

Garland of Flowers
by Abraham Mignon



Magdalena Kraemer-Noble

**BILBOKO ARTE
EDERREN MUSEOA
MUSEO DE BELLAS
ARTES DE BILBAO**

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Before studying the opulent *Garland of Flowers* [fig. 1] in the Museum's collection, it would be of prior interest to explore the challenging life of the Baroque painter Abraham Mignon who is unknown in Spain except this still-life in Bilbao. His works under Dutch and Flemish influence are exclusively devoted to still-lives or still-life related themes that he invented himself. By looking at the mostly precise depiction of the microcosm of nature and perceiving the hidden meaning or symbolic sense behind the objects and scenes, the viewer gets a better understanding of the artist himself.

Abraham Mignon was born in Frankfurt/Main, Germany on June 26, 1640 as the eldest son of the cheese grocer and merchant Peter Mignon, whose forefathers had settled there as coppersmiths from the Southern Netherlands a hundred years earlier. They belonged to the first influx of mostly French-speaking immigrants looking for more prosperous opportunities. Also as religious refugees they had found a place in order to practise their Calvinist faith. However, the local townsmen opposed the successful Dutch salesmen through decrees by the city council in 1594 and 1612 which forbade them practising their religion anymore. This fact together with the ongoing chaotic times of the Thirty Years War lead to a financial decline which forced Mignon's parents to exclude their son from their household before they moved to Wetzlar, Germany. Around 1650, Abraham was brought under the care of the still-life painter, art dealer and collector of tulips Jacob Marrel. After succeeding into a considerable heritage, the latter had moved from the Northern countries to Frankfurt and married the widow of the renowned Swiss engraver Matthäus Merian the Elder. Together with Marrel's stepdaughter, Maria Sybilla Merian, the most famous and courageous female painter of her time, Mignon shared the culture of the Merian home and pursued an apprenticeship as painter.



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1. Abraham Mignon (1640-1679)
Garland of Flowers, c. 1675
Oil on canvas, 102.7 x 84.5 cm
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
Inv. no. 69/223

The next influential step happened when Marrel took Mignon on his commercial travels to Antwerp and Utrecht where, since the foundation of the St. Luke's guild in 1649, a professional painter had the exclusive protection to trade his merchandise within the city. Mignon, becoming a member of the guild in 1669, also profited of Marrel's connections with Jan D. de Heem whom Mignon met and underwent a close and fruitful relationship. In 1672, after the French invasion of the Dutch Republic, De Heem had decided to move back from Utrecht to Antwerp. Although not documented, Mignon might have taken over De Heem's studio, but installed himself definitely in Utrecht. There he married Maria Willarts, a Walloon woman and grandchild of Adam Willarts from the dynasty of the famous seascape painters. The ceremony took place in the French reformed Janskerk in 1675. Besides being appreciated as a talented, diligent and reputed still-life painter, he continued his service as deacon in the Calvinist church. On March 26, 1679, Abraham Mignon died in Utrecht at the age of thirty-nine and left behind his wife and two daughters.

An analysis of Mignon's considerable oeuvre proves that besides copying Jan D. de Heem or assimilating the style of other still-life painters like Willem van Aelst, Otto Marseus van Schrieck or Jacob Gillig, he has to be considered as an independent and ambitious artist using strong colours, applying masterly light and shadow and creating an illusion of space. As towards the end of the Baroque era, Mignon finds himself at the peak of his faculties, he adds to the aesthetic dimensions of colouring and composition the sense of vanity and hidden symbolic meaning, nourished by his religious belief. Mignon's works were copied during his lifetime and thereafter up to the nineteenth century. Spectators are banned still today by their visual virtuosity. His paintings are preserved in museums and private collections all over the world.

In 1953, when Doña María Arechavaleta donated a spectacular still-life painting *Garland of Flowers*¹ from the José Palacio collection as provenance to the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, we must assume that she was aware of enriching the museum's collection. Indeed, since that time this well-preserved piece² attracts lots of visitors and art historians to explore its full sense and beauty³. However, nothing is known about this magnificent example of Dutch seventeenth-century painting. As far as we are aware, no references exist on the provenance of the still-life in old archives⁴, nor is there a hint about how it made its way from the Northern Netherlands to Spain. Also the meaning of the female figure, depicted inside the medallion, is difficult to determine.

Nevertheless some reflections may shed light on the *Garland of Flowers* by Abraham Mignon. Hanging on a cartouche made of grey stone, six different bunches of flowers are attached by two ends with a crown imperial (*Fritillaria imperialis*) at the top. They are fixed on branches of willow and ivy, intertwined by blue ribbons. The monumental composition is symmetrically decorated around a figurative scene in the centre. The garland ends in a silk-tied bow in the centre, overlapping the oval frame and thus rendering a certain elegance and illusion of space. While two bouquets, treated in a smaller scale, are placed to the left and right at the top, the remaining four are double in size and easily fill the canvas to its borders. Two parallel-shaped bushes of lilies, poppies and tulips fit well in their vertical appearance on both sides. They are

1 Unfortunately, at the time of editing the monograph on Abraham Mignon (Kraemer-Noble 2007), I was not aware of the existence of the still-life painting in Bilbao. I'm grateful of Dr. Sam Segal of introducing me to the painting.

