

**Sientje Mesdag-van Houten, *Foral Still Life***  
Saint-Josse-ten-Noode 1847 – 1943 Brussels

oil on panel  
16 ¾ by 14 ¾ inches (43 by 37.5 cm.)  
signed lower right: 'S M.vH'

provenance: Brabantse Kunstjalerij, Oirshot, The Netherlands;  
Private collection, The Netherlands

note: Sientje van Houten married Hendrik Willem Mesdag in April 1856 and seven years later in 1863 their only child, Klaas was born. In 1864, her father died and left her a substantial inheritance. This change in her financial situation allowed Hendrik to leave his father's bank where he had been working for sixteen years and concentrate on his painting and eventually become a professional artist.

Sientje accompanied her husband when he went to Brussels to study under Willem Roelofs. Their house in Rue Van de Weyer was often the focal point for Dutch and Belgian painters, and it could well have been the conversations on art at these soirées that stimulated Sientje's mind and enhanced her artistic talent. She, like her husband, not only received instruction from Roelofs but also from Hendrik's cousin the professional artist, Lawrence Alma-Tadema.

Sientje van Houten accompanied her husband when he spent the summer of 1866 at the Oosterbeek artist colony and again in the summer of 1868 on the island of Nordene where she, like Hendrik, spent time painting and sketching seascapes. The couple moved to The Hague in 1869, where they lived in a house on Anna Paulownastraat and later in a house on Laan van Meerdervoort. Her husband, who wanted to concentrate on seascapes, later hired a studio room facing the sea at the Villa Elba in Scheveningen where he and Sientje would spend hours painting and sketching. In order to improve her artistic proficiency, Sientje took drawing lessons from their family friend and painter Christian d'Arnaud Gerkens.

In 1871, their 8-year-old son Klaas, died of diphtheria. Recovering from this tragedy, Sientje devoted all her time painting. At first, Sientje concentrated on landscape painting and would often leave home and go on painting trips in the Scheveningen dunes with her friend and artist, Harriet Lido who was constantly giving her artistic advice. Sientje Mesdag-van Houten initially focused on landscape painting and travelled to areas such as Drenthe, Overijssel and the Veluwe region in Gelderland. Besides her love of landscape painting she also painted still lifes. Over the years, she became increasingly accomplished as an artist and her self-confidence grew to such an extent that she began to submit her paintings to national exhibitions in Europe and America and was happy to

partake in group exhibitions held by the Dutch Drawing Society and the Pulchri Studio. Her husband was also a member of the Pulchri Studio and on a number of occasions both husband and wife exhibited together. She was also the president of Our Club, a meeting place for cultured women. Mesdag-van Houten kept in touch with other women painters and dedicated herself to the cause of the 'poor female artist' and became the leading light and mentor for many young aspiring female artists who would gather at her studio for advice on their artwork.

Sientje van Houten was in close contact with many art dealers and her paintings were sought after by their clients, especially her still lifes. In 1881 she helped her husband paint the amazing 1680 square meters panoramic painting of Scheveningen which has become known as *Panorama Mesdag*. Her painting entitled *Cottages at Sunset and Heath near Ede* was exhibited at the 1889 Paris exposition and awarded a bronze medal.

Sientje and her husband Henrik were avid collectors of art and eventually amassed almost three hundred and fifty paintings as well as object d'arts, porcelain and artefacts from Holland and Asia. Their favorites were works by the French Barbizon School artists. Their joint collection grew to such a size that in 1887 they had a museum built next to their house in Laan van Meerdervoort in The Hague. In 1903 Sientje and Hendrik donated the collection and the museum to the Dutch state. Now known as the Mesdag Collection, it currently is administered by the Van Gogh Museum.

In 1904, Sientje Mesdag-van Houten celebrated her seventieth birthday at the art society, *Pictura*, and during the celebration they announced that they would name a room in their new building after her. The *Pulchri Studio* also mounted a retrospective exhibition of her work. For many years Sientje had been simply referred to as Hendrik Mesdag's wife, but in an interview, she was very forthright about how she should be remembered, as noted by the interviewer who stated:

Despite her marriage to a renowned marine painter, she does not wish to go down in art history as Mesdag's wife, but as an independent "heroine of art" who follows her own path and seeks recognition for her original artistic convictions...

Sientje van Houten died in 1909, aged 74 and she was buried at the Oud Eik and Duinen Cemetery in The Hague, where later her husband Henrik would also be interred. Along with male painters such as Mesdag, Roelofs and Israëls, Sientje Mesdag-van Houten became one of the most important artists of the Hague School.

*Floral Still Life* was painted around 1885. It is notable for its painterly quality and rich impasto and in its unusual depiction of withering and dead flowers. In its impact and austere style, it is comparable to the somber early still life works created by Vincent van Gogh when he lived in the Dutch town of Nuenen before he moved to Paris in 1885.