



Pieter Claesz

Dutch, 1596/1597 - 1660

## *Still Life with Peacock Pie*

1627

oil on panel

overall: 77.5 × 128.9 cm (30 1/2 × 50 3/4 in.)

Inscription: on the knife blade, initials in monogram: PC 1627

The Lee and Juliet Folger Fund

2013.141.1

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### ENTRY

In this large banquet piece, Pieter Claesz, the most important still-life painter in Haarlem during the 1620s, envisioned a sumptuous feast consisting of the most extravagant foods available in the Netherlands in the early seventeenth century. [1] Dominating the tabletop is a large peacock pie decorated with the fowl's own head and neck as well as wings and tail feathers, a showpiece only served on special occasions. This spectacular presentation, which is given added visual prominence by the pink carnation in the peacock's beak, is complemented by an array of foods, including a roasted pheasant, olives, lemons, breads, shiny red-and-yellow apples, velvety peaches, nuts, and candies. Claesz presented these delicacies, many of which would have been imported from foreign lands, on beautifully rendered pewter platters or in Wan-Li bowls. A small mound of precious salt in a gilded saltcellar provides spice to the meal. Finally, a *berkemeier* filled with white wine that had been poured from a long-spouted pewter pitcher adds to the banquet's festive character.

The term “banquet piece” (“*een banquetje*”) associated with such paintings refers to the wide array of food stuffs and elegant presentation of the meal depicted on a laid table. Claesz has here depicted a gastronomical feast that celebrates the prosperity and global reach of the Dutch Republic, but he has not portrayed a specific meal or even a combination of foods that would have been found at one time on a Dutch table. With great artistic sensitivity, Claesz chose which items to include in his banquet scene, and carefully arranged them across the tabletop. He placed most of the smaller pictorial elements on a carefully ironed white linen tablecloth and counterbalanced them at the right with the imposing peacock pie and the large Wan-Li bowl, filled with apples and peaches. The colors and textures of the foods help guide the viewer’s progress through the composition, with bright yellows and reds situated primarily in the foreground, and more muted tonalities in the background. The experience is somewhat akin to standing before a buffet, where the meal’s sensory appeal is enhanced by careful presentation of the foods and drinks, each distinct from the other, whether it be a peacock pie, cooked pheasant, fresh apples and peaches, cut lemon, or candies. [2]

The aristocratic character of the Gallery’s painting is particularly evident because of the peacock pie and the cooked pheasant. In the Netherlands game birds only could be hunted by the landed gentry, and, hence such delicacies would only appear on the table of someone who owned, or leased, sufficient land for this activity. [3] Although it seems unlikely that such elaborate game pies were frequently made for banquets, a surprisingly diverse array of them are depicted in seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish still-life paintings, including swan pies, turkey pies, and pigeon pies. [4] Occasionally, such pies appear on the tables of merry company scenes, where elegant revelers enjoy the finer things of life [fig. 1].

Within its decorated crust, a game pie contained a stew made of richly seasoned meat taken from a deboned bird. After cooking the pie, the chef would mount the bird’s wings, tail, and head and neck onto the crust, with the neck held upright by a wooden or wire frame. [5] It seems unlikely, however, that a peacock pie such as this one would have actually been eaten at a banquet. Most likely, it would have remained on the table as a decorative element, surrounded by the other foods, including the centrally positioned roasted pheasant, a much tastier game bird than the peacock.

The large scale of this imposing banquet piece, which Claesz painted in 1627, indicates that it was a commissioned piece, presumably intended for a dining room in a stately home in Haarlem. That same year Claesz painted another, almost

identically-sized, banquet scene that is compositionally similar but displays an array of different objects and foods, including a turkey pie instead of a peacock pie [fig. 2]. One can only imagine that the success of one of these paintings inspired the creation of the second, which was presumably commissioned by a different patron. [6]

Whatever the circumstances for painting two such similar works, it seems probable that Claesz transferred the design, at least at the broadest compositional level, from one panel to the other. An examination of the edges of the Gallery's panel reveals a number of cuts and notches, particularly along the vertical edges, hinting at a possible transfer system. [7] Three pairs of notches actually line up horizontally. [8] Microscopic examinations reveal that cracks appear in the paint surrounding the notches, indicating that the latter were made after the paint had dried, and hence after the painting had been completed. A few notches, at comparable heights, are found along the right edge of the Rijksmuseum panel, a finding that supports the hypothesis that Claesz used a transfer system (perhaps nothing more than strings crossing the panels at regular intervals) when he created the second version.

