo, cardinal of Milan. In 1609, Snyder left Milan rather abruptly and returned to Antwerp, where he set up a studio. In 1611, he married Margriete de Vos, the sister of Cornelis (1585-1651) and Paul de Vos (1595-1678), renowned painters in Antwerp. Snyder took on only three apprentices during his lengthy career, presumably because his extended family provided him with the skill he needed to run a high-quality studio. Snyder's first dated fruit piece was executed in 1611, but it is possible that he started creating such works during his stay in Italy. By the 1620s, Snyder had acquired a large fortune and established himself as the preeminent master of still-life painting in Antwerp. In 1621, he commissioned the young Anthony Van Dyck (1599-1641) to paint portraits of himself and his wife (New York, Frick Collection); the portraits bear testimony to Snyder's high social standing, and make no reference to his profession, which was a manual trade. In June 1619, Snyder was elected a member of the Confraternity of the Romanists, and served as dean in 1628. This membership was a symbol of his growing social importance in Antwerp.

Snyder's influence on still-life and animal painting is vastly important. Still-life painters belonged in Snyder's time to the third category of artists, according to a classification based on Aristotle's concept of the soul, and were considered by many as "only common foot soldiers in the army of art", hence the reluctance of Snyder's early biographers to acknowledge the artist's work in this area: Snyder was

S P H I N X F I N E A R T



described as an animal painter, but his immense talent to portray inert objects was very much overlooked. However, by the time of Snyder's death in 1657, still-lives were becoming a newly sought-after genre in the courts and grand houses of Europe.

Frans Snyder built up throughout his career a wealthy, politically influential clientele throughout the Netherlands, Spain and England. Like Rubens, he benefitted from the renewal of Antwerp's economy sparked by the Twelve Years Truce (1609-1621), and contributed to the city's fame and grandeur. These dates correspond with the emergence of the larger type of still-life, of which the present work is an example: these paintings reflect the general optimism of the time, through an abundance of victuals only possible in peacetime.

¹ From a letter dated February 25, 1617, quoted in Koslow, S., *Frans Snyder*, (Brussels, Fonds Mercator, 2006), p. 18

² Hoogstraten, S. van, *Inleyding tot de Hooge Schoole der Schilderconst*, 1678, quoted in Koslow, S., *Frans Snyder*, (Brussels, Fonds Mercator, 2006), p. 32

Artist description:

Seen here in Sir Anthony van Dyck's portrait of c. 1620, in the Frick Collection, New York, Frans Snyder the progenitor of Flemish Baroque still-life and animal painting. He worked intensively for about 50 years, producing an enormous body of works, of which more than 300 paintings survive, along with some oil sketches and about 100 drawings. Through his own paintings and his collaboration with Rubens and other artists, his influence was considerable.

His father, Jan Snyder, was the keeper of a well-known Antwerp inn favoured by artists. In 1593 Frans became apprenticed to Pieter Brueghel II. According to the inscription on Snyder's portrait, engraved by Jacques Neefs (Hollstein: *Dut. & Flem.*, 6th edn, xiv, p. 28, no. 290), he was also a pupil of Hendrick van Balen. Snyder specialized in still-life and animal painting and became a master of the Antwerp painters' guild in 1602. His earliest known work, *Still-life with Game, Birds, Fruit and Vegetables* (1603; ex-Gal. Willems, Brussels, 1956, see Greindl, 1983, p. 287), almost seems to be cut out from a large kitchen-piece by Pieter Aertsen or Joachim Beuckelaer, and the *Kitchen Maid* (c. 1604-7; Bucharest, N. Mus. A.), with its subject of *Christ at Emmaus in the background*, follows these painters' practice of placing a narrative scene in the background of a prominent still-life display.

In spring 1608 Snyder went to Rome, moving that winter to Milan, where, on the strength of letters of recommendation sent by his friend Jan Breughel I, he was supported by Cardinal Federico Borromeo. He left Milan in April 1609 and was back in Antwerp before 4 July. From c. 1610 he was employed by Rubens, whose modello of the *Recognition of Philopoemen* (Paris, Louvre) was the basis of a large, collaborative work (Madrid, Prado), which has been considered the first Baroque still-life with figures. On 23 October

S P H I N X F I N E A R T



JOHANNES SNYDERS MARRIED MARGARETHA DE VOES, SISTER OF THE PAINTERS CORNELIS AND PAUL DE VOES.

Snyders initiated a remarkable variety of new still-life and animal subjects in Antwerp. In large market scenes and pictures of pantries with dealers, pages and servants, he forsook the religious contexts used by Aertsen and Beuckelaer, but retained, at least in many paintings made before 1614, the Mannerist vista and depth of background, as in the *Fish Stall* (c. 1613; Moscow, Pushkin Mus. F.A.) or the *Still-life with Poultry* (1614; Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Mus.). His masterly handling of a profusion of different objects to produce a decorative and rhythmical composition and his growing skill as a colourist were surely influenced by impressions gained in Italy and, more particularly, by the work of Rubens.