2 Ultraviolet screening shows the original's high quality except one small spot at the height of the white lily to the left on dark ground. The iris, the head of the figure in the centre, her left hand, the head of the black servant, the basket with flowers and the lower part of the canvas show little touches. A lower line scratches the surface in about a height of 4.5 cm which could be caused by former framing. Eventual cleaning would bring out brighter colours.

3 Bibliography: Lasterra 1969, no. 223 (attributed to Daniel Seghers) and fig.; Madrid 1989, p. 72 and fig.; Padua/Rome 1991, pp. 52-53 and fig.; Castañer 1992-1993, p. 188 and fig.; Madrid/Bilbao/Barcelona 1992, p. 114 and fig.; Castañer 1995, pp. 244-247 and fig.; Ana Sánchez-Lassa in *Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao...* 1999, p. 114 and fig.; Ana Sánchez-Lassa in *Maestros antiguos y modernos...* 2001, p. 53 and fig.; Ana Sánchez-Lassa in *Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao...* 2006, p. 76, no. 53 and fig.

4 Thanks to Fred G. Meijer who checked the archives of RKD, The Hague.

connected with the lower part of the painting by two filled festoons of various kinds of blossoms which are balanced by gigantic blooms: a poppy and a peony below, against a light and a dark-blue iris opposing the darkish background. Mignon himself approved the composition with his signature to be found at an unusual spot just below the crown imperial. It appears as if he squeezed in his name between two stalks of herbs. The signature itself can be authenticated by comparison within his oeuvre and by the untouched layer of colour on the surface.

At first sight, this construction and compilation of a cosmos of botanical species and insects seems to create visual confusion that is, however, eradicated by a sophisticated artistic trick, that of a colour pattern. Each floral unit is composed of the main colours red and white which like flashing lights render the impression of the composition to explode. The white colour in the middle is surrounded by tints of pink, blue or bicoloured and is continued in a red tonality and variants of orange and yellow.

This demonstration of interplay of colour reflects the taste of the time and especially Mignon's technique. While most of the seventeenth-century categories in painting such as portraits, landscapes, religious and historical themes were officially acknowledged by the academy, still-life was not. Thus it became of increasing importance for still-life painters to articulate their independence and create their own aesthetic criteria as well as moral messages. A small amount of bibliography has survived with instructions and recipes on how to create an ideal and perfectly balanced composition. Just to name a few of those artists, art theorists and art dealers like Karel van Mander (1604), Constantijn Huygens (1630), Cornelis de Bie (1662), Joachim Sandrart (1675) who published their ideas. The Dutch artist Gerard de Lairesse (1704) was the first to attempt an overall definition of still-life⁵.

Despite the Thirty Years War and, in the aftermath, many religious fights, political and social turbulences in the last quarter of the seventeenth century, the arts continued to exist. Artists like Mignon, who had settled in Utrecht, Northern Netherlands, were able to take over from their fellow artists all kinds of achievements concerning the practise of still-life technique, choosing appropriate items for illustration as well as trading their art work.

Looking at the structure of Mignon's *Garland of Flowers*, we notice that the artist has adopted the ornamental cartouche or decorated niche. Originating from Greek and Roman antiquity, this architectural specimen had become popular since the Renaissance and was applied in painting and graphic arts⁶. A large variety of types were developed. The cartouche was chosen as a frame for an impressive or elegant painting, usually surrounded by garlands of flowers or fruit as an autonomous and primarily decorative piece of art. However, a cartouche painting could also be related to the subject matter in the centre of the picture and thereby emphasize the meaning of the artist's intention and the personal, sometimes hidden sense, according to the commissioner. A hybrid form, mixing both, was highly popular in Antwerp and Utrecht, probably introduced there by Jan D. de Heem.

In our context, the oldest-known versions of flower garlands, decorating a centre piece with a religious or allegorical theme, are of Flemish origin. They can be considered as the source of a tradition that was present for decades in the Northern countries. Since 1608, cooperation of artists existed for the flower arrangements and the central images as with f.e. Jan Brueghel the Elder and Rubens and their workshops. They created festoons of various kinds and in countless numbers until the first half of the seventeenth century⁷. Also painters like Daniel Seghers, a Jesuit, starting his career in Utrecht, then travelling abroad in Italy for some

5 Amsterdam/Cleveland 1999, p. 11.

6 Kraemer-Noble 2008, p. 239.

7 Hairs 1985, p. 102.



2. Daniel Seghers (1590-1661); Willeboirts Bosschaert (1614-1654)
Garland of Flowers with a Sculpture of the Virgin Mary, 1645
 Oil on canvas, 151 x 122.7 cm
 Koninklijk Kabinet van Schilderijen Mauritshuis, The Hague
 Inv. no. 256

years and finally settling in Antwerp⁸, introduced this style of profusion and meticulously-detailed compositions of flowers. He was exclusively dedicated to religious portraits of saints, scenes of the Passion and the Holy Bible.

Finally, Jan D. de Heem of Utrecht, the most talented and universal still-life painter of his day, is said to have spent his years in Antwerp between 1636 and 1663⁹. Choosing subjects such as fruits, plants, flowers and vanity still-life, he may have been influenced by Seghers and the Brueghels and therefore, play an important role in this context. Crossing borders back and forth between the Flemish and the Dutch style and mentality, de Heem may have transferred this type of composition to Abraham Mignon who worked with him during the Utrecht period. Mignon might also have been familiar with cartouche paintings before through his first teacher, Jacob Marrel, who had worked with de Heem in Antwerp before moving to Frankfurt.

