

STUDIO OF JAN VAN KESSEL I

(Antwerp 1626 - Antwerp 1679)

Swans and Ducks in a Lake before a Country House

oil on copper
16.6 x 22.6 cm (6½ x 8⅞ in)

THE VIVACIOUS PERSONALITIES AND INTERACTION of the swans and ducks in the foreground of *Swans and Ducks in a Lake before a Country House* creates a playful scene. On the right, two swans look on as a duck dives under water searching for food with only its back feet poking out of the water. On the left, several colourful ducks stand on the riverbank, their beaks pointing upwards suggestive of noisy conversation and hustle. Meanwhile in the background several more ducks are to be seen paddling quietly in the sheltered lake, whilst other birdlife can be seen approaching from the sky. A turreted, fortified country house sits on the rocky banks of the river beyond and, above, the sky appears to be turning a menacing shade of grey as thick, dark clouds gather. Great attention has been paid to the riverbank flora and fauna, which is lined with rushes and elongated stems of water irises, flowering with both yellow and blue buds; behind the swans a yellow water lily gently undulates.

The present work is attributed to the studio of Jan van Kessel I. Van Kessel was son of the artist Hieronymus van Kessel (1578-c.1636) and was



Ferdinand van Kessel, *Landscape with Birds*, 1681, The Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg; Collection of P. P. Semyonov-Tyan-Shansky, Petrograd, 1914 (Figure 2)

trained by both Simon de Vos (1603-1676) and his uncle Jan Brueghel II (1601-1678) (see cat. no. 48). In 1645, he registered with the Guild of St. Luke in Antwerp where he was primarily active.

Van Kessel's *oeuvre* focused mainly on small-scale oil paintings on copper and wood, often depicting animals, but in particular insects, flowers, plants and shells.¹ He worked directly from nature and used scientific texts in order to fill his pictures with objects represented with almost scientific accuracy. His works, particularly those of insects, were influenced by the Flemish manuscript illuminator and topographical draughtsman Joris Hoefnagel (1542-1601) as well the garlands and flower bouquets of Daniel Seghers (1590-1661) who had been taught by van Kessel's grandfather Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568-1625). Undoubtedly, van Kessel also drew inspiration from the work of his uncle, and grandfather, especially in his depictions of exotic animals in small-scale formats on copper or panel.

A particularly attractive example of van Kessel's work is held in the Hermitage Collection. This *Frame with an Allegorical Depiction of the Four Elements* demonstrates his skills as an illustrator and his keen ability to present the exactness of the natural world using a vivid colour palette (fig. 1). He evidently passed down his love of nature to his grandson, Ferdinand van Kessel (1648-after 1696), whose *Landscape with Birds* shares striking similarities with the present work, notably in the respective depictions of swans (fig. 2).



Jan van Kessel I, *Frame with an Allegorical Depiction of the Four Elements*, 1664, The Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg; The Golitsyn Museum, Moscow, 1886 (Figure 1)



(Actual Size)