



## Flower Still Life, Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder

### Flower Still Life

Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder  
Dutch, 1614  
Oil on copper  
11 1/4 x 15 in.  
83.PC.386

A pink carnation, a white rose, and a yellow tulip with red stripes lie in front of a basket of brilliantly colored flowers. Various types of flowers that would not bloom in the same season appear together here: roses, forget-me-nots, lilies-of-the-valley, a cyclamen, a violet, a hyacinth, and tulips. Rendering meticulous detail, Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder conveyed the silky texture of the petals, the prickliness of the rose thorns, and the fragility of opening buds. **Insects** crawl, alight, or perch on the bouquet. Each is carefully described and observed, from the dragonfly's transparent wings to the butterfly's minutely painted **antennae**. Although a vague reference, insects and short-lived flowers are a reminder of the brevity of life and the transience of its beauty.



A rising interest in botany and a passion for flowers led to an increase in painted floral still lifes at the end of the 1500s in both the Netherlands and Germany. Bosschaert was the first great Dutch specialist in fruit and flower painting and the head of a family of artists. He established a tradition that influenced an entire generation of fruit and flower painters in the Netherlands.

### About the Artist

Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder (Dutch, 1573–1621)

During the 1600s the Dutch became Europe's leading **horticulturists**, and exotic flowers became a national obsession. Not surprisingly, flower painters were among the best-paid artists. In 1621, Ambrosius Bosschaert commanded a thousand **guilders** for a single flower picture. Nonetheless, his output of artworks was relatively small, for he was by trade an art dealer. Anticipating religious persecution, in 1587 Bosschaert's parents moved from Antwerp to Middelburg, a seaport and trading center second in importance only to Amsterdam. Six years later, Bosschaert joined Middelburg's **Guild of Saint Luke**. Bosschaert's works have been called flower portraits; each flower receives the same detailed attention as a face in a portrait. Usually small in scale and on copper, Bosschaert's paintings combined blooms from different seasons, painted from separate studies of each flower. It is not unusual to find the same flower, shell, or insect in many of his pictures. Like his predecessors, Bosschaert sometimes included

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symbolic or religious meanings in his works, such as the transience of life, by including objects at different stages in the life cycle.

### **More Background Information for the Lesson *Periodic Pigment***

Paint is made by combining **pigment** (usually a fine, ground powder) and **binder** (usually a liquid). Some pigment gives paint its **color** while binder is what holds the pigment and adheres it to a surface. Pigment particles are insoluble and are suspended in the binder. Pigments come from a variety of sources such as animals, vegetables, minerals, and synthetics. Some are earth pigments, or natural inorganic pigments, which are simply colored clumps of earth. These were the earliest pigments used by man and include **raw umber**, a brownish yellow earth found in many places around the globe. European raw umber traditionally came from Tuscany. Mineral pigments are another type of natural inorganic pigment and include colors such as **vermilion** (cinnabar/mercuric sulfide) and ultramarine (**lapis lazuli**).

Natural organic pigments are made of vegetable or animal products, rather than earth or mineral. These include colors such as the now-outlawed Indian yellow, which was made from dried urine of cows in India that were force-fed mango leaves. Other examples include **madder**, which was made from roots, and charcoal made from carbonized wood. Artificial inorganic pigments, on the other hand, are colors that are produced rather than found. Over the centuries, alchemists and then chemists invented many pigments, such as cobalt blue. These synthetics transformed the painter's palette by creating a new spectrum of color to use.

Binders are the adhesive **element** in paint that gives body to the paint and attaches it to a support (parchment, panel, copper, canvas, paper, etc.). The earliest binders were animal fat and wax. Later, egg yolk, egg white, honey, and tree sap were used as binders and resulted in a matte surface. Oils, particularly cold-pressed linseed oil, began to be used as a binder in Europe in the fifteenth century. Oil is slow to dry and produces a lustrous surface.

### **Questions for Teaching**

What objects do you see that are from nature? What objects do you see that are man-made?

How many different kinds of flowers do you see?

What are some reasons that an artist might have chosen to paint this subject?

What colors did the artist use in this painting?

How many pairs of **complementary colors** can you identify in this painting?

Artists in Bosschaert's time were very interested in all types of nature. What evidence of this do you find in this painting?

How does the inclusion of insects in the **composition** affect your interpretation of the painting?