

A Hare in the Forest

Hans Hoffmann (b. about 1530, d. about 1591)
German, about 1585
Oil on panel
24 1/2 x 30 7/8 in.
2001.12



About the Art

Nibbling on a leaf pulled from a stalk of Lady's Mantle, an alert hare sits at the edge of a pine forest. Each plant and insect—snail, cricket, beetle—is shown with clear detail. The finely wrought leaves of the thistle, the sprawling fronds of a plantain, and the bright blue flowers of the Hare Bell attest to Hoffmann's meticulous treatment of the environment. In fact, none of these plants could have coexisted in the natural world. Hoffmann imaginatively combined numerous individual nature studies in a single painting.

Hoffmann's golden-brown hare is based on his fellow German artist Albrecht Dürer's famous and influential watercolor which shows a hare against a plain ground. Hoffmann had seen Dürer's hare while in Nuremberg. Later, when he went to work in the court of Emperor Rudolf II, he helped the Emperor acquire the watercolor for his *Kunstkammer* (a cabinet of curiosities). Hoffmann's hare differs from Dürer's, however, appearing amid a striking arrangement of elegant plants and insects. At the time it was painted, this arrangement of nearly life-size subjects was entirely unique, not only within Hoffmann's body of work, but also within the tradition of German nature study.

About the Artist

When veneration of the late Albrecht Dürer's art led to a flurry of activity, copying his paintings, drawings, and prints in the late 1500s, Hans Hoffmann was the leading representative of the "Dürer Renaissance." Hoffmann's imitations were so admired that a biographer described him as "a diligent painter . . . who copied Albrecht Dürer so assiduously that many of his works were sold as Dürer originals." Little is known of Hoffmann's training. He probably visited the Netherlands before settling in Nuremberg, where he is first mentioned in 1576.

Hoffmann's nature studies (most of which were made on paper) have earned him consideration as one of Germany's first still-life painters. He specialized in watercolor and body-color nature studies, many copied after or inspired by works made by Dürer's that were in a private collection in Nuremberg. Hoffman often made several copies and different versions of a single drawing, signing one with his own monogram and another with Dürer's.

A Hare in the Forest

In 1584, Hoffman moved to Munich to work for Duke William V of Bavaria. In 1585, Emperor Rudolf II named him court painter, and he moved to Prague, the seat of the imperial court. His oil paintings, few of which survived, seem to have comprised primarily religious subjects and portraits.