



GALLERY
NOTES®

from

JOHN MITCHELL
FINE PAINTINGS

EST 1931

JUNE 2018

Regular readers of *Gallery Notes* will know that we have long specialised in flower painting. It was a surprise therefore when this remarkable oil painting arrived in the gallery by an English artist that we had never heard of. Peter Mitchell's exhaustive dictionary of *European Flower Painters* (1973) gave no account of him, and almost unprecedentedly the Witt Library archives of the Courtauld Institute have no record of him. From what little is known it is clear he was part of the Burgess dynasty of painters who worked in London at the turn of the nineteenth century. He was the author of several books on the technique of flower painting and perspective, and the exhibition records of the Royal Academy reveal that between 1812 and 1837 he exhibited no fewer than 31 paintings. However, no trace of these pictures can be found in any public museums, and perhaps more strangely no oil paintings by him have emerged on the art market in at least the last hundred years. Still-life painting in England in the early 19th century was an unfulfilled art. For centuries British collectors had coveted the virtuoso still-lives of the Dutch and Flemish masters, so it is something of a revelation to find this Georgian flower painting, made in the Dutch tradition, yet painted with a certain amount of native peculiarity.

Reading Burgess' *The Art of Flower Painting* (1811), it is possible to trace the methods that he taught and employed in his own painting to best bring a picture to the 'perfection' that the revered Dutch masters such as Jan van Huysum (1682-1749) and Jan van Os (1744-1808) had achieved. Following the method of van Huysum the bouquet was constructed with the brightest flowers (in our case the white lilies) at the centre, with the force of the colours gradually decreasing from the centre to the extremities. The light is thrown obliquely across the composition to bring out the forms with the greatest effect and satisfaction. As to the choice of fruit and flowers depicted, Burgess writes that the artist must strive for the maximum variety in shape and texture, and we see here how he has taken great relish in contrasting the smooth white tepals of the lilies with the flame like petals of the opium poppy, the velvety peach skins against the waxy red grapes. Burgess stressed the need for taste and balance in a still life, and despite his devotion to the Dutch artists this painting is remarkable for its restraint of both palette and composition. The huge smooth pillar and brooding cloudbank that make up the background are a far cry from the fecund pleasure gardens favoured by the European masters; and the colours are marked by an unusual autumnal coolness with a predominance of steely blues and greys.

This painting is firmly rooted within the wider tradition of European flower painting, and yet it has a peculiar 'Englishness' (if I may use the word), that endows it with a unique charm and character not often seen in this school of painting. Its mysterious reappearance after two centuries shows that there is still much to be discovered and learned in this fascinating area of collecting.

We look forward to sharing our new selection of paintings with you this summer at **Masterpiece London 2018 (28th June – 4th July, stand B41)**. Please contact the gallery for your complimentary tickets.

JAMES ASTLEY BIRTWISTLE
June 2018



John Cart Burgess (before 1798 - d.1863)
A composition of Fruit and Flowers from Nature
oil on canvas, 29½ x 21¾ in. (75 x 55 cm.)
signed and dated 1813

Exhibition: RA 1813, no. 698 (titled as above)

GALLERY NOTES®

is published to acquaint readers with the paintings offered for sale at John Mitchell Fine Paintings. We hope that in receiving them you will share the interest and enjoyment which they have brought to collectors throughout the world for over sixty years.

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