8 Daniel Seghers, *Garland of Flowers with the Virgin, Christ and Saint John the Baptist*, private collection, Belgium (Ibid., p. 192, fig. 62).

9 Willigen/Meijer 2003, p. 104.



3. Jan Davidsz. de Heem (1606-1683/1684)
Garland of Flowers with a Portrait of William of Orange, 1665
Oil on canvas, 132 x 108 cm
Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon, France
Inv. no. A85

Looking at a sequence of still-lives of these three artists, one can observe how they optically distinguished from each other the painted architectural element of the cartouche against the space of the background. Daniel Seghers' stone niche and sculptured *Virgin Mary and Child* [fig. 2]¹⁰ reflects the realistic feeling and contrast of the harsh grey stone and the fresh-looking wreaths arranged around. Both materials are treated with the same accuracy and anatomical exactness. The tiny twigs projecting from the bouquets of medium-sized flowers provide some lightness to the heavy composition. However, the artist demonstrates the contrast of light and shadow in a less dramatic manner. His painting was an altarpiece, dedicated to the Prince of Orange in 1645.

Among a few cartouche compositions with religious subjects by Jan D. de Heem I have selected the non-religious *Garland of Flowers with a Portrait of William of Orange* [fig. 3], dated 1665, in the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon¹¹. De Heem's realistic perception conveys allegorical and spiritual meaning into a secular

10 B. Broos in The Hague 1992, p. 98, no. 24 and fig.

11 Tapié 1997, p. 72 and fig., p. 67.



4. Abraham Mignon (1640-1679)
Garland of Flowers with Madonna and Child
Oil on canvas
87 x 78 cm
Private collection

scene. At the time of the Counter-Reformation the cartouche was the ideal frame for representative statements, here commissioned by the House of Orange. It is almost hidden by a very dense composition of the Prince's bust, flanked by two eagles carrying cornucopias. Besides oranges they discharge masses of grapes, peaches, chestnuts, cherries and a melon that are invaded by numerous insects. Together with a pansy and a sunflower at the top, they form an impressive festoon of fruit. Below the portrait, a lion is lying with another orange in its paws, bearing a bouquet of bright flowers on its shoulders. We can observe de Heem's talent of depicting a display of precise items and at the same time suggesting the hidden sense as symbols of power, glory and eternity. In addition, we have to pay attention to the selection of flowers such as roses, lilies and carnations which traditionally stand for symbols of the Resurrection and the Virgin. Here they might allude in a profane way to the Prince, being constituted in his new leadership as *stadhouder* (governor) of The Hague.

In his flower painting, however, Abraham Mignon makes a step towards mere decoration and enthusiasm about the overwhelming beauty of nature captivating the eye. The cartouche offers a unique opportunity to accumulate a huge amount of flowers "on stage", although its frame actually disappears in front of the dark background. Mignon doesn't require a spatial dimension. Everything happens or is dramatized in the forefront,



5. Abraham Mignon (1640-1679)
Garland of Flowers and Fruit, c. 1670
 Oil on canvas, 91 x 74 cm
 Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Germany
 Inv. no. Gal. 2020

in full light. That seems to be his intention. There are only a few garlands painted in this style by his hand. They have in common the overall presence of flowers and/or fruit. The *Garland of Flowers with Madonna and Child* [fig. 4] formerly in the Schönborn-Liechtenstein collection, Vienna¹², repeats the almost heart-shaped wreath around the religious scene. The figurative medallion is not by Mignon's hand. The author could not be identified. In a third variant in Dresden, Mignon adopts de Heem's art of combining flowers and fruit [fig. 5]¹³, while a second still life *Flowers and Fruit on Blue Ribbons* [fig. 6], also in Dresden, shows heavily packed bunches of local and exotic fruit and vegetables¹⁴. Both paintings remain blank in the centre part. Stalks of wheat or branches graciously overlap the gap.

Flowers were part of everyday life. When the precious exotic bulbs first arrived in the Northern countries, "Tulpomania" was born. First notations can be traced back to the last quarter of the sixteenth century¹⁵.

12 Kraemer-Noble 2007, p. 66, no. 11 and fig., p. 67.

13 Ibid., p. 68, no. 12 and fig., p. 69.

14 Ibid., p. 70, no. 13 and fig., p. 71.

15 Brom 1957; Castañer 1992-1993, p. 188.



6. Abraham Mignon (1640-1679)
Flowers and Fruit on Blue Ribbons, c. 1670
Oil on canvas, 101 x 83.5 cm
Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Germany
Inv. no. Gal. 2018

Also artists participated in the boom in painting flowers and bouquets of flowers, studying them in botanical gardens and even trading them.

Again, it is worthwhile for a better understanding of Mignon's perception of flora and fauna to have a look at the works of Jan Brueghel the Elder. Among the series of the five senses in the Prado Museum, Madrid, *The Sense of Smell* [fig. 7]¹⁶ may help to evoke the intellectual tradition of the Garden of Eden, dated between 1616 and 1618. A female nude, the allegory of the odour, accompanied by a putto, is seated on a velvet cover on the ground amidst a flower garden. Blooming bushes, plants and pots of flowers, vases and baskets overflowing with roses, are displayed around her feet. It is amazing to observe that such selected species of flowers naturally grow side by side. Roses, snowballs, a crown imperial, peonies, irises, tulips, anemones, violets and other flowers appear in European painting and are used for both religious and secular purposes. In our context, the red and whites lilies on the right side should especially be memorized.

