THE LIMNER COMPANY



CATHERINE DA COSTA (1679 - 1756)

Studies of Various Insects
Tempera on vellum

Signed with the artist's initials within an armorial device u.r. *C.C. / F.*

Bears inscription to mount l.r. *M. da Costa.*

This work is presented for sale by Tom Mendel of the Nonesuch Gallery and Emma Rutherford of The Limner Company, who have authored the following catalogue essay. (Please contact us for the illustrated catalogue.) We are grateful to the following for their generous assistance in this: Dr Henrietta Ryan, Dr Kim Sloan, Dr Susan Sloman and Dr Tabitha Barker.

CATHERINE DA COSTA - A LIFE

Catherine da Costa was the 'first Jewish woman known to be active as an artist in Britain' [1], and as such holds a prominent position in the annals of British Art History today, particularly with the ongoing reappraisal of the position of female artists within the Canon more broadly. She was born at Somerset House, then the Royal residence of Queen Catherine of Braganza (1638-1705), the Portuguese wife of King Charles II. Catherine's Portuguese father, Dr Fernando Mendes (d.1724), was the physician to the Queen and had converted from the Jewish faith to Catholicism, though he maintained close ties with the Anglo-Jewish community throughout his time in London. It is thought that Catherine was named for the Queen, who was her godmother, and with the so-called 'Restoration' of the Jewry following Charles II's accession - they had been exiled under Cromwell - Catherine and her family found themselves in the highest echelons of the Anglo-Jewry of this period. Catherine married her cousin Moses da Costa, a successful banker and merchant, and they lived together at the grand (ironically-named) Cromwell House in Highgate, near other distinguished members of the Jewish community and gentry. The Mendes da Costa side of the family had prospered enormously following their emigration to Britain, and their annual income equalled that of much of the English aristocracy, allowing them to live in considerable comfort. Catherine's daughter Leonora also married into a phenomenally wealthy family of

Portuguese-Jewish extraction, the Lopes de Suassos, who could boast enough money to loan William of Orange two million guilders to finance his voyage to London to claim the British throne. Reportedly, Leonora's husband Francisco refused to accept any collateral for this massive sum, saying: “If you succeed, I know you will repay me; if you do not, I agree to lose the money.”

Thanks to their prominence within both British and Dutch society, the families Da Costa, Mendes da Costa and de Suasso are well-documented by contemporary sources, and we can build a detailed picture of Catherine's own life from the records of those around her. She had six children with her husband, one who appears to have died in infancy, one son (Abraham) and four daughters. Abraham was the oldest of the children, but he was sadly dogged by ill-health throughout his life, and it seems that he was (from two contemporary accounts) likely disabled, which prevented him from fathering children of his own or marrying. Thus, when Catherine died, she left all of her artworks to Abraham, but with the stipulation that upon his death these be divided equally among her four surviving daughters.

CATHERINE & BERNARD LENS III

We know little of Catherine's own life in the early years of her marriage, but can date the beginning of her practise as an artist to c.1712, the date at which the 18th century art-historian George Vertue mentions her beginning her studies under the Royal Limner, Bernard Lens III (1682-1740): 'One of the Da Costa Jews daughters learn't to limne of Bernard Lens for many years she having begun about 1712 continued to 1730...' [2]

Lens' father and grandfather were also artists (and also called Bernard, sometimes confusing historical records), the older Lens having emigrated from Holland at some point in the mid-17th century. The youngest Bernard continued the previous century's tradition of 'limning', which had become one of the few artistic disciplines that England could legitimately claim to be a leader in thanks to the careers of Nicholas Hilliard and Isaac and Peter Oliver. Bernard held the official title of 'Painter in Minatura in Ordinary to his Majesty King George' (a position he held under both George I and II), and thanks to this he was able to take on numerous aristocratic and wealthy pupils, as well as the Prince William Augustus and the princesses Mary and Louise. Bernard was also responsible for a pivotal change in the English practice of miniature painting, having begun to paint in watercolours on ivory rather than vellum (a medium whose invention is attributed to the Venetian pastellist Rosalba Carriera), and his student Catherine would emulate this in her own work regularly in her own miniatures.

