

OTTO MARSEUS VAN SCHRIECK

(Nijmegen 1619/20? - Amsterdam 1678)

A Forest Floor Still-Life with Various Fungi, Thistles, an Aspic Viper, a Sand Lizard, a Snail, a Tree Frog and Two Moths

signed and dated 'O/MARSEUS. 1660' (lower centre)
oil on canvas
51.5 x 42 cm (20¼ x 16½ in)

Provenance: Private Collection, Germany.

A *FOREST FLOOR STILL-LIFE WITH VARIOUS FUNGI, Thistles, an Aspic Viper, a Sand Lizard, a Snail, a Tree Frog and Two Moths* is an exemplary work by the still-life painter Otto Marseus van Schrieck. Van Schrieck depicts a dark, dank forest floor, on which lives a range of different plants, fungi and animals. It is a relatively foreboding scene due to the gloom, and the underlying threat associated with aspects such as the fungi or the viper. The snake, emerging from the shadows of the undergrowth, is about to attack the frog. Its mouth is open, prepared to bite, and its wide eyes are fixed on its prey, which has its back turned, unaware of the imminent danger. The overwhelming darkness of the painting is illuminated somewhat by a gentle light which highlights the colour of the fungi and moths. In the background, the lush green of a grassy clearing can be made out, contrasting with the overgrown darkness of the foreground.

From 1663 onwards, van Schrieck, a painter, botanist and entomologist, specialised in painting these type of forest floor still-lives, *A Forest Floor with a Snake, Lizards, Butterflies and Other Insects*, being a further example of this

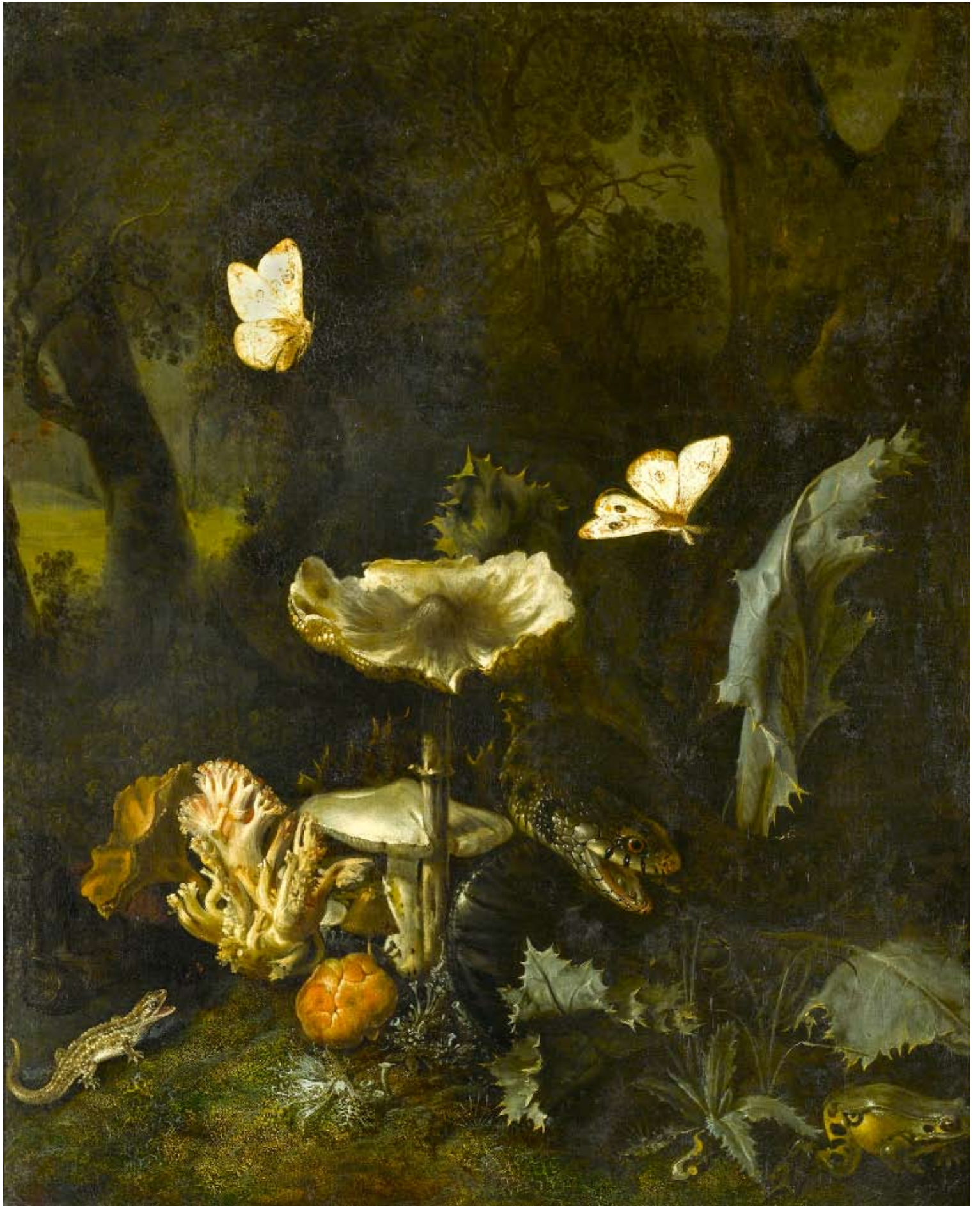


Otto Marseus van Schrieck, *A Forest Floor Still-Life with Various Fungi, Thistles, an Aspic Viper, a Sand Lizard, a Snail, a Tree Frog and Two Moths* (Detail)



