

JAN BRUEGHEL II & ABRAHAM GOVAERTS

(Antwerp 1601 - Antwerp 1678) (Antwerp 1589 - Antwerp 1626)

Flora Seated in a Wooded Landscape and Surrounded by Flowers

oil on panel
44 x 64 cm (17¼ x 25¼ in)

Literature: 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.

A VOLUPTUOUS FLORA, THE ANCIENT ROMAN 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 right 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 (43 B.C.-17/18 A.D.) and Lucretius (c.99B.C.-c.55B.C.) 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* (c.1482, 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.

Brueghel II trained in the studio of his father and subsequently journeyed to Milan to meet his father's patron Cardinal Federico Borromeo (1564-1631). Having travelled to Sicily with Sir 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 Sir Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) and Hendrick van Balen (1575-1632) (see inventory) and indeed the figure of Flora appears to be influenced by van Balen's work.



Jan Brueghel II, *Holy Family Framed with Flowers*, 1636, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg (Figure 1)

Abraham 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 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.

