

LAWRENCE STEIGRAD FINE ARTS



A Forest Floor with Flowers, Thistles, Snakes, Snails and Butterflies on a Riverbank

oil on panel
18 x 12 ¼ inches (45.7 x 31.1 cm.)

PROVENANCE

Private Collection, Maryland

Johann Falch was a student of Johann Christoph Beischlag who was the head of the painters guild in Augsburg. His work follows the tradition established by Otto Marseus van Schrieck and most closely resembles that of Carl Wilhelm de Hamilton with whom he must have had direct contact. Hamilton was the court painter of the Prince Bishop Alexander Sigismund von Pfalz-Neuburg in Augsburg. By 1709 Falch was an independent painter, and at some point, the teacher of Johann Elias Ridinger. Having died at 40, Falch's known oeuvre is small consisting of forest floor scenes with most approximately the size of this panel. Works by the artist are recorded in the collections of Donaueschingen and Raudnitz Castles as well as the Hermitage and the museums of Augsburg and Cologne.[1]

Van Schrieck created the genre of forest floor pieces called *sottobosco* painting after the Italian word for undergrowth when working there in the 1650s. With Van Schrieck's return to Amsterdam in the 1660s flower still life painters such as Abraham Mignon, Jan Davidsz. de Heem, Rachel Ruysch and Nicolaes Lachtropius all felt compelled to add toadstools, moss, lizards, snakes, butterflies and other crawly creatures to their works.[2] At this time nature held a deep fascination for the general population which as the decades progressed intensified. Forest floor scenes with dense foliage were particularly popular as they showed flowers, fauna, animals and insects, often only previously viewable in cabinets of curiosities, in their natural environment.[3]

Pursuing this genre Falch adopted Van Schrieck's lepidochromy technique which stood at "the crossroads between art and science".[4] Such methodology employed "lepidopteran wings (referring to butterflies/moths, etc.) [that] consist of a veined double membrane covered on both sides with layers of scales arranged in rows like roof tiles. Since both sides develop independently from each other, their patterns and colours vary. Instead of gluing on the whole wing, [Van Schrieck] transferred the scales by pressing the wings onto the canvas coated with adhesive before removing the membrane".[5] Further Bodo Beier, an art historian and restorer, suspected Falch of using another of Van Schrieck's methods for painting moss. This was done by using lichen to apply an ochre yellow paint over a dark blue layer.[6] Thus following in the footsteps of Van Schrieck by mixing specimens with paint, Falch and others presented a challenge to the depiction of nature that embodied a new type of hyperreality.[7]

In this painting by placing the viewer at eye level to the forest floor, Falch reveals a hidden world teeming with life.[8] Its only light source stems from the rounded phosphorescent rocks that line the riverbank in the foreground.

Everything has been meticulously delineated from the flat and spongy leaves across the midground to the thistles' spiky ones, with the nyctinastic (closing) movement of the flowers as well as the mesmerizing shell whorls of the snail crossing the orange fungi. While one snake slithers along the damp ground towards the other snail, his companion's jaws are fixated on a fluttering butterfly nearby. From above a dragonfly, another predator, dives into the scene. Crisscrossed trees flank the background with a glimpse of receding wood behind. Such microscopic portrayals marked the climactic culmination of the genre, with Falch among its last painters.

We are grateful to Dr. Fred G. Meijer for confirming this work to be by Johann Falch after viewing.

FOOTNOTE

[1] Biographical information taken from Thieme – Becker, "Johann Falch" in *Allgemeines Lexikon der Bildenden Künstler*, volume XI, E.A. Seeman Verlag, Leipzig, 1915, p. 211; and "Johann Falch", "Carl Wilhelm de Hamilton" and "Johann Christoph Beischlag" all on rkd.nl (RKD Explore) website.

[2] Erma Hermens, "Crawly Creatures, Forest Floors and Butterfly Wings" in *Crawly Creatures, Little Animals in Art and Science*, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, 2022, pp. 139, 146.

[3] Catherine Powell – Warren, "A Strange Attraction", p. 107; and Maria Holtrop & Julia van Leeuwen, "The World as Possession" in *Crawly Creatures, Little Animals in Art and Science*, op.cit. p. 123.

[4] V. E. Mandrij & Giulia Simonini, "Introduction" in *Insects and Colors between Art and Natural History*, volume 7, Brill, October 8, 2024; and V. E. Mandrij, "Lepidochromy: How Butterflies Become Artistic Materials" at

www.mandrijquini-konstanz.de

[5] V. E. Mandrij, "Lepidochromy: How Butterflies Became Artistic Materials", op.cit.

[6] Rozemarijn Landsman, "Smudges, Sponges and 17th – Century Dutch Painting" in *Trading Paintings and Painters' Materials 1550 – 1800*, Archetype Publications, 2018, p. 64.

[7] V. E. Mandrij, "Lepidochromy: How Butterflies Became Artistic Materials", op.cit.

[8] Karin Leonhard, "Pictura's Fertile Field: Otto Marseus van Schrieck and the genre of *sottobosco* painting" in *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, volume 34, no. 2, p. 108, 2009.