



Painting by Withoos from the British Royal Collection identified

By Rieke van Leeuwen & Anna Preussinger

It was recently discovered that an exceptional painting by the Amersfoort master [Matthias Withoos](#) (c. 1627-1703), *Forest Still Life with an Otter and two Fish*, was once part of the British Royal Collection. This contribution explains how this work could be identified and why it may have been disposed of later. The discovery was made during the *Gerson Digital: Britain* research project, which started in 2022.

SPOTLIGHT

Royal collection

The collecting history of Netherlandish art abroad is an important part of the Gerson project.¹ (</en/node/198#voetnoten>) While researching seventeenth-century Dutch paintings in the United Kingdom, we came across a mention of two paintings by Matthias Withoos in the inventory of [King James II](https://rkd.nl/explore/artists/490430) (<https://rkd.nl/explore/artists/490430>)'s collection (ruled 1685-1688). The first painting is listed as no. 454, 'By W. Withoes. A piece with thistles, an otter, and two fishes' and was located 'in Store above stairs over the New Lodgings, Whitehal'. The second work, no. 768, is described as: 'Withoes. A piece with thistles and flowers, a hedge-hog in it', and was placed in the Queen's Drawing Room, Windsor Castle.² (</en/node/198#voetnoten>) The latter work is still part of the Royal Collection (fig. 1).³ (</en/node/198#voetnoten>) It is marked 'MWithoos Amervoort Ao 1665', meaning Withoos made the painting in 1665 in his hometown of Amersfoort, where he had resettled after spending several years in France and Italy. The former painting, the depiction of an otter with two fish near thorn bushes, however, no longer appears in the Royal Collection. It also remained unidentified until now. The very specific description of the unusual subject matter made it seem worth a try to identify the work.





1. Matthias Withoos, *Flower Still-life with Thistles and a Hedgehog*, oil on canvas, 109.8 x 103.2 cm, signed and dated: 'MWithoos / Amersvoort Ao 1665', Royal Collection

Creepy creatures in the forest

Withoos was a specialist in the 'sottobosco' genre ('forest floor still lifes'), like the better-known painter [Otto Marseus van Schrieck](https://rkd.nl/explore/artists/52809) (<https://rkd.nl/explore/artists/52809>), with whom he had travelled to Italy. In this type of still life, flowering plants and hunting animals are placed in their natural context, on a forest floor. Of the more than ninety forest floor still lifes known by Withoos, more than forty are signed.⁴ (</en/node/198#voetnoten>) The animals on the forest floors are usually hedgehogs, lizards, snakes, mice, frogs and insects, and in a few cases a weasel, marten, polecat or an otter, which are intended as a 'repulsive' contrast to the beautiful and attractive elements of the depiction. Only seven forest floor still lifes in Withoos' known oeuvre include an otter, only one of which exactly matches the description 'A piece with thistles, an otter, and two fishes' (fig. 2). Like the forest still life with the hedgehog in the Royal Collection, this painting is signed and dated 1665.⁵ (</en/node/198#voetnoten>)

Both works from 1665 were acquired by [Charles II](https://rkd.nl/explore/artists/459075) (<https://rkd.nl/explore/artists/459075>) not long after they were made in Amersfoort. They are described under no. 606 and 607 in Charles II's inventory (1666-1667).⁶ (</en/node/198#voetnoten>) The description of the latter reads: 'Whithoos. A Landskip wherein are thistles, & flowers, an otter, and two fishes by it'. The dimensions of 1 feet 6 inch by 1 feet 9 inch correspond to the work identified here. The two paintings differ greatly in both subject matter and size. They were clearly never intended to hang together, even though they were probably bought at the same time. The work with the otter in landscape format is almost four times smaller than the other piece, which has a portrait format. The hedgehog in the

times smaller than the other piece, which has a portrait format. The neugenog in the large painting is subordinate in the depiction, lurking in the shadows of the plants and flowers, while the otter and its fish in the small piece are placed right in the full light. It is not clear exactly when the smaller piece was removed from the royal collections. The disposal of the work will no doubt have been related to its subject matter, which was presumably perceived as repulsive. It was last recorded in the Royal Collection in 1714, in the inventory of [Queen Anne \(https://rkd.nl/explore/artists/497464\)](https://rkd.nl/explore/artists/497464)'s collection at Somerset House.⁷ (</en/node/198#voetnoten>) There, as at the time of James II, it was kept in storage, unlike the other painting by Withoos in the collection, which was found agreeable. Clearly, there was an appreciation for the artist but not so much for the subject of the otter. This is evident from the acquisition of a third work by Withoos in the Royal Collection, a floral still life (fig. 3), presumably bought by Queen Anne, along with the floral piece by the already-mentioned Marseus van Schrieck, which was to serve as its counterpart.