Part of Lens' curriculum for his students was the practice of copying the master's own work, and the aforementioned Vertue attests to Catherine having followed this course of instruction: '[da Costa] Coppyd many pictutes & limnings mostly all the remarkable pictures of Fame in England by Rubens Vandyke & other masters, which MR Lens her instructor had coppyd'. [3] Inevitably many of these works described are now lost, but there is at least one instance of both Catherine and Lens' corresponding pieces having survived: a miniature after Rubens' lost *The Victorious hero Takes Occasion to Conclude Peace*, in turn after from Lens' painting of 1720 for the Duke and Duchess of Marlborough (now in the Yale Centre for British Art, B1982.6, see plate 10) now in the collection of Henry Lew, Australia. [4]

Beyond the relatively straightforward practice of direct copies, Catherine produced a number of works entirely of her own devising. Several of these that are known today are portraits of her family and, in one instance, of another Marano (an Iberian Jewish convert to Catholicism) closely-connected to the family. They demonstrate a tenderness and feeling that not all of Lens' students could emulate, with Catherine's 1714 portrait of her disabled son, Abraham, particularly sweet in its character. What is undoubtedly the most ambitious family portrait by Catherine dates from almost two decades after the next-latest work, and now resides in the Jewish Historical Museum of Amsterdam.

THE CONTEXT OF THE PAINTING'S STYLE & SUBJECT

The present painting presents a fascinating intersection between 'Still Life' painting and botanical illustration, two disciplines which were by no means as discrete as they are today in the 17th and early 18th centuries. First and foremost, the composition is likely indebted primarily to the Flemish painter Jan van Kessel the Elder (Antwerp, 1626-1679), whose delicate small-scale paintings of insects and fruit could be found in noble and royal collections across Europe by the time Catherine began to paint. Beginning in the 1650's, van Kessel was one of the first Northern European artists to produce works on an almost-miniature scale on copper, vellum and occasionally panel, which could be presented in the sorts of cabinets created to display artworks which demonstrated the owner's worldliness, the sort kunstkammer (or 'cabinet of curiosities').

These displays allowed cosmopolitan collectors to assemble numerous objects, miniatures and paintings in a decorative fashion, thereby signalling their knowledge and appreciation of all sorts of art and science: such arrangements would range from portrait miniatures of the sort that Lens specialised in, to exotic botanical specimens of natural history, and van Kessel's paintings appealed to this new breed of collector who wished to flaunt their varied interests. Although this practice was considerably slower to take off in England than in the Low Countries and Germany, there were figures such as Sir Hans Sloane and Dr Richard Mead who created small-scale private museums which included these cabinets (together with antiquities, impressive libraries and large portraits in oils including items from the owner's collections) and opened these by appointment to members of the cognoscenti and aristocracy to marvel at. It is highly likely that Catherine, in part through her teacher Lens and partly through her own social status, had access to the aforementioned collections and others, and thus would have been introduced to works by European artists depicting these subjects.

Our picture does not relate directly to any of van Kessel's documented paintings, but his influence is palpable, and a number of his paintings which were in Britain during Catherine's lifetime could have served as inspiration. The prominent art dealer, Samuel Paris, held a sale at his London premises on the 5th of May 1738 which included three works by van Kessel, each described as 'Three pieces of his Study of Insects'; [5] in March of 1757, John Blackwood sold a painting of 'Insects, and Butterflies' by van Kessel for the impressive sum of £29.8; [6] and the following year, a painting of 'Insects, on Copper' was sold by a Mr Kent to a Mr Smart (not the miniaturist) for £16.[7] Beyond the London salerooms, van Kessel's decorative paintings on copper of various flora and fauna had found their way into several private English collections, including Sloane's, who displayed several of them in his museum.