¹⁶ Schneider 1989, p. 65 and fig., p. 68.



7. Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640); Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568-1625)
The Sense of Smell, 1616-1618
 Oil on panel, 65 x 109 cm
 Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid
 Inv. no. P01396

Ten years later, around 1626, his son, Jan Brueghel the Younger, had taken over the Antwerp studio of his father, employing assistants to attend to the high demand of flower pieces in the manner of Brueghel the Elder¹⁷. In *Flowers in a Ceramic Pot* [fig. 8], while smaller flowers are arranged around the opening of the glazed ceramic pot, the crown imperial stands out at the top together with a peony and irises in an oval-shaped bouquet. Even four different kinds of lilies can be distinguished.

The *Madonna and Child in the Garland of Flowers* in the Ermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, demonstrates a next step. It is a cooperation between Jacob Jordaens, who did the central image, and a painter in the manner of Andries Daniels who did the flowers. As Fred G. Meijer has pointed out in his article on Andries Daniels and Frans Francken II in *Bilbao Fine Arts Museum's Bulletin 4* ("A seventeenth-century Antwerp: *Vase with Tulips* by Andries Daniels and Frans Francken II"), another hand, probably from the Brueghel dynasty, must have executed the flowers. However, this painting is a fine example of the combination of reality and illusion, applied in a Christological manner in praise of Mary and the Child. The crown imperial, incidentally imported to Vienna from Turkey by the French botanist Charles de l'Ecluse (Carolus Clusius) in 1576, maintains its primordial position at the top. Peonies are displayed at the bottom and lilies are to be found on both sides of the personification of the "Smell"¹⁸. Also the delicacy and harmonious play of bright colours will be confirmed by later generations of artists.

It is in this spirit that Abraham Mignon developed and even more emphasized his speciality of depicting flowers in the company of insects and other animals throughout his entire work. The list of plants and insects of the *Garland of Flowers* in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum attempts a survey which can be considered as a

¹⁷ *Dutch and Flemish...* 2005, no. 8 and fig.

¹⁸ While Gritsaj interprets the painting as the only known cooperation between the two artists (Wien/Essen 2002, p. 330, no. 114 and fig., p. 331), Fred G. Meijer attributes the flowers being executed by a different hand similar to Daniels in his article on Andries Daniels and Frans Francken II in this 2008 edition.



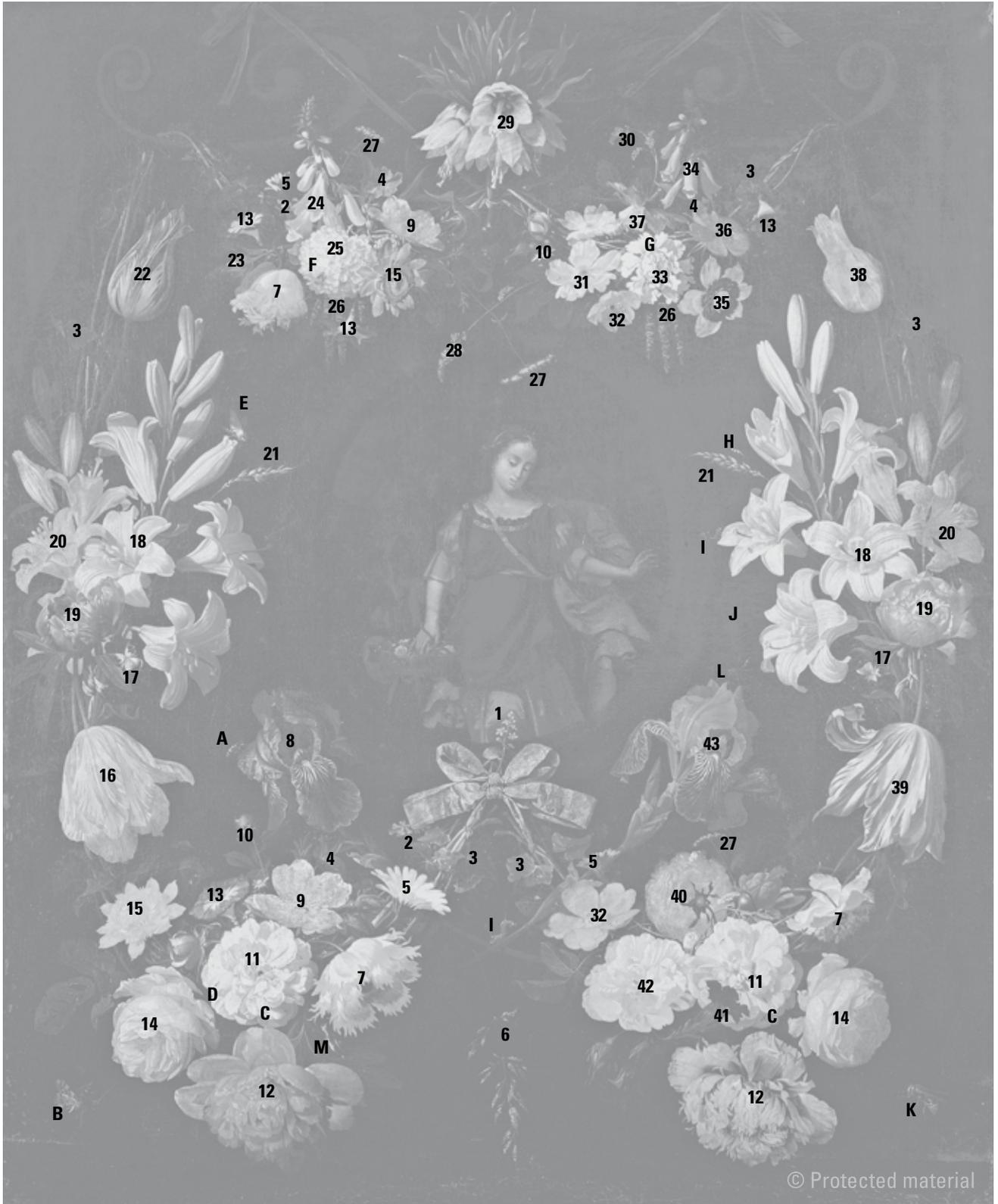
8. Jan Brueghel the Younger (1601-1678)
Flowers in a Ceramic Pot
Oil on panel, 126 x 97 cm
Private collection

