SPHINX FINE ART



Jan Brueghel II (Antwerp 1601 - Antwerp 1678) and Abraham Govaerts [Antwerp 1581 - Antwerp 1642)

Flora Seated in a Wooded Landscape and Surrounded by Flowers

oil on panel

44 x 64 cm (17¼ x 25¼ in)

A voluptuous Flora, the ancient Italian goddess of flowers is draped in luxurious cream and scarlet robes and contrasts harmoniously with the blue tones of the landscape behind her. Set in a secluded wooded clearing imaginatively filled with an astonishing variety of wild flowers and with an intricate aquamarine backdrop, the classical subject matter blends seamlessly with Flemish realism underlined by the two rustic huts glimpsed in the middle ground of the far right of the composition.

Flora is carefully framed by two groupings of flowers. At her left side, a myriad of luscious pink roses, narcissi, buttercups, violas, primroses and poppies predominate while on her other side, tulips and bluebells mingle together. Nestled in the lush grass next to a wicker basket overflowing with blooms of every description are two rabbits, one white and another darker one. Throughout the ages the rabbit has been symbolic of fecundity and has consequently been transmuted into a symbol for lust. In this context, it perhaps alludes to the licentious nature of Flora's Roman festival, the *Floralia* which was held in April and included theatrical entertainment involving naked actresses and prostitutes. Both the ancient authors Ovid and Lucretius describe the goddess in their works: Lucretius, in his encyclopaedic explanation for the origins of nature, *De Rerum Natura,* describes how Flora followed in the footsteps of Zephyr (the east wind) in the spring time, strewing his way with blossoms.[1] Ovid, from whom Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510) later drew inspiration for his *Primavera* (Uffizi Gallery, Florence), tells of Flora fleeing from Zephyr: 'When he at length embraced her, flowers spilled from her lips and she was transformed into Flora'.[2]

Jan Brueghel II's skill at depicting flowers in all their natural complexity is exemplified in another of his

flower paintings which hangs in the Hermitage, St. Petersburg. *Holy Family Framed with Flowers* displays some of the same flowers, notably the tulips and roses, and narcissi as in *Flora Seated in a Wooded Landscape.* The muted yet lustrous colour palette enhanced by flecks of white and silver brushwork in the Hermitage painting is also a distinctive feature of the present work.

Breughel II trained in the studio of his father and subsequently journeyed to Milan to meet his father's patron Cardinal Federico Borromeo. Having travelled to Sicily with Anthony van Dyck (1599-1641) in 1624, he joined the Antwerp Guild of St. Luke the following year. As well as working with Govaerts, he also collaborated with Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) and Hendrick van Balen (1575-1632) and indeed the figure of Flora appears to be influenced by van Balen's work.

Govaerts' paintings typically incorporate mythological or biblical subjects within a mannerist, tricolour landscape framed by repoussoir trees. Figures, and in this case flowers, were often added by other artists.

Brueghel II and Abraham Govaerts frequently collaborated on works, particularly those with mythological subject matter. Dr. Klaus Ertz confirms in a letter dated 7 February, 2007 'that the painting was created by the Flemish painters Abraham Govaerts, who arranged the landscape and Jan Brueghel the Younger, who painted the flowers.' The latter attribution is perfectly in keeping with the tradition of flower painting established by Brueghel II's father, Jan Brueghel I (1568-1625).

[1] Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* V.736-739.

[2] Ovid, *Fasti* V.193-214.

Provenance:

with Newhouse Galleries, New York, as Hendrick van Balen and Jan Breughel, the elder;
Private Collection, by whom sold, Christie's, New York, 3 October 2006, as Circle of Jan van Kessel.