Claesz did not invent the banquet piece, for his predecessors in Antwerp, among them Osias Beert the Elder (Flemish, c. 1580 - 1624), and Haarlem, particularly Floris van Dyck (c. 1575–1651) and Nicolaes Gillis (1595–1632), had painted similarly sumptuous tabletop still lifes earlier in the century [fig. 3] and [fig. 4]. However, Claesz subtly transformed the character of such scenes to make them more realistic. By lowering the vantage point of his paintings, objects not only rest comfortably on a table's surface, they also overlap one another, helping to indicate a logical recession into space. Importantly, Claesz harmonized his arrangements with a remarkable sensitivity to light. In this painting, light flooding the scene creates shadows along the folds and creases of the tablecloth. [9] The objects on the table cast shadows of varied weight and density, among them the cream-colored shadows caused by light passing through a translucent glass of wine. Particularly remarkable is the array of reflections Claesz captured on the surface of the bulbous-shaped pewter pitcher, including various images of the sunlit window and even the effect of light passing through the *berkemeier*.

Claesz's most important innovations were the ways by which he strove to connect his still lifes with the viewer. For example, the life-size pictorial elements in *Still Life with Peacock Pie* make the painting seem to be an extension of the viewer's space, an effect made even more pronounced by the tipped-over glass, partially

eaten flat biscuits (known as *tweeback*), [10] cut lemon, and crumpled napkin, all of which indicate a human presence. The lemon peel, moreover, falls over the table edge at the very front of the picture plane. Claesz's ability to capture a wide variety of textures, whether the white crisply ironed linen tablecloth, rough lemon peels, or the reflective surfaces of polished pewter, further enhances the painting's realistic character.

Claesz proudly signed and dated this painting on the blade of the ivory-handled knife resting in the middle of the composition. [11] The prominence of the diagonally placed knife in this and other of Claesz's paintings from the 1620s seems to have been, in part, a calculated device to draw the eye to a featured element in the composition. Significantly, the knife tip rests on the pewter dish with its cooked fowl, thus simultaneously pointing to this prized offering and providing the means to cut its savory meat. The special character of this central portion of the meal is evident in the decorative arrangement of precious salt crystals on the plate's rim. Claesz utilized the diagonals of the knife, the slender, black leather knife case at the left, [12] and the folds of the tablecloth to draw the eye into the painting, thereby helping to integrate the various round platters, bowls and glasses on the table. [13] These diagonals encourage the viewer's eye to move across the table from one object to another in a measured rhythm, pausing only long enough at each to enjoy its visual delights.

Claesz's tabletop still lifes often contain symbolic associations about the transience of life, but none are evident in this masterpiece. [14] Instead, this glorious work celebrates the prosperity that the Dutch had achieved through their careful nurturing of the land and their extensive trading network to the far reaches of the world. Large and sumptuous in its presentation, this impressive work would have been hung proudly in a burger's home as a demonstration of the burgeoning success of the Dutch Republic.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

June 14, 2015

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## COMPARATIVE FIGURES



**fig. 1** Esaias van de Velde, *An Elegant Company in a Garden*, 1614, oil on panel, Eijk and Rose-Marie van Otterloo Collection



**fig. 2** Pieter Claesz, *Sumptuous Tabletop Still Life with Turkey Pie*, 1627, oil on panel, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



**fig. 3** Osias Beert the Elder, *Dishes with Oysters, Fruit, and Wine*, c. 1620/1625, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Patrons' Permanent Fund, 1995.32.1



**fig. 4** Floris van Dijck, *Still Life with Fruit, Nuts, and Cheese*, 1613, oil on panel, Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem. Photo: Tom Haartsen

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## NOTES

- [1] I would like to thank Peter Rose, a specialist in seventeenth-century Dutch foods, and Henriette Rahusen, Research Assistant in the Department of Northern Baroque Painting, for their assistance in preparing this entry.
- [2] Peter Rose, in correspondence (January 27, 2014) with Molly Harrington (University of Maryland Museum Fellow in the Department of Northern

Baroque Painting), identified the fruits and candies on the pewter plate as being “dates, dried apricots, candied almonds, candied cinnamon sticks (in Dutch called *Kapittelstokken* for the stick that is inserted in the Bible to mark where one stopped reading) and molded red and white letter cookies.” The letters may spell v, c and l or i. Peter Rose notes that the white letters are not spiced whereas the red letters are spiced with rode bolus, a brown red coloring agent obtained from “Armenian stone.” She writes: “I was given an 18th century cookbook with a letter recipe in it, which called for “robolis” which is a contraction of “rode bolus.”

