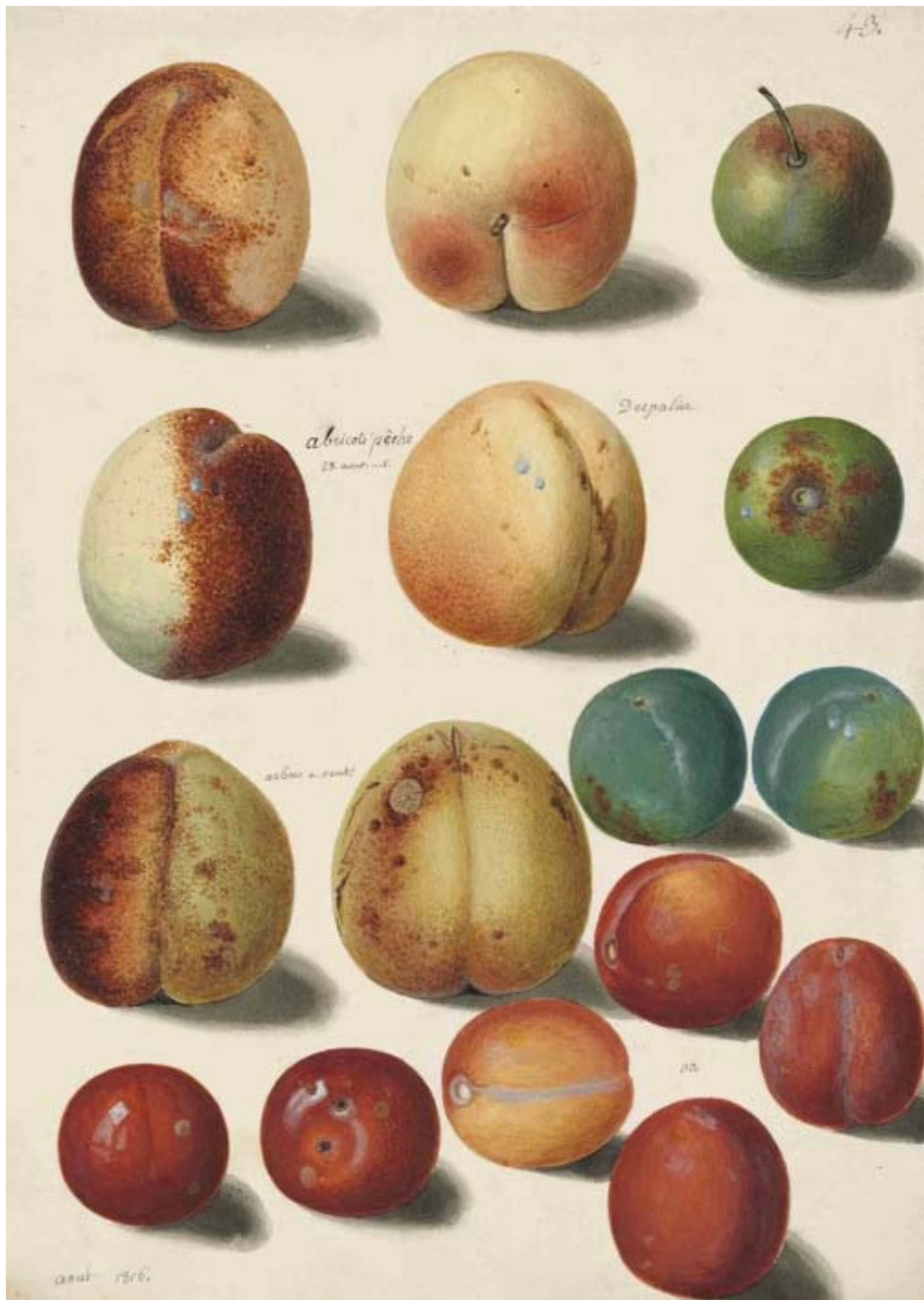


LE CLAIRE

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PANCRACE BESSA

1772 Paris - Écouen 1846

Prunes et abricots

Watercolour and gouache on paper; 1816.

Dated at the lower left: *aout 1816*, numbered at the upper right: 43., inscribed between the fruits: *abricots pêche, 28. aout . . . 6, Despalier, arbres au vent*; bearing the numbers 29. and 30.

290 x 205 mm

The painter Pancrace Bessa ranks among the most scholarly of all French early nineteenth-century scientific illustrators. Although little is known about his earliest training it seems certain that his passion for the natural world emerged at a young age. He advanced to be one of its most faithful depicors both as a painter and as a natural history artist. His teachers were Gérard van Spaendonck (1746-1822) and Pierre-Joseph Redouté (1759-1840).