THE NORTHERN AND ITALIAN TRADITIONS

Jan van Kessel was in some ways ahead of his time, and in others was - indirectly - connected to a tradition that had begun to flourish in Italy, specifically in Tuscany, Lombardy and Rome, associated with the more strictly scientific discipline of natural history and botany. Beginning in the early 17th century, the artists Vincenzo Leonardi (1589-1646) and Jacopo Ligozzi (1547-1627) had begun to paint illustrations of various flora and fauna on vellum for the famed collector Cassiano dal Pozzo (1588-1657) and the Medici family among others, working primarily in tempera and gouache on vellum, the very medium Catherine chose for our work. This discipline reached its height of artistic expression in the works of Giovanna Garzoni (1600-1670), whose beautiful and extraordinarily-detailed still lives of fruit, insects, flowers and small animals were prized by collectors across Europe, including King Charles II: an inventory of the King's pictures at his residences in Whitehall, Hampton Court and 'in stoare', records a work by Giovanus Garzons (the compiler clearly wasn't familiar with the celebrated artist and assumed her to be a man), 'A China Dish with fruite in it on a table and a Mouse eating a wallnut. Limbning..' [8] This painting survives, and can be found today in the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT.

These parallel Northern and Southern artistic traditions began to coalesce in the first few decades of the 18th century, just as Catherine was beginning to paint, and the foremost artist to combine their respective techniques and format was another female artist, one who we will demonstrate may have been the single greatest direct influence on Catherine: Maria Sibylla Merian (1647-1717). Before we consider Merian's impact on Catherine, a brief biographical aside is necessary however.

CATHERINE AND THE SUASSO FAMILY

One aspect of Catherine's life that has not been considered in any depth by any historian of biographer thus far is her relationship with her son-in-law and his family, the noble Lopes Suasso dynasty [9]. The Suasso family were, like Catherine and her husband's family, of Portuguese extraction, and had converted to Catholicism to avoid persecution by the Inquisition that tormented Jews across Spain and Portugal. Just as Fernando Mendes had moved his family to England to escape this, the Suasso family moved to Amsterdam, and they were to become one of the richest families in the Low Countries in just a few decades. Like many Jews, they were both bankers and merchants, and financed numerous ventures in the Dutch colonies, at home and across Europe, in so doing amassing a fortune that rivalled that of the Dutch Royal family. Indeed, it was said that Francisco loaned William of Orange two million guilders for his voyage to claim the English throne, without asking for any collateral whatsoever. Catherine's connection to the Suassos was two-fold: her sister Leonora had married Antonio Lopes Suasso, and her daughter Leonora (whose Jewish name was Rachel) married the son, Francisco Lopes, 3rd Baron Suasso d'Avernas le Gras (1695-1775). The two families could hardly have been closer, and the consolidation of wealth that such familial intermarriages enabled was also considerable.

It is almost certain that Catherine visited The Hague (where her sister and brother-in-law lived), just as the Suassos visited London for business and personal reasons. A portrait by Bernard Lens III of 1717 depicts Francisco which one would presume was painted in London, were it not for the existence of another Lens painting relating to Suasso: there is a record of a painting by Lens, in his posthumous sale catalogue of 1737, described as *A Magdalen after Titian in the Collection of Baron Suasso* [10]. Did Lens travel to Holland with Catherine, and see the portrait there? We cannot know this for certain as the painting is not recorded elsewhere (there is a chance that it was not in fact by Titian), but it is a tantalising possibility.

