

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



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 frutescens 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 Rijksprentenkabinet 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, in Rotterdam. Although the two brothers briefly worked together in the 1630s, the younger Saftleven made his career in Utrecht, where he settled in 1639, becoming a citizen of the city twenty years later. Active mainly as a landscape painter, Saftleven painted a variety of Italianate landscapes, Rhineland scenes and imaginary river views, as well as wooded and mountain vistas and farmhouse genre scenes. A prolific artist, Herman Saftleven produced around three hundred paintings and some 1,200 drawings, mostly finished landscapes, as well as around forty etchings. Many of his drawings are finished, large-scale works produced for collectors, and significant groups of drawings by the artist are today in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin, the British Museum in London, the Albertina in Vienna, and elsewhere.