

Small Wonders

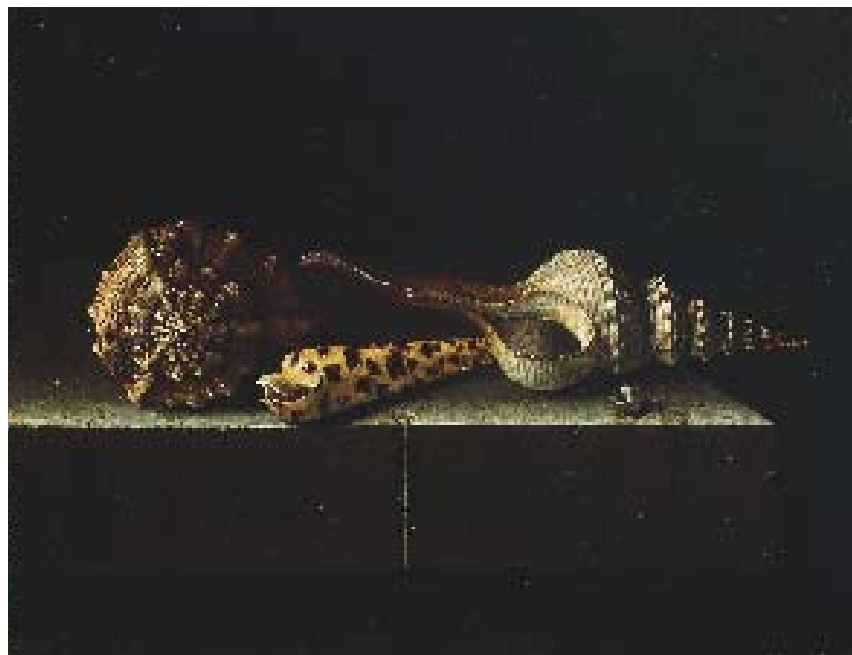
DUTCH STILL LIFES
BY ADRIAEN COORTE

National Gallery of Art, Washington
29 June – 28 September 2003



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1. *Still Life with Shells*, 1697, oil on paper on panel. Private collection



A sense of mystery surrounds Adriaen Coorte, a mystery that concerns not only the character of his haunting still-life images, which are remarkably different from the elaborate compositions his contemporaries painted, but also the nature of his life and artistic career. After three hundred years of obscurity, Coorte has emerged as one of the most compelling still-life painters of the late seventeenth century.

Adriaen Coorte (active 1683–1707) was a visual poet whose intimate still lifes allow the viewer to see both the familiar and the exotic with wonder and admiration. With clarity of vision, Coorte transformed the subjects of his mature paintings, whether seashells, wild strawberries, grapes, gooseberries, or bunches of asparagus (see figs. 1–5 and cover image), into objects of singular beauty, with their own organic and sensuous rhythms. He dramatically illuminated their purified shapes, colors, and textures against a black backdrop, conveying both grandeur and

fragility. In his small paintings pictorial elements often reach upward, seeming to strive toward an unseen light source. These pictures are powerful statements, positive and optimistic at their core. Nevertheless, Coorte always arranged his fruit, vegetables, and shells on a gray stone ledge marred by a crack to remind the viewer that life, indeed all matter, is transient.

Despite careful research by eminent art historians, virtually nothing is known about Coorte except that he produced about one hundred signed and dated paintings between 1683 and 1707.¹ Although his life dates are unknown and no information has survived about his artistic training, it is assumed that he lived and worked in Middelburg, the capital of the province of Zeeland in the southern part of The Netherlands. His precise relationship to this important maritime center is uncertain, however, in large part because municipal archival records, including those of the painters' guild, were destroyed when fire erupted in the

2. *Gooseberries on a Table*, 1701, oil on paper on panel. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Leonard C. Hanna, Jr. Fund



3. *Wild Strawberries on a Ledge*, 1704, oil on paper. Henry H. Weldon



4. *Still Life with Medlars and Gooseberries*, 1686, oil on canvas. Maida & George Abrams Collection, Boston



5. *Peaches and Apricots*, oil on paper on canvas. Collection Pieter C. W. M. Dreesmann, London



