

**WILLIAM GOWE FERGUSON**  
**(Scottish 1632-1695)**

*Still-Life of Partridge and other Birds on a Ledge*

Oil on Canvas

68 x 55.5 cms  
27 x 21.5 inches

Provenance : Col Ralph Sneyd by 1923

Scotland can boast very few native born artists who were working in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. William Gowe (sometimes spelt Gow or Gouw) Ferguson was one and thus will always hold a place of importance in the history of Scottish art.

Current studies indicate that Ferguson did his initial studies in Scotland, and then went abroad to France and Italy to further his artistic education. But after that he moved to Holland. He is recorded living at The Hague by 1660 and was still there in 1668. By the 1680s he had moved to Amsterdam, where he was living with his Swedish wife. By the 1690s he was back in Britain. Some accounts have him living in London, but others note that there were a number of his works sold in Edinburgh in 1692 and 1693, so he may well eventually have gone back to Scotland. Interestingly this move to Britain at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century mirrors the trajectories of a good number of artists and craftsmen. Some of a strongly protestant persuasion had felt exiled from Britain during the days of the late Stuart Kings in England. Others were just following the money. The great mercantile days of the Dutch were slowly beginning to decline and the British were beginning to benefit from their own powerful seaborne empire. The accession to the throne of a Dutch King, William III, also pretty much assured a safe reception for these tradesmen in the British Isles. So Ferguson was probably acting like so many fellow artists, who decided to abandon their life in the Netherlands to seek a more prosperous future in the new protestant era of Britain. Ferguson's date of death is generally accepted as 1695.

Occasionally Ferguson works appear that show him to have painted a few landscapes and also scenes with Roman ruins – these last engendered by his travels round Italy presumably. But his stock in trade were his still-life paintings, which seem to have been a life-long extemporization on the theme of still-lives of dead game and birds. Typically, as in this present very good example, he concentrates on a central larger bird suspended as after a day's shooting and around which he arranges a *mis-en-scene* of other smaller birds

and articles of the chase – powder horns, hawking hoods etc. His pictures are usually set against a shadowed background, against which these main subjects of his are highlighted.

During his stay in Holland Ferguson seems to have adapted his style to align with that of the major still-life painters of the Dutch Golden Age. Jan Fyt and Jan Weenix must have been leading examples for him. But it is perhaps the father and son combination of Elias Vonck (1605-52) and Jan Vonck (1631-1664) with whom his work shows the closest affinity. He may not have met the father Elias, but there is such similarity of style with the son Jan, that one cannot help but think the two artists knew each other. There was a substantial demand in Holland for finely detailed still-life pictures in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, and Ferguson obviously felt he could capitalize on this. In fact so seamlessly did he insinuate himself among these painters, that even today his works can surface on the market where they are ascribed to some of the better known Dutch hands. There may be more to discover about the life of this highly individual Scottish painter but for the moment it is perhaps enough for us to realize that to have his work mistaken for the work of some of these much better known Dutch Golden Age painters is itself accolade enough.