kind of scientific approach on how many species Mignon had studied close up and which ones he was able to reproduce correctly. That is what also makes the artist so special to former and contemporary spectators of art and amateurs of natural science¹⁹.

In all, the Bilbao painting reflects the significance of positioning the crown imperial in the traditional way at the top. The Dresden festoons show it sideways and towards the bottom. Blossoms like those of the peony and the poppy are often observed in lower areas because of their weight while irises and tulips are to be viewed in diverse upper positions.

Apart from examples of the same category of cartouches just discussed, single flowers and combinations of sequences reappear throughout Mignon's still-lives. By comparing them with the Bilbao *Garland of Flowers*, more arguments about the authenticity could be assembled: a gentian as a dark blue spot contrasting a white rose (*Still Life with Flowers in a Glass Vase*, Mauritshuis, The Hague); a series of three roses, a red and white flamed, a white and a pink one [fig. 9], the opening blossom of a red and white poppy (*Flowers in*

¹⁹ Special thanks to Dr. Sam Segal, Amsterdam who has reviewed the list of plants and insects.



List of plants

- 1 *Saxifraga umbrosa* (London Pride)
- 2 *Lychnis chalconica* (Maltese Cross)
- 3 *Hedera helix* (Ivy)
- 4 *Polemonium caeruleum* (Jacob's ladder)
- 5 *Calendula officinalis* (Pot Marigold)
- 6 *Poa pratensis* (Meadow grass)
- 7 *Papaver somniferum albo-rubrum fimbriatum* (Opium Poppy)
- 8 *Iris germanica* (German Flag)
- 9 *Rosa foetida* (Austrian Briar)
- 10 *Chamaemelum nobile* (Chamomile)
- 11 *Rosa x alba subplena* (White Rose)
- 12 *Paeonia officinalis plena* (Peony)
- 13 *Convolvulus tricolor* (Small Morning Glory)
- 14 *Rosa x provincialis* (Provins Rose)
- 15 *Anemone coronaria pseudoplena* (Red Poppy Anemone)
- 16 *Tulipa clusiana x Tulipa Stellata* (Persian Tulip hybrid)
- 17 *Viola tricolor* (Pansy)
- 18 *Lilium candidum* (White Lily)
- 19 *Paeonia peregrina* (Global Peony)
- 20 *Lilium bulbiferum semipseudoplenum* (Orange Lily)
- 21 *Triticum aestivum* (Wheat)
- 22 *Tulipa armena x Tulipa agenensis* (Tapered Tulip hybrid)
- 23 *Hibiscus syriacus roseus* (Rose of Sharon)
- 24 *Digitalis purpurea* (Foxglove)
- 25 *Viburnum opulus cv. Roseum* (Snowball Bush)
- 26 *Amaranthus caudatus* (Love-lies-bleeding)
- 27 *Aethusa cynapium* (Fool's Parsley)
- 28 *Agrostis stolonifera* (Creeping bentgrass)
- 29 *Fritillaria imperialis* (Crown Imperial)
- 30 *Polygonum persicaria* (Red Shank)
- 31 *Rosa canina* (Dog's rose)
- 32 *Rosa foetida vs. bicolor* (Austrian Copper)
- 33 *Scabiosa atropurpurea alba grandiflora* (White Scabiosa)
- 34 *Digitalis purpurea alba* (White Foxglove)
- 35 *Anemone coronaria pseudoplena atrocirculata* (Poppy anemone)
- 36 *Rosa rubiginosa* (Sweet Briar)
- 37 *Narcissus pseudonarcissus* (Yellow iris)
- 38 *Tulipa armena* (Tapered Tulip)
- 49 *Tulipa agenensis x Tulipa armena* (Red Tulip hybrid)
- 40 *Rosa hemispherica* (Sulphur Rose)
- 41 *Gentiana accaulis* (Blue Gentian)
- 42 *Rosa damascena vs. Versicolor* (York-and-Lancaster Rose)
- 43 *Iris germanica x Iris albicans* (German Iris hybrid)



List of insects

- A *Parvavespula vulgaris* (Common Wasp)
- B *Abraxas grossulariata* (Magpie Moth)
- C *Lasius flavus* (4) (Yellow Meadow Ant)
- D *Heteroptera* (True Bug)
- E *Scolioptery libatrix* (Herald)
- F *Trichius zonatus* (Brush beetle)
- G *Formica rufa* (1) (Wood ant)
- H *Trichodes apiarius* (Bee-eating Beetle)
- I *Malocosoma neustria* (Caterpillar Lackey)
- J *Aranius diadematus* (Cross Spider)
- K *Vespa crabro* L. (Hornet)
- L *Tipula oleracea* (Daddy-Long-Legs)
- M *Cepaea hortensis* (Garden snail)



9. Abraham Mignon (1640-1679)
Flowers in a Glass Vase, after 1670
 Oil on panel, 48 x 35 cm
 Private collection, United Kingdom

a *Vase*, Galleria Sabauda, Torino), a soft blue iris *Germanica* (*Garland of Flowers*, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen), a double bow on top as a blue knot (*Hanging Flowers*, private collection, Europe), field flowers and butterfly [fig. 10], and insects on stalks of wheat and on top of a tulip [fig. 11]²⁰.

