

J. L. JENSEN
1800–1856

140. *Dahlias in a Basket*, 1840

(*Kurv med georginer*)

Oil on canvas, 17 x 22¾ in. (43 x 58 cm)

Signed and dated: I. L. Jensen 1840

PROVENANCE: Bruun Rasmussen, Auction 841, 2013, lot 19, ill.

LITERATURE: Heidrun Ludwig, "Still Life Painting in the Eighteenth Century," in Jochen Sander (ed.), *The Magic of Things*, Städel Museum Frankfurt and Kunstmuseum Basel, 2008.

With very small variations, the wicker basket in this picture is similar to the one used by Jensen in *Still Life with Pineapple* from 1833 (cat. no. 56), a decorative but also useful basket that he used many times in his paintings. Here it is filled with a magnificent selection of pom-pom dahlias. Once in a while, Jensen chose to paint a single species, e.g. the blushing moss rose, poppy, camellia, rare orchids, or just a delicate violet. To work with just one or two colors, apart from the green foliage, was for Jensen an important alternative to diverse displays of splendor. In this painting Jensen demonstrates how rich a color scale a single species of dahlia can exhibit.

Nature sets a magnificent palette, and the artist brings us the beauty of these colors. He shows us how each petal in the almost-circular flower has its own shape and refracts the light in its own way, depending on where the light shines in the bouquet: in the orange one, slightly offset from the center, just by the handle of the basket, the white one, the pink, the shaded yellow and the illuminated yellow, or the crimson, almost black. They are all twisted and turned so that we see the flower in all its aspects and in all stages, from bud to fully opened flower. Just there, Jensen stops the cycle of nature. The portrayal of decay does not interest him.

Jensen likes to counterpose various colors in his arrangements, and with his discerning eye, always avoids the trite. The other Jensen paintings in the Loeb collection are either displays of plucked flowers and harvested fruit, placed on a sill indoors, or plants and flowers that are still situated in their site of growth.

The dahlia came to Europe from the highlands of Central America through Spain in 1789, and at the time it was believed to have edible roots. The wild dahlia is a single flower, but by 1817 gardeners had bred the double-flowered dahlia. In 1809, a dahlia landed in the garden of the famous German author and scientist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832). His gardener, August Friedrich Dreyssig (1766–1822), used it for breeding, and in 1820 he had 42 variations in his assortment, 17 of which were double-flowered. The dahlia became *en vogue*, not only in the gardens of scholars but laymen as well.

In 1817, Goethe wrote a short text on flower painting.¹ According to him, a classical Dutch flower painting was intended to appeal to the senses. The new flower painting, that is, one from the 1800s, shows the subject as it looks in real life. The flower painter must accurately portray the structure of the foliage and petals. The stamen and anthers (the reproductive system) must be correctly portrayed botanically, so that the art lover and the botanist are both satisfied. In other words, the flower painting should transcend the



baroque “See how rare and magnificent but transient I am!” to an expression typical of the age of enlightenment: “See how I was created.”

J. L. Jensen is a keen observer of both a flower’s species and its individual characteristics. The heavy, nodding head of the dahlia provides the composition of the picture. The energy and novelty he developed in his Italian paintings between 1833 and 1835 had by 1840 become very strong artistic statements.

M. T.

¹Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, “Blumenmalerei,” in *Über Kunst und Altertum*, vol. I, no. 3 (1817). Münchenausgabe, vol. II, 2, 1995.