Bessa's contact to Spaendonck and Redouté, who were both important contributors to a codex of paintings known as *Les Vélins du Roi*, marked a turning point for him. The *Vélins du Roi* [the King's Vellums] is a compendium of 6,984 botanical and zoological paintings. It was started in 1631 to document specimens from the royal gardens and zoological collections. Leading French illustrators contributed to the codex through the reigns of Louis XIII, Louis XIV and Louis XV. In 1793, Pierre-Joseph Redouté and his brother Henri-Joseph (1766-1852) were singled out to enlarge the codex with botanical and zoological paintings. Pierre-Joseph Redouté was to contribute botanical illustrations, along with Spaendonck, while his younger brother contributed zoological illustrations. In the same year, the *Vélins* were entrusted to the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle and Spaendonck was appointed Professeur d'iconographie. This specially created position passed to Pierre-Joseph Redouté and Bessa on Spaendonck's death in 1822. Today, the *Vélins* are still housed at the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle.

Bessa was appointed official painter at the Muséum in 1823. He produced drawings for the publications of the leading French botanists, landscape gardeners and agriculturists of the time. He painted new species of fruit, flowering plants and trees from North and South America, Africa, Asia and Australia [Figs.1 and 2].

The present watercolour and gouache represents Bessa's second important contribution to a natural history publication, *Traité des arbres et arbustes que l'on cultive en France*, compiled by Henri Louis Duhamel du Monceau (1700-82).¹

The sheet represents studies of apricots and plums. Although Bessa's handling of the subject is methodical and detailed, the style of execution is delicate and the arrangement of the fruits has a conscious elegance.

¹The illustrations for this publication were made by Bessa and Pierre-Joseph Redouté in 1801-19.

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Pierre-Joseph Redouté and Bessa supplied the engravers of the plates with drawings in fairly equal number. However, Redouté concentrated almost exclusively on the representation of flowers, while Bessa was above all responsible for the depiction of fruit. In this remarkable sheet the combined use of watercolour and gouache is a hallmark of Bessa's art. Gouache carries the germ of a more painterly sensibility, as the present work demonstrates.

We are grateful to Claudia Salvi for confirming the attribution and for her invaluable advice and assistance.

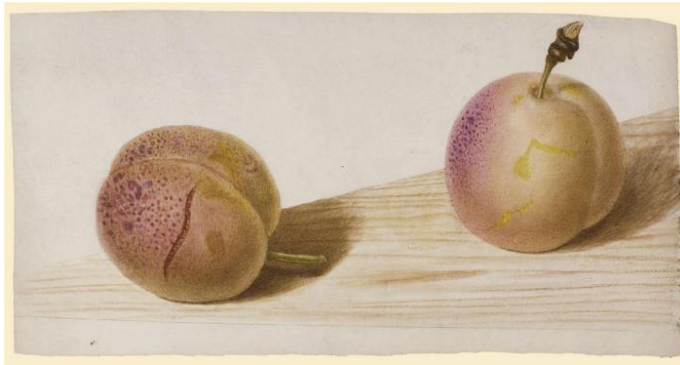


Fig. 1: *Étude d'abricots*
Watercolour and black chalk, 840 x 164 mm.
Private collection.

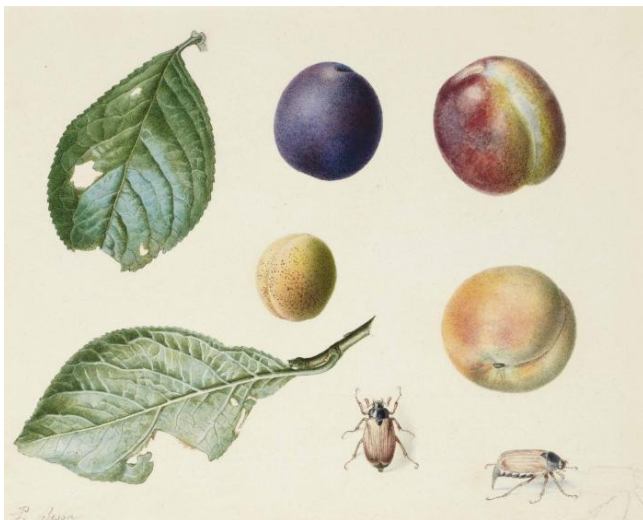


Fig. 2: *Étude de fruits, coléoptères et feuilles de prunier*
Watercolour, pencil, gouache, white heightening, 212 x 267 mm.
Private collection.