Concerning the technique of still-life compositions, this was not a novelty invented by Mignon. As mentioned earlier, the artists, eager to produce, had established certain ready-made patterns to be freely adopted. They certainly were in possession of model books that contained sketches and designs after nature f. e. how to look at a rose from different angles and keep it at hand to integrate it to the right spot of a bouquet of flowers. No such documents are left by Mignon at this day.

The white and red lilies, however, arranged together and decorating both sides of the still-life, are a genuine exception. This combination never reoccurs in any of Mignon's paintings. They can only be found as single flowers in vases of flowers or in floral arrangements within that of a grotto-like landscape [fig. 12]²¹. Similarity of symbolic meaning of the two different lilies combined can be observed in the oval-shaped canvas *The Virgin of the Lilies* by Carlo Dolci, Montpellier, Musée Fabre, showing a white and a red lily and a pink rose. Alain Tapié interprets this painting as a typical Italian Baroque version of an antique remake demonstrating the purity of the Virgin²².

20 Kraemer-Noble 2007, nos. 65, 75, 67, 10, 9, 5 and 74.

21 Ibid., p. 246, no. 98 and fig., p. 247.

22 Tapié 1997, p. 73 and fig., p. 71.



10. Abraham Mignon (1640-1679)
Hanging Flowers and Fruit, c. 1667
 Oil on oak panel, 40 x 31 cm
 Private collection, Germany



11. Abraham Mignon (1640-1679)
Still Life with Summer Flowers in front of a Niche, after 1670
 Oil on canvas, 88 x 68.5 cm
 Horta Auctioneers 1996, Brussels

The only occurrence of two lilies in one bunch or side by side can be found in two works by Jan D. de Heem: in the festoon of flowers as part of the *Portrait of William of Orange* in Lyon and in a *Vase with Flowers* [fig. 13] in the Mauritshuis, The Hague. As the latter is dated around 1675²³, it may serve as an orientation to the dating of Mignon's work whose death is documented in 1679 at the peak of his career.

²³ Fred G. Meijer suggests a date around 1675.



12. Abraham Mignon (1640-1679)
Still Life of Flowers in Woodland, after 1675
Oil on canvas, 101 x 83.5 cm
Present location unknown

Further arguments about Mignon's authorship of the *Garland of Flowers* in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, Bilbao, can be added by comparison of the scientific reports carried out in Amsterdam in 1999/2000 and in Bilbao in 2008. The Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, in cooperation with the Cleveland Museum of Art, had organised a major exhibition including the finest still-life old masterpieces of Dutch art from museums around the world. Questions of style through differences in methods and materials and historical technical sources were also discussed and executed by joint participation in the so-called Molart-project²⁴. Two paintings by Mignon from the collection of the Rijksmuseum were chosen and underwent microscopy and micro-chemical tests. Pigments of a flower (*rosa foetida*), represented and analysed in both paintings, the *Still Life of Flowers and Watch* in Amsterdam²⁵, Rijksmuseum, and the *Garland of Flowers* in Bilbao [fig. 14]²⁶, lead to astonishing and corresponding results which refer to Abraham Mignon's technique and the use of high quality material.

24 Wallert 1999, p. 4.

25 Abraham Mignon *Still Life with Flowers and Watch*, Inv. no. SK-A-268. (Ibid., p. 82.)

26 Arte-Lab, S.L., Madrid, November 2008 and January 2009. Chemical analyses and other techniques used include a study of micro-sample under incident-light and transmitted-light optical microscopes, selective stains and micro-chemical tests, fluorescent optical microscope, Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR), gas chromatography—mass spectrometry (GC-MS) and scanning electron microscope—energy dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (SEM—EDX). Layer thicknesses were measured using a micrometric lens with a 10x /0.25 micrometric lens where the layer was widest. Fibres were identified from their microscopic characteristics in longitudinal and transversal sections and by observing the central filament's reaction to a copper-ammonia reagent.



13. Jan Davidsz. de Heem (1606-1683/1684)
Vase with Flowers, c. 1675
Oil on canvas, 74.2 x 52.6 cm
Koninklij Kabinet van Schilderijen Mauritshuis, The Hague
Inv. no. 1099

The support of the Mignon painting in Bilbao consists of a fine plain-weave linen canvas and fortunately remains unlined until today. Our analyses of the paint samples taken showed the artist applied a layer of brown ground consisting of earths, calcium carbonate and a small proportion of red lead. On that he added another layer of grey imprimatura, comprising white lead, iron oxide black, earths, charcoal and calcium carbonate. The colours used in the flowers were applied on this grey base layer. SEM-EDX, used to analyze the yellow, revealed a significant proportion of non-sulphur (S) associated arsenic, as would be expected in the identification of the yellow-orpiment pigment or realgar. For this reason chemists initiated a research on the hypothesis of the presence of another compound of arsenic that might have been added to this paint layer, either as coloured pigment or as priming material. Mignon obviously was a sufficiently experienced artist who knew how to obtain an optimal effect with the brightness of colours shown here in the Bilbao still-life. This pigment can reach a very concise and almost metallic and crisp look.