Otto Marseus van Schrieck, *Forest Floor with a Snake, Lizards, Butterflies and other Insects*, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (Figure 1)

subject matter (fig.1). Both paintings feel as if they are set in a hidden-away corner of a forest, untouched by humans, and the isolation and darkness create a sinister feeling. Again, in the Rijksmuseum work, the familiar scene of a snake on the point of attacking its prey, which this time is a red butterfly is repeated. Van Schrieck, however, also includes another conflict in this painting, for at the foot of the tree two lizards circle each other ready to fight, the one on the right on the verge of pouncing. Images such as this, or of a snake eating a butterfly, or the depiction of the decay of the forest floor, are believed to allude to the transience of life. It is a recurrent theme throughout van Schrieck's work, portraying nature in such an unsettling way, contrasted with what is often the serenity of the landscape located in the background. Even in paintings such as the Fitzwilliam Museum's *Still-Life with Flowers*, where the focus is centred on a specific plant, rather than on the wider forest floor, the plant will inevitably be dead and drooping, and often will contain details of animal violence.





Maria Sibylla Merian, Plate from *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium*, 1705 (Figure 2)

Looking at his work as a whole it is clear that van Schrieck was fascinated by the animals which he painted and their behaviour. According to his widow, as recorded by Arnold Houbraken, the author of *De Grootte Schouburgh der Nederlantsche Konstschilders en Schilderessen* (*The Great Theatre of Dutch Painters*), van Schrieck knew the habits of these creatures very well and is known to have bred snakes, lizards and insects himself. It therefore seems that many of the detailed flora and fauna contained in his paintings were based on careful study of the various animals, insects and plants he discovered and kept in his own garden, a 'watery' domain near Diemen.¹ Early on in his career, when he lived in Italy, van Schrieck was a member of the *Schildersbent*. This was a fraternal organisation dedicated to social fellowship and mutual assistance, founded in about 1620 by a number of Dutch and Flemish artists living in Rome. Although the society may not have contributed much to his scientific development, it is interesting to note that, according to Houbraken, it was here that van Schrieck received the nickname *Snuffelaer*. He was given the name, meaning a ferreter or scrounger, 'omdat hij allerwegen naar vreemd gekleurde of gespikkelde slangen, hagedissen, rupsen, spinnen, flintertjes en vreemde gewassen en kruiden omsnuffelde' ('because he was all about after strangely coloured and speckled snakes, lizards, caterpillars, spiders, butterflies and strange plants and herbs').² This early interest in the smaller forms of nature was to dominate his painting throughout his career.

Although his subject matter may have been unusual in its specialist nature, van Schrieck's work does reflect Dutch artistic culture in the seventeenth century, in that it is significantly informed by science. The practice of observing and then recording and registering results through pictures and texts, was fostered in even the most basic of schools, and consequently this culture was reflected in art. Several artists did engage in their own scientific experiments, and their interest is evident in their work, on esuch example being Jacques de

¹ see A. van der Willigen & F.G. Meijer, *A Dictionary of Dutch and Flemish Still-life Painters Working in Oils, 1525-1725*, Leiden 2003, p. 139.

² see A. Houbraken, *De Grootte Schouburgh der Nederlantsche Konstschilders en Schilderessen...*, The Hague 1753, vol. I, p. 358.



Otto Marseus van Schrieck, *A Forest Floor Still-Life with Various Fungi, Thistles, an Asp Viper, a Sand Lizard, a Snail, a Tree Frog and Two Moths* (Detail)

Gheyn II (1565-1629). De Gheyn was known for his delicate watercolour studies of insects and flowers, which he often produced for private study and specific patrons, such as the Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II. Equally, many institutions, such as the botanical gardens at Leiden and Amsterdam, and the East and West Indies Companies, published scientific texts which were often illustrated by talented artists, such as Maria Sibylla Merian (1647-1717). Published in 1705 her *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium* presented her keen researches into plants and insects (fig. 2). The impressive plates were based on painstaking observations, many of them made with a magnifying glass. She published them with detailed descriptions, which were written with help from the director of the botanical gardens in Amsterdam. It is not difficult to imagine how the work of van Schrieck, with its acute study of animal interaction and the decay of nature, emerged from this scientific cultural backdrop.

