

SALOMON LILIAN

DUTCH OLD MASTER PAINTINGS

Jacob Marrel

Frankenthal 1613/14 – 1681 Frankfurt am Main

A Tulip Mania painting

Signed and dated lower centre: I . MARRELLUS . f / 1 . 6 . 35 .

Oil on panel

65 x 42 cm.

Provenance:

Munich, Kunsthandel Andreas Meyer, 1886

Palermo, Chiaramonte Bordonaro

Literature:

Sestieri Catalogue, 1950, p. 11 (exhibited in Galleria dei Fiamminghi)

Prof. Massimo Ferretti, *La Collezione Chiaramonte Bordonaro*, tesi scuola normale superiore 2015-2016, p. 18

Dated 1635, this exceptionally elaborate flower piece belongs to the very beginning of Jacob Marrel's documented career as a painter of floral still lifes. Marrel had settled in Utrecht in the early 1630s, and his earliest known dated paintings are from 1634. A self-portrait dated 1635 records his age as twenty-one, making the present work an ambitious achievement by an artist still at the outset of his career. His earliest flower pieces reveal the impact of the Utrecht tradition represented by Roelant Savery (1576-1639), Balthasar van der Ast (1593-1657) and, in particular, Ambrosius Bosschaert the Younger (1609-1645).

The bouquet rises monumentally within a shallow arched stone niche. Tulips occupy the most conspicuous positions: a large red-and-white broken tulip crowns the composition, while a brilliantly coloured yellow-and-red tulip opens towards the left; two further red-and-white broken tulips project prominently on the right. Around them Marrel has assembled iris, roses

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and numerous smaller flowers, ranging from saturated reds and oranges to cool whites and blues. The dense centre of the bouquet gradually dissolves into isolated stems and dark silhouettes towards the upper part of the niche.

The architectural setting is integral to the composition. The strongly illuminated stone surround frames the bouquet against a dark recess, while insects occupy both the fictive niche and its threshold. A grasshopper clings to the left side of the arch, a butterfly appears above, and another grasshopper and a prominently rendered stag beetle inhabit the stone ledge below the vase. Fallen petals and fragments are scattered nearby. Marrel's fascination with such small creatures continued in his tulip books, in which individual tulips are repeatedly accompanied by beetles, butterflies, dragonflies, caterpillars, snails and other specimens. His later Rijksmuseum tulip album, produced between 1637 and 1645, contains eighty-five representations on parchment, with individual cultivars accompanied by precisely such elements of natural history.

Jacob Marrell is directly connected with the Tulip Mania, and his work is among the most artistic documents of the phenomenon.

Jacob Marrell began his famous tulip album in 1637, precisely at the climax and collapse of the speculative tulip market. The Rijksmuseum album contains 85 representations on 97 vellum leaves. Importantly, some sheets record the weight and prices of the bulbs, making the album documentary evidence for the tulip trade, not simply botanical representation.

There is an interesting chronological point: Marrell's 1634 oil painting *Still life with a Vase of flowers and a Dead Frog*, in the Rijksmuseum, already prominently features the highly prized red-and-white and red-and-yellow striped tulips (fig.1).

The present painting is signed and dated 1635, one of two years before the climax of the Dutch tulip speculation in 1636-37.

What immediately stands out are the spectacular broken/flamed tulips: the large red-and-white example at the top is the *Semper Augustus* Tulip. The *Semper Augustus* was the most famous and generally regarded as the most valuable tulip of the Tulip Mania. At the height of the

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market in 1635-1637, a *Semper Augustus* was reportedly valued and offered at around 10.000 guilders for a singler bulb – roughly the price of one of Amsrerdam's grandest canal houses.

The date 1635 gives the painting exceptional historical resonance. It predates the peak of the Tulip Mania by about two years, while showing precisely the highly prized broken tulips that subsequently became objects of extreme speculation.

Marrel's flower paintings and tulip books place him unusually close to the intersection of these worlds. In the *Tulpenboek*, the flower becomes an individual, named specimen; in the present painting, such specimens are brought together and transformed into a luxury pictorial display. The variety of broken tulips, the careful differentiation of their markings and the almost portrait-like prominence accorded to them suggest that the intended viewer was expected not merely to admire flowers in general, but to recognise rarity, variation and horticultural distinction.

The insects and scattered petals add a further dimension. Seventeenth-century flower pieces readily allowed associations between blossoming and decay, beauty and transience. In Marrel's Rijksmuseum painting of 1634, the museum itself relates the prized flowers to the inevitability of withering and death. In the present work, however, it would be reductive to interpret the insects and fallen petals exclusively as a fixed vanitas programme. They participate equally in the period's fascination with close observation of the natural world and in Marrel's demonstration of his ability to render different surfaces, species and states of life with meticulous precision.

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Fig. 1 Jacob Marrel, *Still Life with a Vase of Flowers and a Dead Frog*, signed and dated 1634, oil on panel, 40.3 x 31 cm., Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, object number SK-A-772