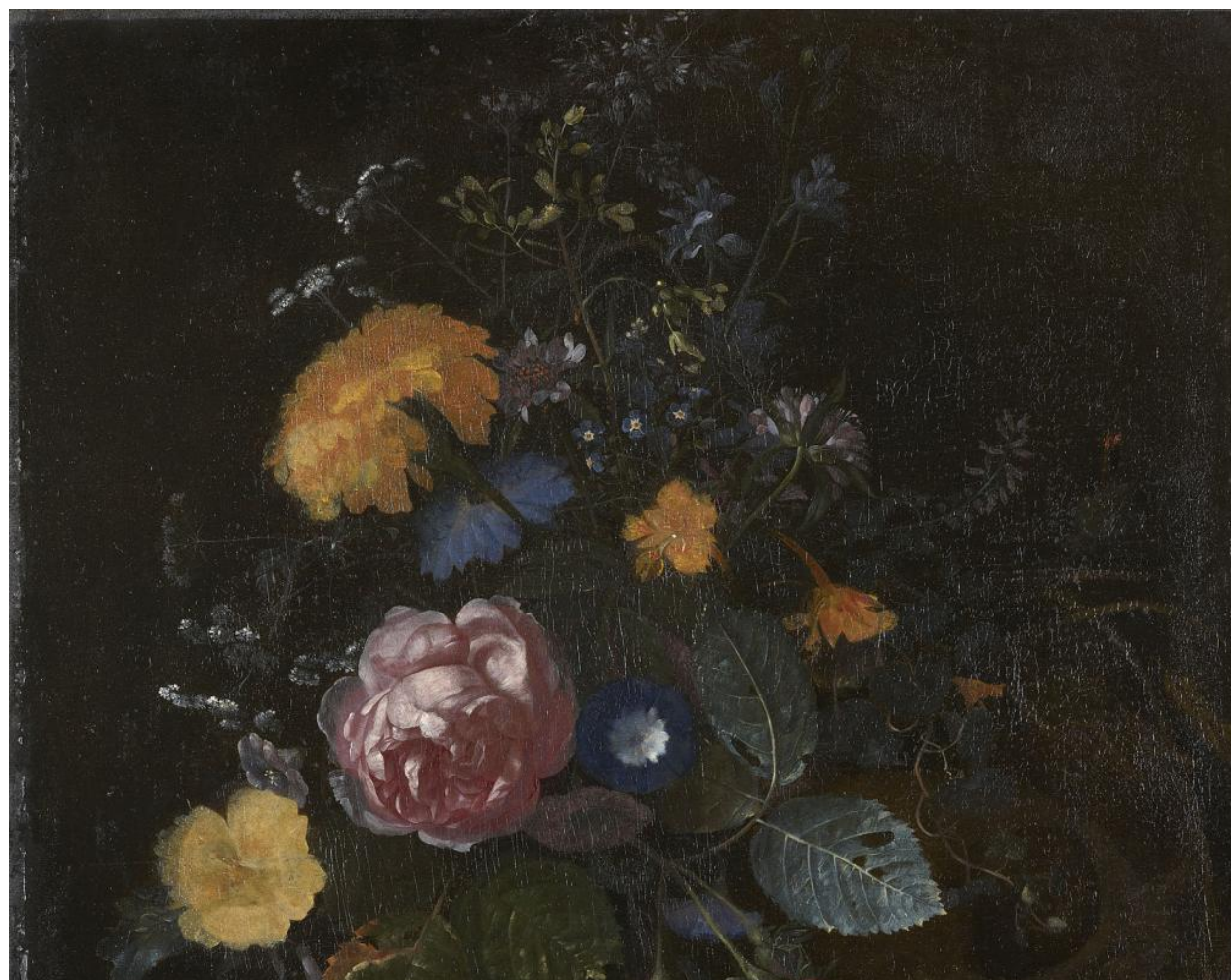


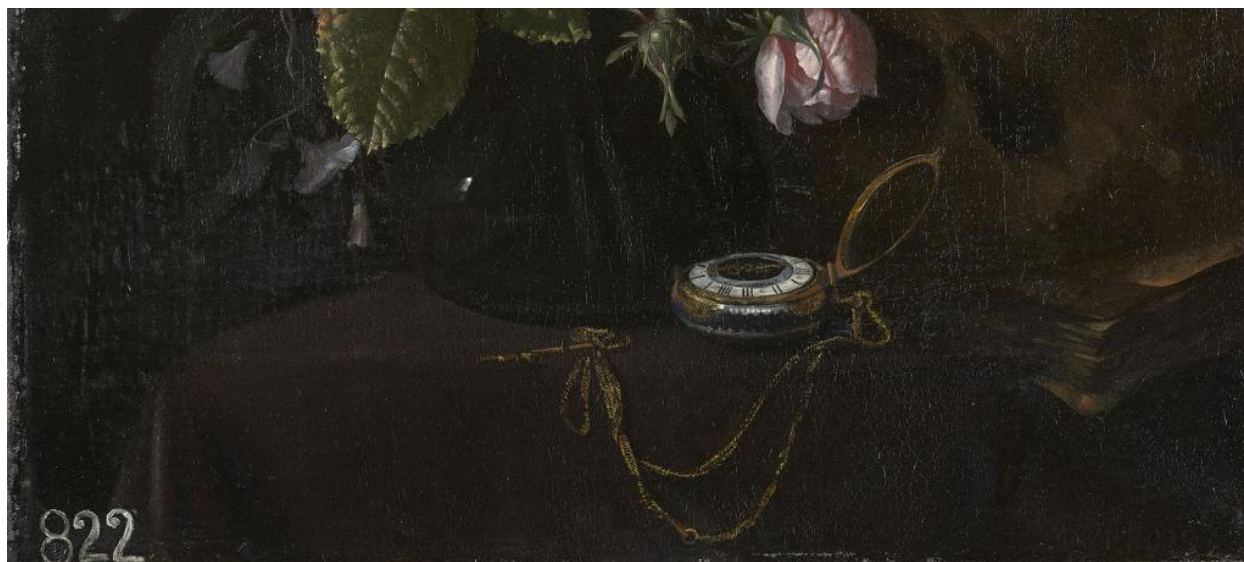
2. Matthias Withoos, *Forest Still-life with an Otter and two Fish*, oil on canvas, 44.5 x 51.5 cm. signed and dated: 'M. Withoos 1665' sale London 1984 (Sotheby's)