Snyders's individual work of this period consists of cleverly composed pantry scenes, featuring figures of pages in half-length (e.g. Brussels, Mus. A. Anc.; Munich, Alte Pin.), and game still-lives, usually with a dead deer in the centre (e.g. Brussels, Mus. A. Anc.). He also produced smaller works: breakfast-pieces and still-lives of the type that had originated in the northern Netherlands c. 1600. In these, too, he was innovative, rejecting the straightforwardly descriptive manner of Osias Beert I and his circle and combining the objects in well-arranged groups to form a geometrically structured composition. His favourite motifs were dead hares and birds, tazze (shallow dishes on a tall foot), baskets with grapes and other fruit, enamelled pitchers and Chinese porcelain of the Wanli reign (1573–1620) of the Ming dynasty. Until c. 1614 the still-lives are set in dark surroundings (e.g. *Still-life with a Hare, Birds, Fruit and Vegetables*, Kassel, Schloss Wilhelmshöhe), but thereafter, under the influence of Rubens, Snyders brightened his palette to give his compositions greater splendour and material intensity, as in the *Still-life with Small Game and Fruits* (c. 1616). Snyders's representational skill was formidable, but his still-lives also carry symbolic messages: the depiction of grapes next to dead birds probably had a eucharistic meaning, especially in his early works (e.g. *Still-life with a Basket of Grapes, Birds and a Dish of Strawberries*, c. 1612; Düsseldorf, Kstmus.). He also included living animals in his still-lives, and these also have a symbolic function, quite apart from the dramatic effect of contrasting them with dead animals (e.g. *Basket of Grapes with Parrot and Cat*, 1616; Zurich, Ksthaus).

Snyders's collaboration with Rubens became more active c. 1615. About that time he painted the fruit and dead game in such well-known works as *Diana and the Nymphs Sleeping* (c. 1615–17; London, Kensington Pal., Royal Col.) and *Diana Returning from the Hunt* (c. 1615; Dresden, Gemäldegal. Alte Meister). He painted the garland for *Putti with a Garland of Fruit* (c. 1615–17; Munich, Alte Pin.), which, together with the exalted example set him in this genre by Jan Breughel I, inspired him later on to produce his own splendid *Garland of Fruit* (e.g. Philadelphia, PA, Mus. A.).

After 1610 Snyders turned increasingly to hunting scenes and other subjects involving living animals, an early example being the eagle in Rubens's *Prometheus Bound* (c. 1611; Philadelphia, PA, Mus. A.). However, Rubens seems to have preferred Snyders's ability to represent fruit and dead animals, as he did not engage him for his profane hunting scenes of the 1610s. Snyders's early paintings of boar hunts (e.g. Prague, N.G., Kinsky Pal.; Rome, Pal. Barberini) do indeed suffer from a slight stiffness, but it was not long before he developed greater freedom and vitality of style. His most characteristic subjects involving live animals are fables, such as *Bird-catching*, *The Cock and the Diamond* (both Aachen, Suermondt-Ludwig-

S P H I N X F I N E A R T



mus.) and the *Cock Fight* (1615, Berlin, Gemäldegalerie.).

In 1619 Snyder joined the Antwerp painters' guild, of which he later (1628) served as Dean. He was by then a rich man, able in 1622 to buy a house in Keizerstraat and eventually to acquire other properties, which provided rental income. His compositions of this period became more exuberant, celebrating the abundance of nature, as in the *Fish Market* (e.g. St Petersburg, Hermitage; Paris, Louvre), which was also an accurate depiction of the Antwerp market. Antoine Triest (1576–1657), Bishop of Bruges from 1616 to 1621, commissioned the famous *Four Markets* (c. 1615–17; St Petersburg, Hermitage), which probably illustrates proverbial sayings. The many kitchen-pieces Snyder produced (e.g. *Pantry with Cook and Maid, Bitch and her Young*, Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister) also often contained moralizing or erotic messages. His hunting scenes of the 1620s display a splendid verve and harmony of composition (e.g. *Stag Hunt*, Brussels, Mus. A. Anc.).

Around 1630 Snyder's style achieved a new freedom. His colours gained in splendour and atmospheric effect and his brushwork became softer and more fluid, although the objects he portrayed lost none of their characteristic solidity and tangibility. He lightened the densely composed masses of objects and came to prefer overlapping curves to geometrical lines in structuring his compositions, as for example in the *Fruit Loft with a Woman and Parrot* (c. 1630; Madrid, Prado) and the *Still-life with Game and Fruit* (c. 1635; Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum.).