Lens' Titian aside, it is two later works which point to Catherine's having painted whilst staying with her family in the Hague. There is something of a lacuna in Catherine's artistic surviving output, between the mid-1720's and 1745, and Vertue states that she was only a student of Lens' until around 1730, however there is no reason to assume that she ceased painting during these years. One would expect her to have continued for her own personal enjoyment, as well as for family. This is borne out by the existence of a portrait from 1745: the work in question is an impressively large-scale painting on vellum, measuring 57cm tall (such a sheet of vellum would have cost dearly), which shows Catherine's daughter and grand-daughter in a grand setting, with the arms of the Suasso family emblazoned on a shutter, adjacent to Catherine's own signature. The work is a tender one, composed in a format reminiscent of a Madonna and Child, and it is considerably finer and more confident than Catherine's earliest works. The flowers in the basket by her grand-daughter are particularly well-painted, and the richness of colour and ambitious composition all point to Catherine having continued her practise and training. Married life was no obstacle to this; in fact, we have identified a painting dating from 1724 by either Catherine's daughter or, more likely, her sister, which clearly shows the artist's training in miniature painting, likely under Lens' supervision, but which is undoubtedly a copy of an earlier Dutch painting, possibly by an artist such as Gerrit Dou.

CATHERINE AT THE HEIGHT OF HER ABILITIES

Having established therefore that Catherine continued to better her skills as an artist and painted until at least 1745, we must consider where she might have done so: was she learning entirely by herself, or did she take on a new teacher? Our painting shows an artist in complete command of their discipline, and is of superlative quality, totally outstripping the portraits of Catherine's time learning from Lens. Similarly, Lens never painted works of this sort, focusing almost entirely on copies of history paintings or portraiture. We have to look for another source, as it is highly unlikely that Catherine could have painted this work without any further training. This is where we posit an exciting theory, one which connects Maria Sibylla Merian - arguably one of the most talented botanical artists in Europe of the 18th century, and certainly the most gifted female artist to practice in the genre - with Catherine herself.

Just like Lens, Merian took on many students to supplement her income, which came primarily from her paintings for engraved illustrations to botanical texts. She was a remarkably intrepid artist, travelling to Surinam (a Dutch colony) and recording the wildlife and flora she saw there for a book which was published on her return to much acclaim, and her daughters followed in their mother's footsteps, becoming skilled artists in their own right. Merian found a niche in botanical illustration, and became something of a successor to Giovanna Garzoni, with royalty and nobility throughout Europe clamouring for copies of her Surinam publication and her original works. Her focus was more strictly scientific, though the beauty of her paintings is unquestionable, and the composition of these paintings of flowers and various insects and animals still remained decorative to appeal to collectors. In particular, Merian's paintings on vellum of insects she had collected in Surinam hark back to van Kessel's paintings of similar subjects, even though their raison d'eetre is different. It is precisely these paintings which, we argue, are in fact the clue to Catherine's inspiration and artistic development in the latter half of her career, and which explain how the same hand that painted the sweet but technically unskilled portrait of Abraham da Costa in 1714 could also be responsible for the masterpiece presented here.

By the time of Merian's death in 1717, she was a celebrity: her works had been acquired by collectors

across Northern Europe, with one of the most acquisitive clients being Sir Hans Sloane, who owned several hundred of her works and her publications had become bestsellers. Similarly, Dr Richard Mead (whose collection, though not as impressive as Sloane's, was still an extremely popular attraction for the intelligentsia of the mid-18th century) owned 95 watercolours by Merian. The entire album belonging to Mead would also have been available to view at the preview of his posthumous sale in 1755. [11] Certainly, Bernard Lens III had himself visited Mead's collection, as we know that he painted at least four works from this collection: Lots 47, 84, 89, 90, sold at Lens' posthumous sale of 3rd February 1737 (lot 47, in 'Limnings', all described as being after works in Mead's collection). In short, Catherine could not but have known this fellow female painter, who was famous in her daughter's adopted home-country and whose works were available to view at the fashionable Sloane collection. Whether she ever met Merian is unlikely, and she cannot have learned to paint in her style from Maria's daughters: Dorothea Maria became scientific illustrator for the Russian Tsar, while Johanna Helena Merian moved to Suriname with her husband in 1711. However, there is every likelihood that Catherine had the opportunity to copy Merian's works, or even that her wealthy relatives owned examples by her, which would allow for particularly close study and ample time for repetition.

