

J. L. JENSEN  
1800–1856

139. *Flowers and Grapes on a Stone Sill*, 1834

(*Blomster og vindruer på en marmorkarm*)

Oil on canvas, 14¼ x 18½ in. (36 x 47 cm)

Signed and dated: I. L. Jensen, 1834 Roma

PROVENANCE: Bruun Rasmussen, Auction 841, 2013, lot 18, ill.<sup>1</sup>

When J. L. Jensen left Copenhagen in 1833 for a two-year journey to Italy through Montpellier in southern France, it was first and foremost for the sake of his wife's health. For a flower painter, Rome and southern Italy were not a "must" in the way it was for his contemporary landscape and figure painters. Jensen had finished his room decorations, and thus the Pompeian wave that the excavations in Herculaneum and Pompeii initiated was no more useful to his art.

The hub of the Danish colony in Rome was the elderly sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770–1844). Many of Jensen's peers from the Academy, among them the painters Jørgen Sonne (1801–1980), Ditlev Blunck (1798–1854), Albert Küchler (1803–1886), and the sculptor H. V. Bissen (1798–1868), as well as the poet and author Hans Christian Andersen (1805–1875), were delighted to visit the Jensen couple's home in Rome. The two had a real home, whereas all their friends had gone to Rome alone, and it would be a long time before they could start their own homes there.

No one should think that the stay in Italy did not leave its mark in the art of J. L. Jensen. His sense of shape sharpened, his arrangements became more assertive, the result bolder. The fruits and flowers of southern Italy have a unique color and shape that Jensen was able to capture in his paintings. An earlier visitor to the area also greatly admired the fruit there: Prince Christian Frederik (1786–1839, later King Christian VIII) noted in his diary from his great Italy tour of 1818 to 1820 that in Strasbourg "We passed a fruit shop close to the cathedral. I have never seen the like of it, and for travelers from the Nordic countries, it brings great pleasure to see so many plucked fruits. As it proved, we could not withstand the temptation either, and a quantity of grapes and peaches were purchased."<sup>2</sup>

Grapes, oranges, pomegranates, peaches, and apricots were no longer what Jensen could study only in Dutch paintings. Now he lived among these magnificently colorful fruits, and not only painted but ate them with delight. A painting that Bertel Thorvaldsen bought from Jensen, an arrangement with an orange, walnuts, and grapes,<sup>3</sup> conveys his sensuous tasting experience. This picture, along with five others acquired by the sculptor, can today be seen at Thorvaldsens Museum in Copenhagen.

On November 10, 1833, Jensen was visited by Hans Christian Andersen. "I saw his Italian flower painting," he wrote in his diary.<sup>4</sup> There is reason to believe that this refers to a very large painting, the largest Jensen ever produced apart from the room decorations for the royal family. The picture depicts oranges, agave, roses, dahlias, and a laperga on a very large marble stand, adorned with Thorvaldsen's relief and placed in an Italian landscape. This work was purchased by Senator Martin Johan von Jenisch (1790–1864) for his newly built country house close to Altona, outside of Hamburg. There it still hangs on public display.<sup>5</sup>

In 1844 Jensen painted the Loeb collection's *Flower and Grapes on a Stone Sill*. The picture has two com-

ponents: The first is a flat Grecian kylix (drinking bowl) on a foot with large, angular handles, black with a narrow, red line at the top, filled with blue and yellow grapes. Both color and shape indicate that there are two kinds of blue and two kinds of yellow grapes. Illuminated yellow ones are in the foreground while shaded blue ones are at the back.

We do not see the foot of the kylix. In front of it is the other component of the picture: a freshly picked flower bouquet, unbound, chosen for contrast in color and shape, with a single crimson dahlia as the focal point. This flower radiates energy in its outlines and unifies all picture elements with its color. Around it are blue iris, yellow and white dahlias, rosa primula, and red sage. Green boxwood branches stretch up against the black clay vessel.<sup>6</sup>

As the grapes hang over the curved edge of the kylix, so the flowers fall over the hard edge of the marble sill. This painting can be understood geometrically as circle over square, but it can also be conceived as an exchange between inorganic, man-made shapes and nature's inventions.