Artist description:

Jan Brueghel II was the son of the artist Jan Brueghel I. He probably trained in the studio of his father and then went to Milan to meet his father's patron, Cardinal Federico Borromeo. In the spring of 1624 Jan the younger travelled to Palermo, Sicily, with his childhood friend Anthony van Dyck. After the sudden death of his father in a cholera epidemic in Antwerp, Jan returned to the Netherlands, and by early August 1625 he was back in Antwerp, where he took over his father's studio. He sold the pictures left by his father and successfully completed half-finished works. In 1625 Jan II joined the Antwerp Guild of St. Luke, and in 1626 he married Anna Maria, the daughter of Abraham Janssen; they had eleven children. Jan II headed a large studio with students and assistants, and in 1630–31 he became Dean of the Antwerp guild. The same year he was commissioned to paint an *Adam Cycle* for the French court. Thereafter, the studio declined and he produced a number of small paintings in his father's manner that no longer fetched high prices. According to an inscription attributed to one of his sons on the last page of Jan's journal, which ends in 1651, Jan II was also in France in the 1650s, working in Paris, although no information has yet emerged to indicate how long he stayed there and what he painted. In 1651 he worked for the Austrian court. He is mentioned again in Antwerp in 1657, and various sources indicate that he remained there until his death.

Like his father, Jan II worked with Rubens and Hendrick van Balen, and his journal also indicates that he collaborated with such artists as his father-in-law, Abraham Janssen, Pieter de Lierner, Adriaen Stalbemt, Lucas van Uden and David Teniers the younger (his brother-in-law). Jan II tried to stay close to his father's model and although the general quality of his work never surpassed that of Jan I, the

distinction between his father's late work and his own juvenilia remains problematic. The painted oeuvre of c. 340 pictures by Jan II includes landscapes, religious, allegorical and mythological themes, still-lifes and a new picture category, animals in a landscape. His landscapes can be subdivided according to subject matter: wooded landscapes, 'near-and-far' landscapes, wide landscapes, water landscapes, village landscapes, landscapes with the Archdukes Albert and Isabella, Hell landscapes and, finally, landscapes with the Holy Family.

The wooded landscapes include forest scenes, forest roads vanishing in the distance and close-up compositions of trees, such as *Forest Road with Travellers* (Florence, Uffizi), *Wooded Landscape with Riders* (Maastricht, Bonnefantenmuseum) and *River Crossing* (Warsaw, National Museum). A typical example of the 'near-and-far' landscapes, all of which appear to be composed in a two-dimensional mosaic style, is the *Wooded River Valley with Road* (Basle, Kunstmuseum). In the wide landscapes, with or without a mill, Jan repeated the compositions of his father, though with a different palette, as can be seen in the *Attack on a Baggage Train* (Madrid, Prado) or in the *Landscape with Mills* (The Hague, Dienst Verspreide Rijkscollection). His water landscapes, such as the *Harbour Scene in Antwerp* (Antwerp, Museum Mayer van den Bergh) or *River Landscape with Wharf* (Sarasota, FL, Ringling Museum), also rely on his father's example. In the village landscapes Jan began in his father's idiom but developed his own style in the 1640s. Examples are a *Village Street with Dancing Peasants* (Prague, National Gallery, Šternberk Palace) and a *Village Street with Canal* (Aschaffenburg, Schloss Johannisburg Staatsgallerie). Of the landscapes with the Archdukes Albert and Isabella, one, of the *Royal Castle in Brussels* (Madrid, Prado), was executed in collaboration with Sebastiaen Vrancx. Some of the paradise landscapes, which again emulated his father's creations, were also collaborative efforts; for example, the *Paradise Landscape with the Fall of Man* (Madrid, Prado) was carried out with Denijs van Alsloot and Hendrik de Clerck. Finally, landscapes with the Holy Family were for the most part executed after his return from Italy in 1625 and are the result of his collaboration with Hendrick van Balen. The landscape backgrounds were among Jan's best, while van Balen painted the figures.

Most of the allegories of the *Senses*, the *Elements*, the *Seasons* and *Abundance* were executed in the 1620s, while most of Jan II's mythological themes are joint productions, for example the *Rape of Europa* (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum), with van Balen, or the *Banquet of Achelous* (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art), painted with Rubens and his studio. Jan II's flower paintings and still-lifes either follow his father's models or are variations on them. His flowers are usually less dense, thinner and less exact in detail, while the picture format is often narrower or reduced in size. In his cartouche paintings, Jan is indebted to Daniel Seghers.