Herman Saftleven,
A Sticky Nightshade,
or Litchi Tomato

Carina Fryklund, Curator, Old Master
Drawings and Paintings
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Herman Saftleven, *A Sticky Nightshade, or Litchi Tomato*

*Carina Fryklund*
*Curator, Old Master Drawings and Paintings*

This watercolour of *A Sticky Nightshade, or Litchi Tomato* (*Solanum sisymbriifolium*), signed and dated 31 October 1683, is a typical example of Dutch artist Herman Saftleven’s (1609–1685) sensitively executed botanical studies (Fig. 1). Saftleven made his career in Utrecht as a painter, draughtsman and engraver. Born in Rotterdam in 1609, where he probably studied under his father, he settled in Utrecht in 1632. A prolific artist, he produced around 300 paintings and some 1,200 topographical and imaginary landscape drawings. His documentary flower studies, a genre to which he turned late in life, were all made on commission for one remarkable patron, the renowned Dutch amateur horticulturalist and botanist Agnes Block (1629–1704), a niece and intimate friend of the great poet Joost van den Vondel (1587–1679). They provide a valuable historical record of the intersection of art and science in the 17th century and have been described as “among the most impressive botanical studies in 17th-century Dutch art.”

Fig. 1 Herman Saftleven (1609–1685), *A Sticky Nightshade, or Litchi Tomato* (*Solanum sisymbriifolium*), 1683. Watercolour, 35.5 x 25.6 cm. Purchase: The Wiros Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMH 516/2016.
employed there periodically from 1680 until shortly before his death five years later.9

On the verso of the drawings she commissioned, Block inscribed the Latin names of the flowers depicted, as well as further details about each one, including when they flowered. In the case of this particular sheet, she correctly identified the plant as a “Solanum sisymbriifolium”, a prickly plant with small, edible fruits native to tropical and sub-tropical regions of South America and Africa. Earlier in the same month, Saftleven had painted a watercolour of a different specimen of the nightshade family of plants; dated 10 October 1683, it is now in the British Museum (Fig. 3).10 Saftleven produced over 100 botanical studies for Block. Only 27 stylistically closely related watercolours are known today, the majority of which are large compositions on paper measuring around 35 by 25 cm, originally bound into albums.11 He typically began with a drawing in graphite, and proceeded by using a mixed-media technique, applying brown ink and watercolours with pen and brush, adding white opaque watercolour to give body to areas of colour. In the current study, a branch of the plant is rendered illusionistically, with a clear sense of depth achieved by allowing the fruits and leaves to overlap slightly, and with chiaroscuro effects. The branch has a fully opened blossom, as well as other buds, blossoms, fruits, and leaves in various states of emergence and decline. Each leaf and petal seems to tingle with life, the sense of vivid animation heightened by the fresh pinks and greens. The interior structure of the plant is illustrated by a cross-section at the bottom. The florid cursive signature of the artist, documenting the date of completion of the drawing, complements the elegant arabesque of the branch.

Although seemingly naturalistic, drawings such as this are in fact idealised versions of reality. They are composite images, possibly based on individual
studies from life – no such preliminary studies by Saftleven have yet been identified – and designed to communicate all known information about a flower in one single illustration. The function of adapting reality in this way was not simply a project of beautification, but primarily a tool for effective scientific record. In creating her garden, and in seeking to understand and classify her specimens, Block was motivated by a belief that nature itself was imperfect until it had been refined by art. This indefatigable “Flora Batava” thus strove to subdue nature into the more ordered and perfect form of a garden; equally, her patronage of Saftleven and other botanical artists served to transform her plant specimens into images that are both documents and striking works of art.

Notes:
1. Watercolour, white opaque watercolour, some gum arabic, over graphite; black chalk framing lines; the edges of the sheet gilded (on three sides); 35.5 x 25.6 cm. Watermark: Fragmentary Strasburg Lily with letters VR (near Heawood, nos. 1784–87: 1080s). Signed with monogram and dated ‘HS. f. 1683. Den 31 octob.’ (lower centre, in brown ink). Inscribed by Agnes Block: “Solanum pomiferum frutescens Africanaum/spinozum, nigricans boraginis flore/foliis profunde laciniate” (on verso, in brown ink). Nationalmuseum, NMH 516/2016. Prov. Agnes Block (1629–1704), Vijverhof, Loenen aan de Vecht; Valerius Röver (1686–1739), Delft (?); Samuel van Huls (1655–1734), The Hague (?); (his posthumous sale, Yver, Amsterdam, 14 May, 1736, part of lot 3882: “2 Grands Livres contenant 7 Titres & 252 Pièces en miniature; représentant des fleurs & plantes étrangères & autres, cultivées par Agnes Block à Vijverhoff, & peintes d’après nature par plusieurs maitres fort renommés; comme Withorst, Withoos, Herm : Saftleven, Herold & autres”); his widow, Cornelia Röver-van der Dusen, Delft (?); purchased in January 1761 with the rest of the Röver collection by Hendrik de Leth, Amsterdam (?); Ignatius Franciscus Ellinckhuysen (1814–1897), Rotterdam; (sale, Frederik Muller & Cie, Amsterdam, 16 April, 1879, lot 234); Charles M. Dozy (1852–1901), Leiden; (his posthumous sale, R.W.P. de Vries, Amsterdam, 6–7 May, 1902, lot 176: “Branche de fleurs. Annoté par l’artiste: Solanum pomiferum frutescens africanum...”); Iohan Quirijn van Regteren Altena, Amsterdam; thence by descent; (sale, Amsterdam, Christie’s, 10