FURTHER NOTES: The Signature

There is an unusual heraldic-esque device in the upper right of our painting, which can be read as follows: the initials 'C.C.F.' likely stand for Catherine [da] Costa / Fecit, a standard inscription which we find on most of Catherine's earlier works, while the palm fronds beneath the 'crest' are attributes of St Catherine of Alexandria, the martyr, whose name identified her automatically with da Costa. The diadem that floats above the crest is a strange inclusion, as coronets and crowns that adorned crests were reserved for members of the nobility, including the Suasso family; it may perhaps then a nod to their more exalted heritage, if the work was a gift to them from Catherine.

Unlike the Suassos, the Da Costa family did not have a coat of arms or armorial device of their own, as they were not ennobled. In their London residence, Cromwell (now Highgate) House, there remains to this day a monogram above a fireplace dating from their residency, which bears no relation to the 'signature' in our painting. However, as shown by Catherine's deftly-painted rendering of the Suasso crest, she was naturally aware of the importance of such symbolism in paintings of this sort. The device would have been simple enough to read for the owner of the painting, almost certainly one of Catherine's relatives as she was not a professional and all of her paintings passed by descent in her family.

Catherine's inspiration for this sophisticated form of signature might have come from another portrait, that of Maria Merian in the 1717 edition of one of her most expensive texts, *Der Rupsen Begin...*, published in three volumes, which contained as its frontispiece an allegorical portrait of the artist. The artist Jacob Schijnvoet included Maria's crest in the upper right of the portrait, and it bears a marked resemblance to the signature in our work: fronds beneath the crest (in Maria's case a heraldic one) and a diadem crowning this. We know that Catherine was conscious of herself as a specifically female artist working within a tradition of such relative nonconformists: her own self-portrait of c.1721 is clearly derived from Sofonisba Anguisolla's (1532-1625) own self-portrait, one of the most famous depictions of a female artist in the Western canon. Although we cannot say without hesitation that Catherine was thinking of the Merian portrait when she included her idiosyncratic 'signature', she certainly will have been familiar with it and it would have been a very appropriate, subtle nod to the earlier, trailblazing artist.

[1] Now You See Us (exhib. cat.), ed. T Barber, London (2024), p.47

[2] George Vertue, B.M. Add Mss. 23079 f.26, printed in full in The Walpole Society, vol. XXII (Vertue III)

[3] Ibid.

[4] Cf. M.E. Wiseman, 'Bernard Lens's Miniatures for the Duke 7 Duchess of Marlborough', in Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art, vol. 10, no. 2 (Summer 2018), p.11, footnote 20

[5] The sale's Lugt number: 493a; Getty Provenance Index, Sale Catalog Br-A345; the lots in question were 56, 57 and 58. They were bought respectively by Sir Jacob Debouverie, a Dr Scott, and a person named Glynn.

[6] Getty Provenance Index Sale Catalog Br-A531, lot 71

[7] Getty Provenance Index Sale Catalog Br-A541, lot 71

[8] - 'An Inventory of All His Majesties Pictures in Whitehall in Hampton Court and in Stoare', modern facsimile of the original ms. in the Royal Collection, publ. London (1922), fol.47

[9] Much has been written on the family, for a summary bibliography see: D. Swetschinski and L. Schônduve, The Lopes Suasso Family, Bankers to William HI, Zwolle-Amsterdam (1988);J.S. da Silva Rosa, Geschiedenis der Portugeesche Joden te Amsterdam (1925); H.I. Bloom, The Economic Activities of the Jews of Amsterdam (1937); and the Suasso family archives, held by the Stadsarchief Amsterdam: https://projetos.dhlab.fcsh.unl.pt/s/wsdroadmap/item/54164 (last accessed 11.11.2024)

[10] Getty Sale Catalog Br-A335, Cock's Auction House, London, 11th February 1737, Lot 12

[11] The Merian Album was lot 66 in this sale.