Most often, Jensen places the arrangements he paints on a cast stone sill or a marble table. Here, the sill has additional classical profiling. The space above the arrangement is bare. The monochrome of the background, the two-colored grapes, and the polychrome of the flowers give a compelling falling cadence, springing from the stem of the upper blue cluster of grapes.

The Etruscan vessels (as the Grecian vases were then called because they were first found in Etruria) originated in ancient Greece. In the 1800s, they practically toppled out of the ground there, and also in southern Italy, and became important collectors' items. Most famous were the collections of the diplomat Lord William Hamilton (1731–1803) from his time in Naples. Some of these are now at the British Museum in London.

Prince Christian Frederik was also an avid collector. The vase collection in the palace of Amalienborg (his favorite dwelling) is now the core of the antique collection at the National Museum in Copenhagen. Bertel Thorvaldsen also collected, and J. L. Jensen painted a magnificent bouquet in a Grecian vase that Thorvaldsen bought.<sup>7</sup> In 1834, while in Sorrento, Jensen produced a compelling study of a bouquet in a Grecian vase that was bought by Prince Christian Frederik.<sup>8</sup>

The Greek fascination of artists, scientists, and collectors of the 1800s was the atmosphere from which many of Jensen's Italian pictures emerged. The Loeb collection's *Flower and Grapes on a Stone Sill* is an eminent example of this.

M. T.

<sup>1</sup>According to Bruun Rasmussen, the painting is mounted in a period bobinet frame (decorated with lace) with corner ornamentation.

<sup>2</sup>September 30, 1818. The diary is written in French (my translation). Albert Fabritius et al. (eds.), *Christian VIII. Dagbøger og optegnelser*, Copenhagen 1973, vol. II, 1, p. III.

<sup>3</sup>*Nature morte med frugter på en marmor-bordplade*, 1833, oil on canvas, 9½ x 12 in. (24.1 x 32.7 cm), Thorvaldsens Museum, inv. no. B 237.

<sup>4</sup>K. Olsen, H. Topsøe-Jensen (eds.), *H.C. Andersens dagbøger 1825–1875*, Copenhagen 1971–1977, vol. 1, p. 228.

<sup>5</sup>*Marble Vase with Laperga, Oranges, and Agaves*, 1833, oil on canvas, 68½ x 49¼ (174 x 125 cm). Jenisch Haus was the country seat of the Hamburg merchant Senator Martin Johan von Jenisch the Younger. It was built between 1831 and 1834 to designs by Franz Gustav Forstmann and Karl Friedrich Schinkel. It is now part of Norddeutsches Museum, Altona. See also Barbara Scott, "Johan Laurentz Jensen, the Father of Danish Flower Painting," in *Apollo*, vol. XII, Nov. 1987, pp. 337–342.

<sup>6</sup>Mette Thelle would like to thank professor emeritus, dr. scient. Ole Jørgen Hamann and the florist Lise Kramhøft for their help in identifying the plants in the painting.

<sup>7</sup>*Still Life with Flowers in an Antique Vase (Nature morte med blomster i en antik vase på en marmorplade)*, 1834, oil on canvas, 24<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 19<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in. (61.5 x 50.3 cm), Thorvaldsens Museum, inv. no. B 232. See also Torben Melander, *Thorvaldsens Antikker*, Copenhagen 1993.

<sup>8</sup>*Flowers in a Vase (En vase med blomster)*, oil on canvas, 40<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 35<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. (102.8 x 90 cm), Statens Museum for Kunst, inv. no. KMS 265. See also Bodil Bundgaard-Rasmussen et al. (eds.), *Christian VIII og Nationalmuseet*, Copenhagen 1999.