

# Jan van Son

Dutch, 1658-1718

## Roses, Honeysuckle and other Flowers in a Sculptured Vase

c.1685, oil on canvas, 52.5x47.0 cm

Purchased with assistance from the National Art Collections Fund of Great Britain 1973



### About the work

This is a fairly typical 17th century Dutch Still Life painting showing with precise and painstakingly-careful realism the forms and surfaces of a number of precious blooms. Working in London, Jan van Son frequently assembled his floral compositions around a rose, because of the obvious English connotations, and the fact that roses were highly favoured by the English flower growers. This bouquet included roses, peonies, and honeysuckle, all flowers that would have been cultivated by English enthusiasts at that time.

It is beautifully balanced and arranged so that each bloom is given space to display its best features. The flowers in *Roses, Honeysuckle and other Flowers in a Sculptured Vase* are arranged in an Italian garden vase standing on a plinth, which was a compositional device frequently used by Van Son. However, here the dark background and simple accessories focus the painting on the beauty of the perfect blooms. The remarkable realism in works of this type is thought to have been enhanced by the use of magnifying lenses which enabled the artist to record in fine detail the elaborate structure and patterning of the petals.

Often in flower still-life paintings flies or butterflies were added to enhance the sense of realism, but also as a well-recognised symbol for the inevitable decay over time. These symbols were known as *memento mori* (reminder of death). The honeysuckle in this painting could be seen in that light as it is out of the vase, so will soon wither and fade. The sprig of

honeysuckle has been placed on the front edge of the plinth, giving the illusion of protruding into the viewer's space. This effect was known as *trompe-l'oeil* (deceives the eye).

Van Son did not usually work directly from the blooms, but from a series of earlier sketches and studies, which he worked up into his paintings in the studio. This accounts for the fact that flowers which bloom at different times of the year have been brought together in this composition.

By the 15th century flower painting had become an independent genre, rather than being used only in conjunction with paintings of other subjects. In Holland towards the end of the 16th century there was tremendous enthusiasm for the cultivation and sale of rare flowers and the bulbs of rare tulips fetched high prices in the flower markets of Amsterdam and London. This resulted in a growing demand for flower paintings, particularly from the cultivators of rare and exotic blooms, which meant that still-life studies of flowers became a major category in 17th century Dutch still-life painting.

*Roses, Honeysuckle and other Flowers in a Sculptured Vase* is a much simpler arrangement than Van Son usually used in his still-life paintings, where he often surrounded the fruit and flowers with sumptuous and exotic drapery. The painting was purchased from Hal O'Nain's Gallery, London, in 1973 by art historian Jonathan Mane-Wheoki on behalf of the Robert McDougall Art Gallery.

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## About the artist

Jan van Son was born in Antwerp in 1658, the son of the Flemish artist Joris van Son (1622- c.1667) who excelled in painting flowers and fruit. Jan van Son studied under his father but early in life he went to live in England with his English-born wife. While there he developed a reputation for his still-life paintings of fruit and flowers with works that were similar to those of his father, but modified slightly for English tastes. Van Son remained in London until his death in 1718.

His flower paintings in particular proved popular with English art patrons but, as well as painting flowers, Van Son also painted fruit, dead game, vases, curtains fringed with gold, Turkish carpets and similar objects.

## Other works by the artist in the Collection

There are no other works by the artist in the Collection.

## Further reading

*The Art of the Still Life*, N. Schneider, Benedikt Taschen, Koln, 1990.