Van Schrieck's work is also a product of the conditions of the Dutch art market at the time. Art was a booming industry in the Netherlands, often taking place on the level of arts and crafts, rather than as 'fine art' in the



Otto Marseus van Schrieck, *Still-Life with Plants and Reptiles*, 1667, Kunstsammlung der Universität, Göttingen (Figure 3)

modern sense of the term. Works of art were made for a market, as opposed to just being made on commission. One of the results of this was that painters had to strive hard to find a specific niche for themselves in so competitive a market. As a result, not only did many of them specialise in a specific genre, such as history or portrait painting, but often they specialised within that genre. The landscape painter Aert van der Neer (1603-1677) (see inventory), for example, invariably imbued his works with unconventional light effects. This specialisation did mean that the resultant work was often of a high quality and it is clear that van Schrieck's still-lives were in part a product of this.

Van Schrieck's paintings also betray an unusual working technique, with some of his paintings characterised by the presence of various organisms, which he would apply directly onto the canvas. For example, in his *Still-Life with Plants and Reptiles* van Schrieck used real butterfly wings to make an impression into the paint in order to achieve lifelike texture and he also implanted at least one leg of a fly onto the canvas (fig. 3).

According to Houbraken, van Schrieck travelled to Italy in the early stages of his career and stayed in Florence and Rome with Matthias Withoos (1627-1703) (see cat. no. 63) and Willem van Aelst (1627-after 1687), the latter being his pupil at the time. Houbraken remarks that van Aelst 'carried out many pranks' in the company of van Schrieck. In Italy he was patronised by, amongst others, Ferdinando II de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany. Samuel Hoogstraten claimed that he met van Schrieck in Rome as late as 1652. About 1657 he returned with van Aelst to Amsterdam, where he had a small property and was married on the 25 April 1664.

Van Schrieck developed the 'Forest Floor still-life', depicting the flora, moss and fungi with reptiles, butterflies and snails in their natural habitat with extreme precision, and was one of the first painters to specialise in this subgenre. He returned to Amsterdam in 1657 where he established a successful studio, specialising in still-life. He was much admired in his own lifetime, and his work was greatly sought after. His paintings also had a notable influence on a number of artists, including the Italian Paolo Porpora (1617-1670-80) and Schrieck's distinguished pupil, Rachel Ruysch (1664-1750). Ruysch's forest still-life *Flowers on a Tree Trunk*, provides a particularly good example of the



Rachel Ruysch, *Flowers on a Tree Trunk*, Staatliche Museen, Kassel (Figure 4)



Otto Marseus van Schrieck, *A Forest Floor Still-Life with Various Fungi, Thistles, an Asp Viper, a Sand Lizard, a Snail, a Tree Frog and Two Moths* (Detail)

extent to which she was influenced by van Schrieck (fig.4). As in van Schrieck's still-lives, we are presented with a dark undergrowth, from which a dried stump with knotholes surrounded by toadstools and moss emerges. Winding around the dead tree's trunk are brightly coloured flowers of all kinds, including roses, lilies and bindweed. They have a luminous quality which seems to emanate from within. Insects, reptiles, to fight one another, and collectively they destroy the plant-life. On the left of the composition a toad and a small snake attack each other, and on the right, another toad is trying to hold a small lizard in check.

The work of van Schrieck occupies a special place among Dutch still-life painters. He was as interested in representing the interactive behaviour of animals as he was their external appearance: thus a snake trying to catch a butterfly, or two lizards attacking each other. By expressing the violence of these animals, the artist's paintings underline the transitory, fragile and precarious side of life. His compositions almost always have a narrative quality to them, whether light and pleasant, as in the *Forest Floor with a Snake and a Butterfly* (Fondation Custodia, Institut Néelandsais, Paris), or in a more threatening manner, as in *A Forest Floor Still-Life with Various Fungi, Thistles, an Asp Viper, a Sand Lizard, a Snail, a Tree Frog and Two Moths*. However, although the world represented in van Schrieck's paintings reflects the zoological and botanical interests of a well-versed science amateur, this world is still not free from religious associations. Indeed, it is the religious meaning which seems to have determined the selection and composition of the animals and plants. The snake, the toad and the lizard are the 'unclean animals', with the serpent being regarded as an incarnation of evil, and as such, was a favourite subject to represent pictorially. The strong presence of death and decay in van Schrieck's work create an effect of drama, mild horror and fascination.

An inventory of the contents of van Schrieck's house was made in July 1678, shortly after his death, in which more than three hundred paintings were listed. Besides his own paintings, there were works by Cornelis van Poelenburch (1595-1667) (see Inventory), Simon de Vlieger (1600-1653) (see Inventory), Ludolf Bakhuizen (1631-1708) (see cat. no. 61), Jan Wijnants (c.1635-1684), Lucas van Leyden (c.1494-1533) and van Aelst.