Taking into account all these considerations, one can conclude that this painting is a genuine opus by Abraham Mignon. The scene in the oval, however, is ambivalent in character. In addition, it seems appropriate to consider the artist's personal situation.



14. Abraham Mignon (1640-1679)

Garland of Flowers, c. 1675

Bilbao Fine Arts Museum

Cross-section of the yellow from a flower (*rosa foetida*)

1. Ground layer composed of earths, calcium carbonate and very low proportion of red lead
2. Imprimatura composed of white lead, low proportions of iron oxide black, earths, charcoal, and very low proportion of calcium carbonate
3. Layer of yellow paint composed of white lead, yellow earth and low proportion of calcium carbonate
4. Grey-brown layer
5. Layer of yellow paint composed of calcium carbonate, yellow earth, barium white and low proportions of cadmium yellow, white lead, titanium white and zinc white
6. Grey-brown layer

Abraham Mignon was an immigrant and refugee due to his Calvinist belief, and he had to restart a living from scratch after his arrival in Utrecht with only his talent, his eagerness and his determination to win. His religious practice as deacon helped him to communicate and establish contacts for his social and professional life within the city. He therefore had joined the St. Luke's Guild in 1669. His marriage into a family of silversmiths and landscape painters was also a clever decision²⁷.

Mignon's strong belief in Calvinism objected the use of figurative images. That may be a reason why he prefers to depict nature, framed by architectural niches, landscapes or grottos. He represents life as a cycle in all its beauty and transience as a praise of God's Creation. However, we can barely find human figures or human achievements of any kind in his work. One flower still-life, *Garland of Flowers with Madonna and Child*, mentioned earlier in the former collection of Count Schönborn-Liechtenstein, Vienna²⁸, painted by Mignon, shows Saint Mary and the Child seen in profile from the back [fig. 4]. Even in this case, although unfortunately the original could not be studied, the execution of the figure itself is most probably of another artist's hand.

Bilbao's piece retains a lot of secrets and questions unsolved until today. Although executed in inferior quality, the figure seems to be by Mignon's hand [fig. 15]. A young female walks towards the spectator out of a semi-dark ground. She wears an antique-looking dress in golden ochre, a white chemise and an additional wrap on top with a cross belt, adorned by precious stones and a blue cape profusely swinging behind

²⁷ Kraemer-Noble 2007, p. 10.

²⁸ Ibid., no. 11.

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15. Abraham Mignon (1640-1679)
Garland of Flowers, c. 1675
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
Detail

her. Her hair, decorated with red bands, pearl earrings and pearls that are fitted as a kind of diadem in the middle of her forehead, gives her the appearance of mythological, allegorical and/or noble provenance. The expression on her face is immobile as she gazes towards a basket, filled with roses and other flowers and which is held to her right side by a black servant. His court-like habit consists of an upper-garment with split sleeves and a yellow scarf slung around his neck and head. Whether the gesture of the young woman's left arm seems to be defensive in the sense of wanting to be left alone, or just graceful, cannot be answered. Her right hand and arm are held over the basket. A tiny serpent, creeping around the palm of her hand, has bitten her as two tiny drops of blood testify. The basket, full of flowers, from where the serpent escaped, seems to establish the link between the figurative medallion and the garland of flowers as the principal element of the composition.

The interpretation, mentioned by X. Castañer López in 1995²⁹, which identifies the female as Prudentia with the serpent as a symbol of wisdom, is not much convincing. Experts on the study of the collection at Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, such as C. de Lasterra, Juan J. Luna and Ana Sánchez-Lassa, identify the female as Cleopatra, characterized by the basket and the poisonous snake³⁰. Cleopatra, Ptolemaic, Queen of Egypt, reputed for her beauty, intellect and extravagance, is known both for her myth and her history³¹. Plutarch

29 Castañer 1992-1993, p. 188 and Castañer 1995.

30 See Madrid 1989, no. 20 and Ana Sánchez-Lassa in *Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao...* 1999, p. 114 and *Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao...* 2006, p. 76, no. 53.

31 Cleopatra 69-30 B.C. was the last queen before Egypt was connected as province to the Roman Empire. Born in Alexandria, she stayed in Rome 46-44 B.C. with Cesar and had one son. After Cesar's murder she returned to Egypt. In 41 B.C. she entered a political alliance with his successor Antony with whom she started the famous love affair and whom she married in 36 B.C. and had 2 children. After his defeat at the battle of Actium in 31 B.C. Antony killed himself. This led Cleopatra, reigning over Egypt for more than 20 years, to commit suicide at the age of 39. Among numerous authors Cassius Dio LI 13, 4 and Plutarch 44 (Antonius) 82-86 reported on her life and death.



