Still Life with Flower Arrangement and Fruit Basket by Antoine Berjon

Carl-Johan Olsson
Curator, Paintings and Sculpture

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Ludvig Florén, Magnus Olausson and Martin Olin.

Editorial Committee

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Jonas Burvall and Jenny Phan.

Photographers
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Photo: Clermont Auvergne Métropole, MARQ/Florent Giffard (fig. 2, p. 32).
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Allegory of Sunday – A Painting by Ditlev Conrad Blunck
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19th-Century Finnish Landscape Painting. From Romantic Views to Colour Experiments
Photo: Finnish National Gallery/Public Domain (figs. 2–4 and 9, pp. 42–43 and 46).
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Mary Cassatt’s Portrait of her Sister Lydia. A Free Study for The Cup of Tea
Photo: 2023 Image copyright The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource/Scala, Florence (figs. 3–4, pp. 49–50).

Julia Beck’s Painting Autumn Day and 19th-Century Transnational Naturalism
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Supplice de Loke – A Sculpture by Ida Matton
Photo: Ida Matton’s archive, Uppsala University Library (figs. 2–4, pp. 60–63).

Isabelle Mann Clow’s Dining Room Furnishings and Swedish Design in 1920s USA
Photo: Ray isbell, findagrave.com (fig. 2, p. 66).
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Nature Inside: Plants and Flowers in the Modern Interior
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Nationalmuseum
Box 16176
SE–103 24 Stockholm
Sweden
www.nationalmuseum.se

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The Nationalmuseum has acquired a flower piece by Antoine Berjon, one of the foremost artists in the genre in his time. In the artist’s relatively limited output, this painting is among the largest, format-wise, and the most ambitiously executed. Although the artist was exceptionally technically gifted, his career was not smooth and was fraught with financial difficulties. Berjon was born in Lyon, in 1754, where he was also educated; he later worked at the local academy and was associated with the silk industry. When this industry was severely affected by the French Revolution, he tried his luck in Paris in 1791, by exhibiting three floral and fruit still lifes at the Salon. Two years later, after an uprising in his native Lyon was brutally suppressed in June 1793 by the revolutionary terror, Berjon moved to Paris.

At the time, he was around 40 years old and very experienced. Berjon specialised in still lifes, but had also mastered pastels and miniature painting. His landlord in Paris happened to be a leading miniaturist, Jean-Baptiste Jacques Augustin. For Berjon, portraiture was an important way of making a living, especially miniatures, and he was able to learn artistically from this technique for his work on still lifes. He regularly exhibited his flower and fruit paintings at

Fig. 1 Antoine Berjon (1754–1843), Still Life with Flower Arrangement and Fruit Basket, c. 1800. Oil on canvas, 99 × 76 cm. Purchase: Wiros Fund 2021. Nationalmuseum, NM 7582.
the Salon and had several decades of success, but the big breakthrough never came. Financially, his income was meagre, which may have been because artists could not charge as much for flower still lifes as for other subjects; another factor was probably the fact that Berjon’s technique was time-consuming, due to its wealth of detail and the sophisticated relationship between the different layers of paint, which had to be dried and planned in relation to each other. A third explanation may be found in the artist’s personality, which made him barely socially adept.

This may nevertheless be surprising, because floral painting experienced a renaissance in Paris in the latter half of the 18th century. Anne Vallayer-Coster was the leading name, followed by a number of Dutch artists who successfully established themselves there at the end of l’ancien régime. The leading representatives were Gerard van Spaendonck (1746–1822) and Jan Frans van Dael (1764–1840). The former was a professor of flower painting at the Jardin des Plantes, the Paris botanical gardens. Like Berjon, Spaendonck also worked as a miniaturist, which contributed effectively to the renewal of floral painting. However, compared to 17th-century Dutch still lifes, they are painted with thinly applied paint, giving them a lighter, brighter and more decorative appearance. Moreover, the often intricate symbolism of the 17th century has giving them a lighter, brighter and more decorative appearance. Moreover, the often intricate symbolism of the 17th century has given way to a more pronounced striving for beautiful illusionism, and a touch of geometric abstraction.

The Nationalmuseum’s newly acquired painting is one of Berjon’s largest, in terms of format, in his relatively small production. The painting shows roses, peonies, lilies, tulips and other plants in various stages of bloom. A fruit basket on the table overflows with peaches, pears and grapes and there is a bumblebee on one of the roses, which could be interpreted as a reference to 17th-century still lifes. However, while insects such as beetles and flies often represent decomposition, the bumblebee symbolises the plants’ reproduction. Everything, including a wicker basket, is rendered with meticulous attention to detail, except for one item – the urn-like vase that holds the bouquet of flowers. This is startling, because Berjon was a highly skilled illusionist in his rendering of the subject. The two-dimensional nature of this vase is difficult to explain, and can hardly have been due to an artistic shortcoming, but remains a curious feature here and in several other of the artist’s still lifes.

Berjon returned to Lyon in 1810, where he became professor of floral design at the École des Beaux-Arts, founded in 1807 to support the re-establishment of the city’s silk industry. There, he became the most sought-after designer, but in 1823 he came into conflict with the school’s management, which led to him leaving his position. He continued to design and teach for the remaining 20 years of his life, but from a fairly isolated position.

Notes:
5. Joseph J. Rishel characterises Berjon’s painting as follows: “This was the context in which Berjon emerged. Although his depictions were as botanically correct as those of his Parisian contemporaries, his tradition as a Lyonnais set him clearly apart. His designs were not intended for illustration and porcelain decoration (be it a vase or a plaque), but for the continuous flow of decorative rhythms required by the weavers. In turn, there is often a boldness in his lighting and composition – a strength of relief and robustness of forms – which suggests his formation in a center some distance from the almost feminine refinement and delicacy of the court style practiced by his contemporaries in Paris. He is, in fact, closer in spirit to the baroque amplitude and fullness of scale of the seventeenth-century Flemish and Dutch masters who stand behind them all.” Quote after Joseph J. Rishel, “A Lyonnais Flower Piece by Antoine Berjon (1754–1843)”, in Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin, autumn 1982, vol. 78, no. 336, p. 20.