6. *A Wooded Rocky Landscape with Swimming Ducks*, 1683, oil on canvas. Emmanuel Moatti, Paris



city hall in May 1940. One argument for placing him in Middelburg is that an “Adriaen Coorte,” who could have been the artist’s father, is recorded as living there in 1665.² Moreover, Coorte’s still lifes were primarily collected in Zeeland, largely by Middelburg art lovers. According to a 1731 inventory, one Middelburg collector, a Mr. L. F. de Beaufort, owned fourteen of Coorte’s still lifes.³

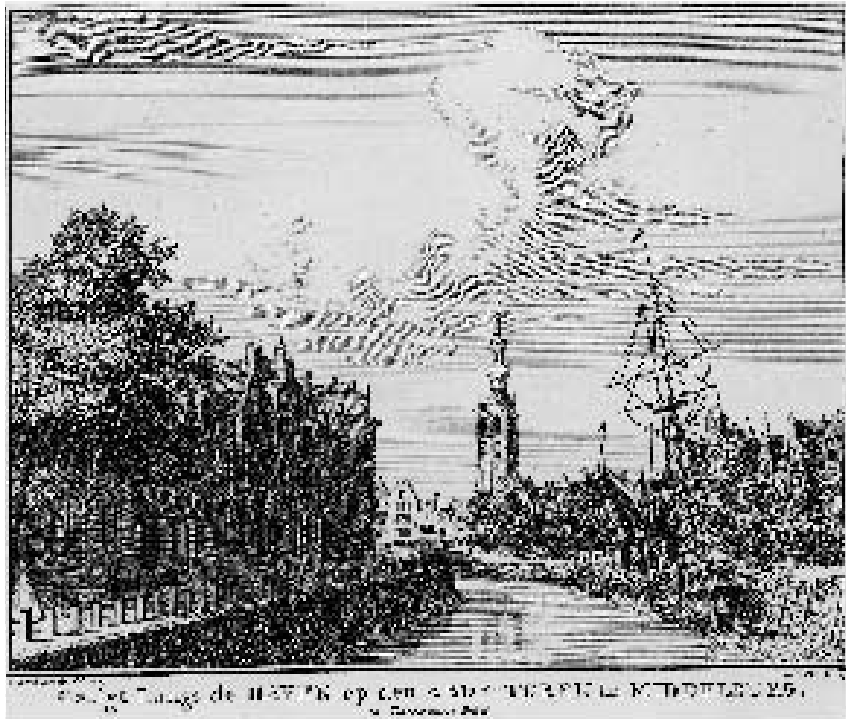
Curiously, Coorte’s earliest paintings of 1683 (fig. 6) are of an entirely different character than his mature works. They depict exotic birds in a landscape, with motifs derived from paintings by Melchior d’Hondecoeter (1636–1695), suggesting that Coorte may have lived for a while in The Hague or Amsterdam, where d’Hondecoeter worked and where Coorte could have seen this older master’s paintings. Apparently Coorte quickly realized that depicting live birds was not his forte. By 1685 he had abandoned this style of

decorative painting and had begun to focus his attention on restrained still lifes of fruit and vegetables, motifs that would fascinate him for the rest of his career. These intimate scenes may have been inspired by the work of Isaac van Duynen (1628–1679/1681), an artist from The Hague who primarily painted still lifes of fish but who is also known to have depicted asparagus and wild strawberries arranged on a tabletop.⁴

Only one contemporaneous document mentioned Coorte, and that concerned a fine levied against him in 1695 because he had sold paintings in the Middelburg market when he was not a master in the local artists’ guild.⁵ The document is particularly interesting because the St. Luke’s Guild scribe clearly did not know Coorte personally. He misspelled Coorte’s family name, referring to the artist as “Coorde,” and left a space instead of writing in the artist’s first name. Perhaps Coorte lived not in Middelburg itself but in the surrounding countryside, enjoying a quiet, contemplative existence akin to the serenity created in his elegant paintings. It is also possible that he painted as a gentleman “amateur” rather than as a professional artist. Such an explanation would help account for the individuality of his style, which he pursued with single-minded devotion throughout his career. Indeed, judging from the low monetary values attached to his paintings in eighteenth-century inventories, it is difficult to believe that Coorte could have earned a respectable living solely on the basis of his artistic production.