16. Caspar Netscher (1639-1684)
Death of Cleopatra, 1673
Oil on canvas, 53.5 x 44 cm
Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe, Germany
Inv. no. 264

described Cleopatra's death with the following words: "They saw her stone dead, lying upon a bed of gold, set out in all her ornaments. Iras, one of her women, lay dying at her feet, and Charmion, just ready to fall, scarce able to hold up her head, was adjusting her mistress' diadem." Cleopatra's character, having become a legend over the literary, musical and pictorial traditions since the Antiquity, is identifiable because of her power, oriental exotism, luxury and erotic sensuality, apart from being a freedom symbol for her determination to commit suicide. This topic was much in evidence and treated in Baroque drama and operas. Shakespeare's drama *Anthony and Cleopatra* (1606/07) can be quoted among the most influential receptions. Since the seventeenth century, Italian painting shows Cleopatra seated or lying on a couch, holding an asp close to her bare bosom, and surrounded by her attendants. North of the Alps, all kinds of interpretations are to be found. Besides Italian versions of Cleopatra, exposing herself as half naked in the presence of the court, other scenes show her seated with a pathetic expression behind draped curtains, surrounded only by her servants, and a basket filled either with flowers or fruit [fig. 16]³².

32 As examples of the "Northern" reception may be quoted *Death of Cleopatra* by Johan Liss, 1595-1631, 97.5 x 85.5 cm, dated ca. 1622/24, Alte Pinakothek, Munich, Inv. no. 13434 and *Death of Cleopatra* by Johann Georg Platzer, 1704-1761, oil on copper, on loan from private collection, Austria, exhibited in Salzburg, Residenzgalerie 2008, presented in Rococo style with preference of erotic allusions. The *Death of Cleopatra* by Caspar Netscher, 1639-1684 preserved Staatliche Kunsthalle in Karlsruhe [fig. 16], dated 1673, reflects the classical tradition of the Cleopatra legend.



17. Nicolaes van Ravesteyn II (1661-1750)
Portrait of a Lady, probably Anna de Bye (1636-1713)
Oil on canvas, 65 x 52 cm
Institut Collectie Nederland, Rijswijk/Amsterdam
Inv. no. 2159

In the Netherlands, a special development can be observed in female portraiture in the seventeenth century: elegantly-dressed ladies of noble descent in oriental look or in Dutch tradition are often shown in the company of black servants such as in paintings by Anton van Dyck, Caspar Netscher, Nicolaes van Ravesteyn II [fig. 17], Adrien Hannemann and others³³.

33 Portraits of elegant ladies demonstrate the wealth and social status due to the tradition of their provenance, showing them in the company of a black person, dressed as servant: "Portrait of Princess Henrietta of Lorraine" after the original by Anton van Dyck (1634), wood, 146 x 112 cm (RKD), a signed painting "Portrait of an elegant Lady" by C. Netscher, dated ca. 1670, New York, Sotheby's, January 30, 1998, lot 8 and fig., "Portrait of Princess Henrietta Maria Stuart" (1631-1665), wife of Willem II, Prince of Orange by Adriaen Hannemann, dated ca. 1660, The Hague, Royal Cabinet of Paintings in the Mauritshuis, Inv. no. 429 (RKD), Nicolaes van Ravesteyn II, "Portrait of probably Anna de Bye" (1636-1713), The Hague, Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst, Inv. no. C2014 (RKD), Anonymus, Northern Netherlands, Portrait of Anna Margaretha van Ingendorp à Blois (1749), Arnhem (RKD). An interesting *Allegorical Portrait of Lady Venetia Digby* by Anton van Dyck in the Royal collection, Windsor Castle (Knackfuss 1897, pp. 56 and 63, no. 43) shows the lady seated in a Roman dress, surrounded by symbols of innocence (dove), evil (serpent), fame (laureate wreath above her, held by putti) and a double-faced monster in chains, lying in the background. The allegorical elements were meant as compliments to hide Van Dyck's affection for this woman while working at the Royal court.

Looking at the centre scene of the *Garland of Flowers*, Abraham Mignon might have been influenced by both receptions, the literary Baroque illustration of the Cleopatra legend and the popular trend of female Dutch portraiture. Nevertheless, speculations would be endless as long as one doesn't know Mignon's motivation in breaking the rules of Calvinist thinking. We probably have to accept the more realistic and humane way of a compromise. Mignon apparently executed the commissioner's personal wish for an allegorical scene portraying Cleopatra's drama. But he has a new view. His Cleopatra is very much taken aback, a modest and ashamed-looking young woman, dressed like a nymph, but decorated with the attributes of a queen and courted by a black servant³⁴. As a Calvinist, Mignon couldn't do it better.

Abraham Mignon was a self-made, very learned and flexible artist. He was able to execute his client's wish to perfection and not unveil the mystery to the public, which is the case with the *Garland of Flowers* in Bilbao. However, one can well distinguish each species of flowers and insects as well as the figure in the centre. Art historians have identified earlier that the represented personification is not Flora but Cleopatra. Here she is shown in an originally designed version by Abraham Mignon. His Cleopatra represents a mixture of the Antique myth and the Dutch tradition of portraiture of elegant ladies featured since the first quarter of the seventeenth century. As it is known by today, only two variants of a garland surrounding a centre-piece are known by the hand of Mignon. While in the cartouche painting *Saint Mary and the Child*, in the Schönborn collection, only the flower garland can be certified by the master, this magnificent still-life with Cleopatra excels as unique interpretation and full authenticity. By comparison of details and style, it is part of his mature works and can be dated around 1675.

34 Thanks to Prof. Wolfgang Augustyn, Munich, on the discourse of Cleopatra's iconography (Augustyn 1997).

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