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Jan van Kessel, Decorative Still-Life Composition with a Porcelain Bowl, Fruit and Insects, 17th century, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

AN VAN CAMP: I am An Van Camp. I am the Curator of Northern European Art here at the Ashmolean Museum of Arts and Archaeology in Oxford. Northern European Art means that I am responsible for all the Dutch, Flemish, and German paintings, prints, drawings, the art sculpture, anything that comes from the modern regions of the Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany.

Today, we are in the Daisy Linda Ward Gallery, which contains almost 100 still-life paintings, Dutch and Flemish still life paintings from the 17th and 18th century. And today, we'll be looking at this intriguing small fruit still-life painted by Jan van Kessel, who came from Antwerp, a city in Flanders. Flanders roughly corresponds to modern Belgium. And Antwerp is a very important port city in Flanders. And it also happens to be my hometown, the city where I was born and grew up.

So here, we have an oil painting by Jan van Kessel. It's titled "Decorative Still-Life with a Porcelain Bowl, Fruits, and Insects." It's an oil painting made on a small copper plate. Jan van Kessel's specialty was really producing hundreds of these small scale still-life paintings. The majority of them were painted on copper because copper was a very smooth surface as opposed to paintings on woods, which would still show the wood grains or the seams between the wood panels, or paintings made on canvas, which would show you the weaving of the threads. So copper was perfect when you wanted to paint still-life paintings, because you wanted to make them appear as realistic, as detailed, as lifelike as possible. So if you had a copper surface to paint on, it would provide you with that smooth surface to render all the tiny brush strokes that you wanted to convey in order to render your fruits or your flowers or your porcelain bowls, as you can see in this painting.

So Jan van Kessel was born in Antwerp in 1626. We know he joined the St. Luke Guild, which is the guild of all the painters in a city, in this case, in Antwerp. And if you wanted to be an independent artist, if you wanted to sell and trade your paintings, then you had to join the guilds and adhere to their regulations. So Jan van Kessel joined the guild in 1644 as a flower painter, which is nicely reflected in the picture we're standing in front of today.

Jan van Kessel was born in a very famous Antwerp artistic family. The founder of this great artistic family is called Pieter Brueghel. And he was one of the most significant Flemish artists in the 16th century, around 1515. His son was Jan Brueghel the Elder, who became very famous as a still-life painter. And this is Jan van Kessel's grandfather. So Jan van Kessel sort of had a head

start in life because he was born in this very successful, very wealthy artistic family who had very good connections.

So for instance, when Peter Paul Rubens, who is the greatest Flemish artist of the 17th century - when he paints a picture and he needs the detail of a flower or fruits, he will go to his friend Jan Brueghel, the grandfather of Jan van Kessel, to ask him to contribute a flower. If he wants to paint an animal, because Rubens isn't that great at painting animals, he will ask his friend, Frans Snyders, to paint the animals. So if you look at the Flemish painting of that period, you can - it's almost like a jigsaw. You can sort of recognise the different painters who have contributed.

So Jan van Kessel was specialised in flower pieces or fruit still-lives, as we have the example here. But he also did allegorical pieces. He also painted landscapes. We know of hundreds of paintings Jan van Kessel, which indicates that he was very prolific. He was a very busy man, which of course indicates that he was much in demand.

For this small fruit still-life by Jan van Kessel is, in fact, part of a set of four small copper plates. They all share the same dimensions, which is how we know that they belong together. And they stayed together throughout their collecting history.

We received the paintings as part of a large bequest in 1937 called the Daisy Linda Ward bequest, which reflects the gallery in which we are standing here. So this is an oil painting. And if you look at the picture, the first thing that you will notice is this fabulous porcelain bowl in the centre of the composition. In fact, it is a Chinese porcelain bowl. Chinese porcelain bowls were an exotic item. They were a luxury item that were imported through companies such as the Dutch East India Company, and who would then make their way in trade centres such as Antwerp, and who would appeal to wealthy collectors such as merchants and bankers, to display into their houses to show to their friends and family how cultured and how wealthy they were in order to have obtained such an item.

And so if you look more closely, it's almost like a deep soup tureen. And it's painted with cobalt blue flower decorations, which is very appropriate for the theme of the still-life that we're looking at. And so the lower part of the bowl is a continuous frieze of flower garlands. And the rim of the bowl is, in fact, partitioned into separate panels, into separate squares, each showing a different flower. And this is very typical for a Chinese porcelain type called wanli, because that's from where it was imported into Europe.

If we look at the fruits displayed into the bowls, so at the front, we can recognise a lemon which has been peeled. And peel has been decoratively curled by the artist to sort of be draped outside of the rim of the bowl, to then be tucked back into the bowl. We also see plums behind the lemon. We see oranges in the back. We see grapes. We see apricots or peaches, and cherries in the front and in the back.

