SPHINX FINE ART



Frans Snyders and Studio (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.

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 Snyders 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 Snyders' later compositions that still retains the relative simplicity of his earlier, smaller works. Indeed, as from 1620 approximately, Snyders, 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 Snyders may have met either in Italy or Antwerp, an Englishman, Toby Matthew, wrote about Snyders' 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 Snyders is to represent beasts but especiallie Birds altogether dead, and wholly without anie action" . Snyders' 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 Snyders 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 Snyders' work. Matthew's judgement regarding Snyders' 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 Snyders' *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 Snyders' 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 Snyders' *oeuvre.* Snyders 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 Snyders' return from Italy, Rubens commissioned him to paint the still-life motifs in the *Recognition of Philopoemen* (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 Snyders' 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 Snyders' later works such as the *Dresden Larder with a Bitch and her Pups* (*c.*1620-1630, Dresden, Staatliche Kustsammlungen, Gemäldegalerie). Snyders' 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 Snyders 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 Snyders 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 Snyders to specialize in these two genres. Snyders 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, Snyders 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, Snyders 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. Snyders 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. Snyders' 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, Snyders 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 Snyders' high social standing, and make no reference to his profession, which was a manual trade. In June 1619, Snyders 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.

Snyders' influence on still-life and animal painting is vastly important. Still-life painters belonged in Snyders' 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 Snyders' early biographers to acknowledge the artist's work in this area: Snyders was described as an animal painter, but his immense talent to portray inert objects was very much overlooked. However, by the time of Snyders' death in 1657, still-lifes were becoming a newly sought-after genre in the courts and grand houses of Europe.

Frans Snyders 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 larder 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.

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

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