Despite the uncertainties related to Coorte’s biographical information, the distinctive qualities of his intimate still lifes, which infuse a sense of wonder into seemingly descriptive depictions of natural forms, relate to the character of Middel-

7. View of Middelburg, engraving from *Speculum Zelandiae* (Amsterdam, 1760). National Gallery of Art library, David K.E. Bruce Fund

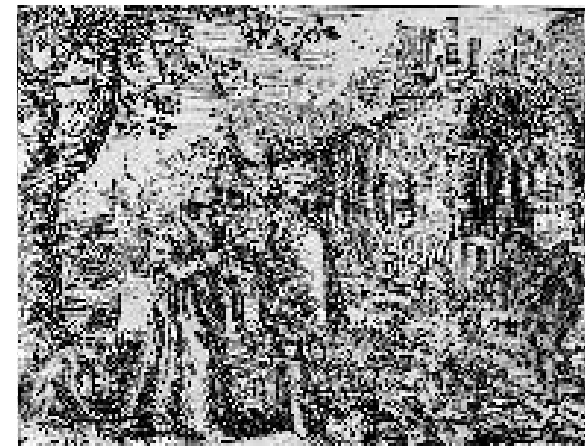


burg and its painting traditions. As the capital of Zeeland, Middelburg was a prosperous trading center during the seventeenth century (fig. 7). It gained much of its wealth from the influx of Flemish émigrés—among them artists such as Ambrosius Bosschaert (1573–1621)—who left Antwerp during the Dutch revolt in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries for a variety of religious, economic, and political reasons. It also benefited enormously from the presence of the Dutch East and West India Companies, both of which established important regional offices in this well-situated maritime city.

Middelburg's wealth was noted in 1673 by an English traveler, John Ray, who described the city as “large, well-built, having spacious Streets, populous, full of wealthy Merchants, and well fortified.”⁶ A century later Jan Christiaan Sepp, the author of a Dutch travel guide, was simi-

larly positive in his assessment, adding that outside the city walls were “innumerable pleasure houses and orchards, uncommonly pleasant for travelers and inhabitants alike.”⁷ He also noted that Middelburg was famous for its Kermis, or church festival, which lasted fourteen days and where “one could see displayed all sorts of expensive items sold by merchants from near and far, from England, France, Brabant, Flanders, and Liège.”⁸

The fine gardens and exotic merchandise to be found in Middelburg resulted from the fortuitous combination of industrious and talented Flemish émigrés, far-reaching trade, and a temperate climate. From the beginning of the seventeenth century, Middelburg's wealthiest citizens adorned their homes with luxury goods from around the world and their gardens with rare bulbs and plants. As early as 1625 Jacob Cats described with obvious wonder the garden of a friend from Middelburg:



8. Adriaen Pietersz. van de Venne, *Ex minimis patet ipse Deus* (God is revealed in the smallest work of his creation) from *Zeeusche nachtegael* (Middelburg, 1623). National Gallery of Art library, David K.E. Bruce Fund

“There she has many fruits from divers foreign lands, / A multitude of plants from divers distant strands, / And unknown, nameless blooms.”⁹

The Flemish botanist Matthias Lobelius established the first important Middelburg garden in the 1590s after he had emigrated there from Antwerp. His renowned herb garden, which was transformed into a flower garden after he left for England in 1602, was later owned by the artist and poet Adriaen van de Venne (1589–1662).¹⁰ Van de Venne probably used it as a setting

9. Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder, *Still Life with Flowers*, c. 1612–1614, oil on copper. Teresa Heinz



for his delightful engraving of a scholar pointing to one of his choice plants as he explains to a worldly young man that God is visible in the smallest of his creations (fig. 8). The lively, expressive contours of the scholar's costume evoke the excitement and enthusiasm of botanists and collectors, who believed that each of these plants revealed God's infinite power and ingenuity. Van de Venne's engraving appeared in 1623 in *Zeeusche Nachtegael*, a Middelburg publication that not only celebrated Zeeland's distinct literary and poetic culture but also emphasized both the intimate relationship between painting and poetry and the ability of painting to capture the appearance of the visible world.

Abraham Bosschaert was the Middelburg artist who most fully epitomized the attitudes expressed by Van de Venne. His small paintings are joyous works in which he combined the different colors and shapes of carefully observed flowers, fruits, and shells to create a pleasing and uplifting visual experience (fig. 9). In many respects Bosschaert's flower paintings from the early seventeenth century display a primitive simplicity: he preserved the integrity of individual blossoms by arranging them to avoid overlapping forms; and he used light less to model his flowers than to illuminate them and bring out the brilliance of their colors.

