

Herman SAFTLEVEN (Rotterdam 1609 - Utrecht 1685)

A Sticky Nightshade or Litchi Tomato Plant (Solanum sisymbriifolium)

Watercolour, gouache and gum arabic, with framing lines in black chalk.
Signed with monogram and dated HS. f. 1683 den 31 octob: at the lower centre.
Inscribed (by Agneta Block) Solanum pomiferum fruitescens Africanum / spinosium, nigricans boraginis flore / foliis profunde laciniate on the verso.
354 x 256 mm. (13 7/8 x 10 1/8 in.)

ACQUIRED BY THE NATIONALMUSEUM, STOCKHOLM.

Dated the 31st of October 1683, this was one of around a hundred botanical drawings commissioned from Herman Saftleven by the amateur horticulturalist and botanist Agnes (Agneta) Block that have been described as ‘among the most impressive botanical studies in 17th-century Dutch art.’

A wealthy widow, Agnes Block (1629-1704) was a collector of exotic plants and flowers, which she cultivated in her garden at Vijverhof, a country house on the river Vecht, several miles southeast of Amsterdam, between Breukelen and Nieuwersluis. She owned between 450 and 500 different plants and flowers, including many specimens from foreign lands, and commissioned artists to record her specimens in watercolour. As she wrote to a fellow botanist, ‘When I have a strange or unknown plant, I have it drawn from life, so that if it dies, I have a record on paper.’ On the verso of the drawings she had commissioned, Block inscribed the Latin names of the plants depicted, as well as further details about each one, such as when they flowered.

Block is known to have commissioned ninety-two studies of flowers and plants from Herman Saftleven, which all date from the last few years of the artist’s career, between 1680 and 1684. Other artists from whom she commissioned drawings included Otto Marsius van Schrieck, Pieter Holsteyn, Johannes Bronkhorst, Maria Sibylla Merian, Herman Henstenburgh, Willem de Heer and Matthias and Pieter

Withoos. Most of the drawings commissioned by Block have long since been dispersed, and only one album of botanical drawings from her collection has survived intact, and is today in the Rijkspentenkabinet in Amsterdam.

Native to South America - mainly Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay - the sticky nightshade or litchi tomato (also known as a 'fire-and-ice plant' or 'Morelle de Balbis') is a prickly plant with small edible fruits. Earlier in the same month that he drew the present sheet, Saftleven painted a second watercolour for Block of a different specimen of the nightshade family of plants; dated the 10th of October 1683, it is today in the British Museum.

Of the nearly one hundred botanical watercolours by Herman Saftleven known to have been commissioned by Agnes Block, Wolfgang Schulz catalogued twenty-seven surviving examples, including the present sheet. Drawings by Saftleven from this group are today in the collections of the Rijksprentenkabinet in Amsterdam, the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin, the British Museum in London and the Kunstsammlungen in Weimar, while others are in private collections, including that of George and Maida Abrams. Another botanical watercolour by Saftleven, depicting a Hollyhock (Alcea rosea), was sold alongside the present sheet at the Ellinckhuysen sale in Rotterdam in 1879, and shares the same later provenance; that drawing has recently been acquired by the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles.

Provenance:

Commissioned from the artist by Agnes Block, 'Vijverhof', Loenen aan de Vecht, near Amsterdam
Possibly Samuel van Huls, The Hague
Possibly his posthumous sale, Amsterdam, Yver, 14 May 1736, part of lot 3882 ('2 Grands Livres contenant 7 Titres & 252 Pièces en miniature; représentant des fleurs & plantes étrangères & autres, cultivées par Agnes Block à Vijverhoff, & peintes d'après nature par plusieurs maîtres fort renommés; comme Withorst, Withoos, Herm: Saftleven, Herold & autres.')
Possibly Valerius Röver, Delft
Possibly his widow, Cornelia Röver-van der Dussen, Delft
Possibly purchased in January 1761 with the rest of the Röver collection by Hendrik de Leth, Amsterdam
Ignatius Franciscus Ellinckhuysen, Rotterdam
Sale, Amsterdam, Frederik Müller & Cie., 16 April 1879, lot 234
Charles M. Dozy, Leiden
His posthumous sale, Amsterdam, R. W. P. de Vries, 6-7 May 1902, lot 176 ('Branche de fleurs. Annoté par l'artiste: "Solanum pomiferum frutescens africanum..." – Signé du monogramme et daté: del 31 Oct. 1683')
Iohan Quirijn van Regteren Altena, Amsterdam (his posthumous sale stamp [Lugt 4617] stamped on the verso)
Thence by descent.

Exhibitions

Dordrecht, Dordrechts Museum, Bekoring van het kleine, 1959-1960, no.72.

Literature:

Anna G. Bienfait, Oude Hollandsche tuinen, The Hague, 1943, Vol.I, p.176, note 1; Laurens J. Bol, Bekoring van het kleine, exhibition catalogue, Dordrecht, 1959-1960, p.36, no.72, illustrated pl.12; Wolfgang Schulz, 'Blumenzeichnungen von Herman Saftleven d. J.' Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte, 1977, p.153, no.22, fig.17; Wolfgang Schulz, Herman Saftleven 1609-1685: Leben und Werke, Berlin and New York, 1982, p.487, no.1442, illustrated pl.236.

Artist description:

Herman Saftleven was the younger brother of Cornelis Saftleven and studied with him, probably under their father, the obscure painter Herman Saftleven the Elder, in Rotterdam. Although the two brothers briefly worked together in the 1630s, notably at the palace of Huis Honselaarsdijk in 1635, the younger Saftleven made his career in Utrecht. He had settled there by 1632, becoming a citizen of the city some twenty-five years later. (He also served as an officer of the city's artist's guild between 1655 and 1667.) Active mainly as a landscape painter, Saftleven painted a variety of Italianate landscapes, Rhineland scenes and imaginary river views, as well as topographical views of Utrecht and the surrounding area, wooded and mountain vistas and farmhouse genre scenes. While his early manner as a topographical artist is indebted to the example of such artists as Jan van Goyen (with whom he may have studied) and Pieter Molijn, by the 1640s he was working in a more Italianate manner, inspired by the example of Jan Both and Cornelis van Poelenburch. He had achieved his mature style by around 1650, producing expansive landscape paintings and drawings inspired by his travels along the Rhine and Moselle rivers and their tributaries.

A prolific artist, Saftleven produced around three hundred paintings and some 1,400 drawings, mostly finished landscapes, together with some forty etchings. Many of his drawings are signed and dated, large-scale sheets intended as independent works for collectors, as well as for such publications as the Amsterdam collector Laurens van der Hem's fifty-volume Atlas Maior. Writing around 1660, the Dutch poet and playwright Joost van der Vondel, who was a friend of Saftleven's, noted in verse that, whomsoever owned an album of the artist's landscape drawings, could 'Catch some air, if he wants, / While staying home, safe and quiet: / He can quietly travel up the Rhine, / from Utrecht, and its Cathedral; / Between banks and streams, / Between vineyards, woods, and trees, / To amuse himself, / Canals, cities and farmland, / Herds, cattle, villages and hamlets, / Fields, and townships, and fences, / To behold Springs and waterfalls, / In his room, when he turns / To these works on paper, / So full of life, so full of elegance.' In the last few years of his career, between 1680 and 1684, Saftleven drew nearly a hundred botanical drawings of flowers and plants, in watercolour and gouache, that were commissioned from him by the amateur horticulturalist and botanist Agnes (Agneta) Block, although less than thirty of these works survive today. Significant groups of landscape drawings by Herman Saftleven are in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin, the British Museum in London and the Albertina in Vienna.