And so at first sight, this looks like a very realistic set-up. This looks like the artist just gathered some fruit, some nuts from his household, placed them in a bowl, and decided to paint them on a very sunny day. But in fact, when you start looking deeper into all these different elements, you quickly realise that not all of these fruits actually are in season at the same time. So while we

have plums and apricots, which are in season in early summer, we have the cherries which are, of course, a summer fruit. But then we also have the grapes and the hazelnuts, which are more typical of autumn. And the oranges are best eaten in December, January of the year.

So in fact, once we know all this, we realise that this can't be a realistic depiction of a set-up arranged by the artist on any given day in his studio. This is an artificial set-up. So the artist must have had studies available to him in order to pick and mix, in order to cut and paste different elements which he's already painted earlier into a final work.

We actually know from Jan Kessel's other works of art that they're a combination of different elements. So Jan van Kessel would create these study sheets, for instance, of a single orange, of a single lemon, of a caterpillar, of a butterfly, of a stag beetle. And he would combine these on smaller copper plates, which appear like drawn study sheets. And he would then use the individual elements of these study sheets to be incorporated into other works of art.

So once you know that, you can start looking for matches. You can start looking for the same butterfly appearing in different paintings by Jan van Kessel, which were painted over a long period of time, perhaps even 20 years' time. So you know that was not a real butterfly flying around Jan van Kessel's workshop, but a model, a study that he'd drawn perhaps 20 years earlier and then copied to be reused in another painting.

Alongside the fruits and nuts, we also see some insects. So for instance, in the lower left corner, we see a stag beetle. It's almost like he's crawling off the tabletop. Sometimes stag beetles are used as symbols of evil. It's not clear if the artist meant it here as a symbol of evil or just as a natural occurrence, as a natural insect to decorate his still-life.

We also see many butterflies darting above and below the fruit. So here, we can see a monarch butterfly, an orange monarch butterfly. At the top, for instance, we see a red admiral butterfly.

And in the lower right-hand corner, just like we have the stag beetle at the left, we see a caterpillar quickly crawling off the table, as if he's trying to escape. This might look like a simple fruit still-life, something that was set up in the artist's studio. There are deeper meanings behind pictures like this.

So fruits, as we all know, once you've picked them, once you've bought them, once you brought them home, they will deteriorate very quickly. They will perish. So maybe the artist tried to convey a message of life and death. So on the one hand, we have these really lush, ripe fruits inviting us from their bowl. And we have that beautiful blossoming rosebush in the background. But really, we know that soon, this beautiful composition will all turn to brown, decomposing fruits. And so this is quite interesting because it gives the viewers a message. And the message is *memento mori* - so beware of death, because death will come for us all.

And similarly, there's another message we can detect in this fruit still-life, especially if we look at luxury items like the wanli porcelain bowl that the artist is displaying here, because it's clearly a vanity. It's a folly. It's only for people who can afford to buy imports, Chinese porcelain wear.

And so again, it's a warning where the artist says, well, beware, because don't attach too much to worldly possessions. So it's a vanity piece, as well.

There might also be a deeper meaning when we look at the butterflies depicted in these Dutch and Flemish still-life paintings. So we know from the development of butterflies that they start off as a caterpillar, which will then turn into a chrysalis, which will then reveal the adult butterfly coming out in all its splendour with its beautiful, colourful wings. In fact, butterflies were a symbol of salvation and resurrection, because while you think when they're still in their caterpillar and their chrysalis stage, that they're quite still and, perhaps, dead, all of a sudden, they erupt from their cocoon. And you have this beautiful creature. And so that's why butterflies are often a symbol of the resurrection, and of course, the Resurrection of Christ in the Christian context, in the 17th century.

Antwerp, the city where Jan van Kessel was working in Flanders, was very Catholic. It was ruled by the Spanish King. And so that might explain some of these deeper meanings that we can find in butterflies as the resurrection, and in the stag beetle as the personification of evil.

So while these paintings were painted in the 17th century, probably in the 1660s, they still have relevance for us today. So for instance, a Chinese import-wear is very current nowadays because we are facing China as the biggest producer in the world. We also have the fact that family businesses are very important. So we know that Jan van Kessel grew up as a Brueghel grandson. And so it's important to see him as part of that big family business, as a brand that lasts from the mid-16th century until the end of the 17th century. So we're talking about almost 150 years of the Brueghel brand really dominating the art market in Europe.

People nowadays also put a lot of emphasis on decorating their houses, on interior design. And so this is a perfect example of people in the 17th century also having a keen interest in decorating their houses with things that not only display their wealth, not only show that they were wealthy enough to buy these pictures, but above all, to display these beautiful works of art in their house, not for their own self-enjoyment, but also for other people to enjoy when visiting their houses.