Although Adriaen Coorte worked almost a century later and rarely painted flowers, he belonged entirely to Bosschaert's world, where great virtue was attached to the close examination of the most minute of God's creations. In his own manner Coorte conveyed a comparable poetic sensitivity in his careful, almost naive renderings of fruits, vegetables, and exotic shells. His delicate brush captured the tenderness of a young shoot or the



10. *Vanitas Still Life in a Niche*, 1688, oil on canvas. Zeeuws Museum, Middelburg

translucency of a berry's outer skin and the promised lushness of its inner core—but at a remove. He viewed the world with a classical restraint, simplifying and idealizing forms to enable them to gain in lasting significance. Pictorial elements, while seductive and appealing, are deliberately posed as though plucked from nature and presented for appreciative scrutiny, creating images of cool sensuality.

This approach to his subject matter also characterizes Coorte's treatment of *vanitas* scenes, a number of which he painted during the middle to late 1680s. In these compositions Coorte depicted objects that reminded viewers of the transience of life and the dangers of succumbing to sensual pleasures. Nevertheless, as Laurens Bol has so appropriately written, the skull in Coorte's *Vanitas Still Life in a Niche* (fig. 10) is less a "lugubrious admonisher" of death than "a beautiful, clear

painted object, catching the light just like his favourite asparagus."¹¹ Indeed, even while the combination of *vanitas* elements—including the watch, clay pipe and tobacco, playing cards, and musical instrument—is consistent with pictorial elements found in earlier Middelburg *vanitas* paintings, the clarity of Coorte's style gives this work an uncommon objective reality that is as compelling as its symbolic message.

Yet symbolic and emblematic meanings alluding to transience do not seem to have greatly concerned Adriaen Coorte, who favored images that were affirmations of life, notably such modest delectables as asparagus, wild strawberries, peaches, and red gooseberries. These were not particularly rare foods, but seasonal delights, meant to be savored on special occasions. Wild strawberries were valued enough to be presented in expensive Wan-Li bowls (fig. 11), presumably brought from China by ships from the East India Company, although Coorte also depicted these delicacies in simple earthenware pots. The artist occasionally combined several types of fruit in one still life but more frequently portrayed them separately, as though each were worthy of individual attention. Perhaps he composed some of his paintings as pendants (or as groups of three, as one eighteenth-century inventory would indicate), where, for example, the deep reds of wild strawberries would be balanced against the subtle greens, purples, and whites of a bunch of asparagus. He also seems to have paired depictions of exotic shells.

Coorte sometimes painted on canvas and panel but most often on paper, which he later laid down on panel, a technique that seems to have been distinctly his own. The origin of the idea of painting on paper is unknown, but this support served him

11. *Strawberries in a Wan-Li Bowl*, 1704, oil on paper on canvas. Ivor Foundation



well. It provided a smooth surface on which to paint, one that enhanced the clarity he sought in his images. It allowed him to apply his thin glazes without concern for the visual irregularities inevitably to be found in the grain of a wood panel or the weave of a canvas. Typically he would apply two ground layers on his support, over which he would paint the dark background. He would leave an area in reserve for the main compositional elements, as, for example, a bunch of asparagus on a ledge. He would then model the forms with a mixture of paints containing glazes.¹² Many of the pigments he used are similar to those recommended by W. Beurs, whose 1692 treatise on painting small-scale images may have been known by the artist.¹³

Somehow these modest and fragile paintings, acquired for only a few guilders in the late 1600s and early 1700s, have sur-

vived over the centuries, albeit unknown to most art lovers. Whether they were preserved through benign neglect or because they were especially valued by their owners is difficult to say, for virtually nothing was written about Coorte's paintings until the early twentieth century. It was not until the 1950s, and particularly the 1958 exhibition devoted to the painter at the Dordrechts Museum, that Coorte's unique artistic qualities were made known to a wider public.¹⁴ Since then the quiet intimacy of his works has become increasingly appreciated and valued by both private collectors and major museums, including the National Gallery of Art. This exhibition has been organized to celebrate the Gallery's recent acquisition of Coorte's *Still Life with Asparagus and Red Currants*, 1696 (cover), which was made possible through the generosity of the Lee and Juliet Folger Fund.