From 1636 Snyder provided 60 hunting scenes and animal pieces for the extensive commissions Rubens undertook for King Philip IV of Spain to decorate his hunting-lodge, the Torre de la Parada, and the Palacio Real in Madrid. There was a further commission, dated 22 June 1639, requiring Rubens and Snyder to produce 18 paintings, but of these few survive (e.g. *Diana and Nymphs Attacked by Satyrs*, Madrid, Prado), though there are preparatory oil sketches by Rubens (e.g. *the Death of Sylvia's Stag*, Philadelphia, PA, Mus. A.) and copies (e.g. *the Death of Actaeon*, Nîmes, Mus. B.-A.). It was Paul de Vos who actually executed the animal scenes for the Torre de la Parada. Other hunting scenes and fable subjects by Snyder (Madrid, Prado), probably also intended for the Palacio Real, demonstrate an increasing skill at creating atmospheric effects, although their execution is somewhat careless, no doubt due to the speed with which these paintings needed to be produced. Nonetheless, these commissions must have further stimulated Snyder's interest in animal painting.

The hunting scenes Snyder produced after 1640 are more vivacious than his earlier ones and distinguished by their success in integrating animals and landscape through the use of tonal harmony (e.g. *Boar Hunt*, 1653). However, many of the hunting scenes and other paintings of live animals formerly ascribed to Snyder (e.g. fighting dogs and cats in the kitchen, or shameless apes stealing fruit) are now recognized as the work of his brother-in-law Paul de Vos, whose style is more spontaneous and dramatic than his master's, with broader and lighter brushwork but never the degree of harmony and balance achieved by Snyder. Snyder's own versions of these animal studies, a category so successfully popularized by his followers, are often distinguished by the addition of still-life motifs, as in *Dogs and Cat in the Kitchen* (Madrid, Prado) or *Apes Stealing Fruit* (Paris, Louvre).

S P H I N X F I N E A R T



In the years after 1640 Snyder's inclined to greater refinement in his compositions and greater economy in the choice of objects. Even the large kitchen scenes (e.g. Moscow, Pushkin Mus. F.A., and Dresden, Gemäldegal. Alte Meister) show a new elegance and delicacy. His smaller paintings recall the distinctive Dutch still-lives that he must have admired during visits he is supposed to have made to Holland in 1641 and 1642 in company with other Flemish artists. The signature, date and inscription on the Still-life with Birds, Oysters and Fruits (sale Gal. Le Roy, Brussels, 27 April 1903, no. 87), F. SNYDERS FECIT IN BREDA AO 1646, attests to a further visit. His last works (e.g. Bowl of Fruit, Silver Plate and Pitcher, Antwerp, Kon. Mus. S. Kst.; Basket of Grapes, Porcelain and Birds, Vaduz, Samml. Liechtenstein), in which he set his still-life elements in a landscape background, reflect the spirit of the time: a refinement of taste, an arcadian mood and evidence of the Italianate influence that was so prominent in the work of his pupil Jan Fyt.

Snyders became a widower in 1647. Four wills, dated 1613, 1627, 1641 (codicil, 1646) and 1655, are preserved. He died childless and bequeathed his fortune to his sister, a beguine. His important art collection was bought by the Antwerp dealer Matthijs Musson. It included fifteen works by Rubens and five by Anthony van Dyck, as well as works by Hendrick van Balen, Jan Breughel I, Pieter Bruegel I, Joos van Cleve, Coninxloo, Jacob Fopsen van Es, Willem Heda, Jacob Jordaens, Lucas van Leyden, Jan Lievens, Lambert Lombard, Jan Massys, Joachim Patinir, Pourbus, Adriaen van Utrecht and Frans Ykens.

Snyders, characterized as a sensitive and distinguished gentleman in a splendid portrait by the young van Dyck (c. 1619–20; New York, Frick, with a pendant of his wife) collaborated most notably with Rubens but also with Cornelis de Vos, Abraham Janssen and, more sporadically, with Jordaens, Jan Boeckhorst, Erasmus Quellinus II, Thomas Willeboirts Bosschaert (1614–54) and Theodor van Thulden. The landscape painter Jan Wildens contributed to some of his hunting scenes and animal pieces. Van Dyck worked with him on the Boar Hunt (c. 1618–20; Dresden, Gemäldegal, Alte Meister) and the Calling of St Matthew (formerly known as the Fish Market, c. 1620; Vienna, Ksthist. Mus.). Some of the assumptions commonly made about his collaboration seem questionable, for instance that all the figures in his kitchen scenes were executed by others. His partnership with Boeckhorst was probably less extensive than has been thought, whereas his joint work with Janssen and Jordaens needs fuller acknowledgement.

Judging from the contemporary copies made of his large paintings, Snyder's must have run a sizeable workshop. Although only three apprentices are named in the guild lists (Melchior Weldenck, 1609; Henri Joris, 1616; and Nicasius Bernaerts, 1633), there most certainly were others, including his brother-in-law Paul de Vos, who followed his style in still-lives and hunting scenes, and Jan Fyt, who is known to have continued working with Snyder's even after he became an independent master in 1629.