and dated. M. WITHOOS 1665, Sale London 1964 (Sotheby's)

Unique pictures

Although Withoos did incorporate many of the same elements in his forest still lifes, he did his utmost to vary greatly, both in his compositions and by choosing different formats. We know of no different versions of almost identical works by Withoos. Therefore, we can state with reasonable certainty that the painting with the otter and two fish, which was part of the royal collections from the reign of Charles II to that of Queen Anne, is identical to the 1665 dated work (fig. 2). It was not until 1964, 250 years after its last entry in the Royal Collection, that the painting resurfaced at an auction in London.⁸ ([/en/node/198#voetnoten](#)) A similar depiction of an otter by Withoos did appear at auctions in London in 1830 and 1835, however, with no mention of the number of fish nor indication of sizes, making identification with the Royal Collection work tentative.⁹ ([/en/node/198#voetnoten](#)) Finally, the painting reappeared at an auction in New York in 1982, before being auctioned again in London in 1984.¹⁰ ([/en/node/198#voetnoten](#)) After this, nothing is known to us about its whereabouts.





3. Matthias Withoos, *Still-life of Flowers with a Watch and Skull*, oil on canvas, 47.7 x 38.9 cm, signed: 'MWithoos', Royal Collection

About the authors

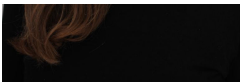


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¹ For various publications of the Gerson project: see [RKDStudies \(https://rkdstudies.nl/rkd-series/\)](https://rkdstudies.nl/rkd-series/). The proceedings of the conference *Close Encounters. Cross-Cultural Exchange between the Low Countries and Britain 1600-1800*, held 22-23 September 2022, RKD, The Hague, is forthcoming, also in RDKStudies.

² G. Vertue, *A catalogue of the collection of pictures, etc. belonging to King James the second; To which is added a catalogue of the pictures and drawings in the closet of the late queen Caroline ... in the palace at Kensington*, London (Bathoe) 1768, pp. 38, 68.

³ C. White, *The Dutch pictures in the collection of Her Majesty the Queen*, Cambridge 1982, p 149, no. 236.

⁴ See A. Boersma, *Ander licht op Withoos. Drie generaties Withoos*, Amersfoort 2021, esp. p. 236-331.

⁵ RKDimages 307163. Another (unsigned) work is known of an otter with two fish (Boersma 2021 [op. cit. note 4], no. 12), but the thistles in the vegetation are missing; the format is portrait. Two other works feature an otter with three fish (idem, nos. 2 and 11).

⁶ Many thanks to Lucy Whitaker, who was generous enough to share her annotated transcription of the inventory of Charles II's paintings collection. The inventory is in two parts: 'An Inventory of all His Ma^{ties} pictures in White-Hall' and 'An Inventory of all His Ma^{ties} pictures in Hampton-Court', and is preserved in the Royal Library, Windsor Castle, RCIN 1112575. It can be dated 1666-1667. Lucy Whitaker is publishing the inventory in the 2024 edition of *The Walpole Society*. That the still life with the hedgehog was already in Charles II's collection has already been published in *White 1982* (op. cit. note 3).

⁷ 'The Pictures in the Store Rooms at Somerset House October: 28: 1714', folio 15 no. 313. British Library, Add. MS 19933.

⁸ Sale London (Christie's), 17 July 1964, no. 152.

⁹ Sale London (Christie's), 4 /5 June 1830, no. 79a (Withoes. Plants, an Otter, and Fish, in a Landscape); sale London (Foster and Son), 18 February 1835, no. 111 (Withoos. A Landscape with Flowers and Shrubs, and an Ottar devouring the Fish; in fine preservation, and a capital specimen of the master).

¹⁰ Sale Sotheby's (New York), 25 March 1982, no. 89; sale London (Sotheby's), 5 July 1984, no. 356.