NOTES

I would like to express my appreciation to Liesbeth Helmus and Lydia van Oosten from the Centraal Museum, Utrecht, for their assistance in arranging loans from the exhibition organized by the Centraal Museum in the spring of 2003, *Adriaen Coorte: Master of Sublime Simplicity*. I would also like to thank Robert Noortman, David Koetser, and George Wachter for drawing my attention to paintings by Adriaen Coorte in private collections.

1. Abraham Bredius was the first art historian to uncover documentary information on Coorte. See A. Bredius, "De Gildeboeken van St. Lucas te Middelburg," in Fr. D. O. Obreen, *Archief voor nederlandse Kunstgeschiedenis* 6 (Rotterdam, 1884–1887), 229. The rediscovery of Coorte's work is largely due to the devoted research of Laurens J. Bol. See Laurens J. Bol, "Adriaen S. Coorte, stillevenschilder," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek*, 4 (1952–1953), 193–232; Laurens J. Bol, *Adriaen Coorte, stillevenschilder* [exh. cat., Dordrechts Museum] (Dordrecht, 1958); and Laurens J. Bol, Adriaen Coorte, *A Unique Late Seventeenth Century Dutch Still-life Painter* (Assen, 1977).

2. See Bol 1977, 3 n. 1, who acknowledges information from notes by Abraham Bredius in the Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie in The Hague.

3. Bol 1977, 32.

4. See D. H. van Wegen, *Kunst uit de Kaap: Hollandse en Vlaamse meesterwerken uit de Michaelis Collectie te Kaapstad* [exh. cat., Bonnefantenmuseum] (Maastricht, 2003), 20.

5. See Bredius 1884–1887, 229.

6. John Ray, *Observations Topographical, Moral, and Physiological; Made in a Journey through Part of the Low-Countries, Germany, Italy, and France* (London, 1673), 21.

7. Jan Christiaan Sepp, *Nieuwe Geographische Nederlandsche Reise-en Zak-Atlas* (Amsterdam, 1773; facsimile reprint, Alphen aan den Rijn, 1987), 54.

8. Sepp 1773, 55.

9. Quoted from Laurens J. Bol, *The Bosschaert Dynasty: Painters of Flowers and Fruit* (Leigh-on-Sea, 1960), 16.

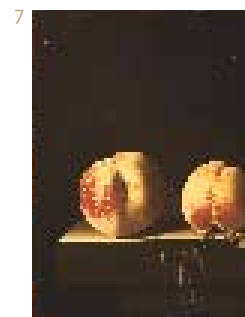
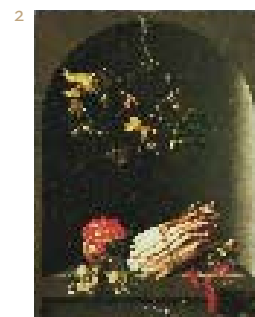
10. Information kindly provided by C. S. Oldenburger-Ebbers on the basis of research undertaken by P. W. Sijnke, gemeente-archivaris van Middelburg, in a letter dated 26 September 1990. For Lobelius, see *Botany in the Low Countries (End of the 15th Century—ca. 1650)* [exh. cat., Museum Plantin-Moretus and Stedelijk Prentenkabinet] (Antwerp, 1993), 121–123.

11. Bol 1977, 20.

12. See the assessment of Coorte's painting techniques in *Still Lifes, Techniques and Style: The Examination of Paintings from the Rijksmuseum*, ed. Arie Wallert [exh. cat., Rijksmuseum] (Amsterdam, 1999), 93–94.

13. W. Beurs, *De Grootte Waereld in 't Kleen geschildet; of schilderagtig tafereel van s'weerelds schilderyen, kortelijc vervat in ses boeken; verklarende de hoofdverwen, haare verscheide mengelingen in oly, en derzelve gebruik* (Amsterdam, 1692), 152–153.