Fig. 3 Herman Saftleven (1609–1685), A Madagascar Potato (Solanum Indicum Maximum), 1683. Watercolour, 35 x 25.4 cm. British Museum, London.
ACQUISITIONS/HERMAN SAFTLEVEN, A STICKY NIGHTSHADE, OR LITCHI TOMATO


2. Vondel, a frequent visitor to Vijverhof in his last years, dedicated several poems to his beloved niece; see Catharine van der Graft, *Agnes Block, Vondels nicht en vriendin*, Utrecht 1943, pp. 24, 30 f., 53 f., 70. A poem written in her honour in 1668, suggests that Block was herself a dedicated amateur engraver, painter and draughtsman, though no surviving works have been identified; see Graft 1943, p. 55.


4. Saftleven and his patron may have known, for example, of comparable studies by older contemporaries such as Jacques de Gheyn II (1565–1629), who produced animal and plant studies for the court of Rudolf II (1552–1612) in Prague, where there was a lively interest in natural history and an early presence of painters of flora and fauna. In the years, 1600–1604, De Gheyn filled an album with watercolour miniatures on vellum of flowers, insects and other small animals, in all probability the same as that purchased by the Emperor, and described by the artist’s biographer as: “a little book as well in which [he] had, in the course of time, drawn some little flowers from life in gouache, with many small animals too” (Karel van Mander, *Schilder-boeck* 1604, ed. Miedema 1994, fol. 294v). Now Paris, Fondation Custodia, Coll. F. Lugt, inv. 5655; see I.Q. van Regteren Altena, *Jacques de Gheyn: Three Generations*, The Hague, 1983, nos. 909–930, cf. also no. 934 (‘1620’).

5. In 1649, Block married the Amsterdam silk merchant Hans de Wolff (1613–1670). On 16 June, 1670, she purchased the country estate of Vijverhof at Loenen aan de Vecht. Four years later, in 1674, at the age of 45, she was married again, to the wealthy silk merchant Sybrand de Flines (1623–1697). By 1676, Block had settled permanently at Vijverhof. Shortly after her death in 1704, the estate was purchased by the Amsterdam merchant Samuel Teixeira; the fame of its legendary gardens lingered on, and the Russian Tsar Peter the Great visited it in 1717, by which time the art collections had passed into other hands. The house was demolished in 1813. The primary biography of Block remains Graft 1943 (as in note 2). See also A. van Leeuwen, “Hollandsche Flora’s; over elitevrouwen en hun lusthoven aan het einde van de zeventiende eeuw”, *Cascade* 20/2 (2011), pp. 31–45; and Susan Bracken, Andrea Göldy, and Adriana Turpin (eds), *Women Patrons and Collectors*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 2012, passim.


9. The dates inscribed on the drawings indicate lengthy stays at Vijverhof, from late spring until early autumn, from 1680 until 1684.


11. Part of the contents of Block’s albums of botanical drawings by Saftleven, known from written sources, have been lost over time, making it difficult to assess the original number of watercolours. Schulz listed 27 surviving botanical drawings by Saftleven, today in the collections of the Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam, the Kupferstichkabinet, Berlin, the British Museum, London, and the Kunstsammlungen, Weimar, while others are in private collections; see Schulz 1982, pp. 96–101, nos. 1420–1446. According to Sam Segal (in Haarlem 1998, p. 80, see note 7), Block’s heirs sold her collection to the Delft lawyer Valerius Rörer (see note 7), whose manuscript inventory lists over a hundred drawings by Saftleven (Amsterdam University Library, inv. HS II A 18). The Stockholm drawing is not singled out, but may have been among those listed at the end of the inventory in Album 29, which included sheets by both Saftleven and Willem de Heer of “…flowers (that were) ordered to have been painted after life by Agneta Block at her mansion Vijverhof…” Only one album of botanical drawings – not Saftleven’s – from Block’s collection has survived intact (Amsterdam, Rijksprentenkabinet, inv. RP-T-1948-119, Book 313).

12. In a medal she commissioned to be cast in 1700, Block appeared as the personification of “Flora Batava” (the Dutch Flora), accompanied by the inscription “Fert Arsque Laborque Quod Natura Negat” (Art and Labour bring about what Nature cannot achieve); see Graft 1943 (as in n.2), p. 122, ill.