14. Bol 1958.



CHECKLIST OF PAINTINGS IN THE EXHIBITION

1. *A Wooded Rocky Landscape with Swimming Ducks*, 1683
Oil on canvas
84 × 70 cm (33¹/₁₆ × 27⁵/₁₆)
Emmanuel Moatti, Paris
(FIG. 6)

2. *Fruit and Asparagus before Arched Niche*, 1685
Oil on canvas
65 × 49.5 cm (25⁹/₁₆ × 19¹/₂)
Teresa Heinz

3. *Still Life with Medlars and Gooseberries*, 1686
Oil on canvas
40.6 × 34.9 cm (16 × 13³/₄)
Maida & George Abrams
Collection, Boston
(FIG. 4)

4. *Vanitas Still Life in a Niche*, 1688
Oil on canvas
77.5 × 62.5 cm (30¹/₂ × 24⁵/₈)
Zeeuws Museum, Middelburg
(FIG. 10)

5. *Still Life with Asparagus, Gooseberries, and Strawberries*, 1690
Oil on canvas
37 × 44 cm (14³/₁₆ × 17⁵/₁₆)
Dordrechts Museum, Dordrecht

6. *Still Life with Asparagus and Red Currants*, 1696
Oil on canvas
34 × 25 cm (13³/₈ × 9¹/₁₆)
National Gallery of Art, Washington, The Lee and Juliet Folger Fund
(COVER)

7. *Two Peaches on a Stone Ledge*, 1696
Oil on paper on panel
27.5 × 21 cm (10³/₁₆ × 8³/₄)
Private collection, by courtesy David Koetser, Zurich

8. *Still Life with Shells*, 1697
Oil on paper on panel
17.2 × 22.2 cm (6³/₄ × 8³/₄)
Private collection
(FIG. 1)

9. *Still Life with Shells*, 1698
Oil on paper on panel
17 × 22.5 cm (6¹/₁₆ × 8⁷/₈)
Private collection, Boston

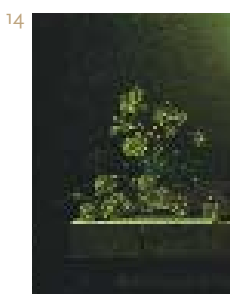
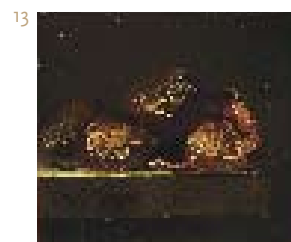
10. *Gooseberries on a Table*, 1701
Oil on paper on panel
29.7 × 22.8 cm (11¹/₁₆ × 9)
The Cleveland Museum of Art, Leonard C. Hanna, Jr. Fund
(FIG. 2)

11. *Strawberries in a Wan-Li Bowl*, 1704
Oil on paper on canvas
29.5 × 22.8 cm (11⁵/₈ × 9)
Ivor Foundation
(FIG. 11)

12. *Wild Strawberries on a Ledge*, 1704
Oil on paper
13.5 × 16.5 cm (5⁵/₁₆ × 6¹/₂)
Henry H. Weldon
(FIG. 3)

13. *Chestnuts on a Ledge*, 1705
Oil on paper on panel
13.7 × 16.2 cm (5³/₈ × 27³/₈)
Henry H. Weldon

14. *Green Gooseberries*, 1705
Oil on canvas
31.4 × 2.4 cm (12³/₈ × 9⁷/₁₆)
Courtesy of Noortman Gallery, Maastricht





15. *Still Life with Strawberries*, 1705
Oil on paper on panel
16.5 × 14 cm (6½ × 5½)
Royal Cabinet of Paintings
Mauritshuis, The Hague



16. *Gooseberries and Strawberries*
Oil on paper on canvas
32.5 × 23 cm (12½ × 9¼)
Collection Pieter C. W. M.
Dreesmann, London

17. *Asparagus and Red Currants*
Oil on paper on canvas
33 × 23 cm (13 × 9¼)
Collection Pieter C. W. M.
Dreesmann, London



18. *Peaches and Apricots*
Oil on paper on canvas
32.5 × 23 cm (12½ × 9¼)
Collection Pieter C. W. M.
Dreesmann, London
(FIG. 5)

19. *Still Life with a Bundle of Asparagus, Red Cherries, and a Butterfly*, c. 1700
Oil on paper on panel
25.6 × 19.8 cm (10¼ × 7¾)
Private collection, by courtesy
David Koetsler, Zurich



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Brochure written by Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., curator, northern baroque paintings, and produced by the departments of exhibition programs and publications. Copyright © 2003 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington

SUNDAY LECTURE

September 7, 2:00pm
East Building Auditorium

Adriaen Coorte: A Curator's View
Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr.
Curator, Northern Baroque
Paintings, National Gallery of Art

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COVER

Still Life with Asparagus and Red Currants (detail), 1696, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, The Lee and Juliet Folger Fund