- [3] Scott A. Sullivan, *The Dutch Gamepiece* (Montclair, NJ, 1984), 41–42; and Scott A. Sullivan “Rembrandt’s Self-Portrait with a Dead Bittern,” *Art Bulletin* 62 (1980): 236–243.
- [4] For other of Pieter Claesz’s paintings depicting pies decorated with a bird’s neck and feathers, see: Pieter Biesboer, et al. *Pieter Claesz: Master of Haarlem Still Life* (Zwolle, 2004), nos. 12, 13, 44.
- [5] The neck and head would be dried in the oven before being mounted on the pie.
- [6] The two paintings were examined side-by-side in the conservation laboratory of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam in 2009. Unfortunately, questions of chronological sequence could not be answered on that occasion. Correspondence from Anna Tummers, curator at the Frans Hals Museum, to Jim Mullen, February 6, 2009.
- [7] There are fifteen notches along the right edge and eight notches along the left edge. Some of these have been filled and inpainted. Only one notch is found on the top edge of the Gallery’s panel, and none on its bottom edge. This information is contained in an email Joanna Dunn sent to the author on October 10, 2014 (curatorial records).
- [8] These pairs are located at 23.5cm, 34.6 cm, and 56.1 cm from the bottom. This information is contained in an email Joanna Dunn sent to the author on October 10, 2014 (curatorial records).
- [9] A somewhat undefined diagonal between the pewter pitcher and the rose in the muted background may be a suggestion of light falling onto the scene from the upper left. A similar effect is also found in the Rijksmuseum painting, but in that instance a clearer distinction exists between the dark area to the left of the diagonal and the lighter wall to its right.
- [10] Julie Berger Hochstrasser, *Still Life and Trade in the Dutch Golden Age* (New Haven and London, 2007), 2, 65. Although these biscuits were a common form of daily bread, Hochstrasser emphasizes that the grain for making bread was imported from the Baltic.
- [11] The device of including a diagonally placed knife in a tabletop still life has a long history in Netherlandish painting. See, for example, the still life in Joos

van Cleve and a collaborator, *Madonna and Child*, c. 1525, oil on panel, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Jack and Belle Linsky Collection, 1982.60.47.

- [12] Knives were often carried around in cases attached to an individual's belt. The presence of the knife case in this painting indicates that an individual has removed the knife case from his/her belt prior to the meal. For images of people wearing knife cases in the mid-1620s, see: M. Royalton-Kisch, *Adriaen van de Venne's Album in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum* (London, c. 1988), for example folios 71, 73, 79, 82, and 94. I would like to thank Henriette Rahusen for identifying this visual source.
- [13] Floris van Dijck and Nicolaes Gillis also used diagonals of the folds of a white tablecloth and a diagonal placement of the knife to draw the viewer's eye into their paintings, but they did not integrate these pictorial elements as did Pieter Claesz. In their paintings, the knife's diagonal is opposite those of the folds of the tablecloth, whereas with Claesz they are in the same direction.
- [14] For a discussion of *vanitas* images in Claesz's early still-life paintings, see Christian Klemm, "Mors ultima linea rerum: Prehistory and foundations of the Skull Vanitas" in Pieter Biesboer, et al. *Pieter Claesz: Master of Haarlem Still Life* (Zwolle, 2004), 70–90.
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## TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support is a horizontally-grained oak panel [1] comprised of at least three boards. There are two distinct joins, one running through the overturned glass on the table and the other located just below the swell in the top of the pitcher. The original joins were probably attached with an adhesive; however, splines have now been set into the wood to reinforce them. Very likely this reinforcement was added when the wood panel was thinned and attached to a cradle.

Covering the surface of the panel, but not the edges, is a very thin, smooth, off-white ground. The paint consists of layers ranging from transparent to totally opaque. Claesz sometimes applied his paint thinly, allowing the ground to play a role in the final image. He used a variety of brushes and manipulated the paint in a range of techniques to mimic or reproduce the textures of the objects on the table. Claesz often formed the shadows by running paint layers into one another and then pulling a small stiff brush into a scallop or wave pattern across the area. He created the diagonal shadow in the background between the pitcher and the flower in the peacock's beak by moving wet paint aside with his brush. Although



he applied some paint wet-into-wet, he mostly painted this image wet-over-dry.

Infrared reflectography at 1.5–1.8 microns [2] reveals changes around the pitcher at the left and along the left edge of the table. Claesz also initially painted an object under the glass that looks like a blade of some sort. One can also see that the plate under the poultry was fully realized before the roasted fowl was painted. The patterned tablecloth must have been painted after the fruit, since its diagonal decoration does not extend under the fruit.

The painting is in very good condition. Two cracks stem from the right edge of the panel toward the center and a crack runs across the entire panel just below the edge of the table. Small cuts and notches into the panel and the paint layers are found along the left, right, and top edges, some of which have been filled and inpainted. Fifteen horizontal cuts and notches are found on the right edge, and eight on the left. One notch has been made at the top, but there are no cuts or notches along the bottom edge. These may have related to a design transfer process. The paint is cracked around these notches, indicating that they were made after the paint had dried.

There is inpainting around the edges, along the joins and the cracks, and in scattered other areas. Although there are no major areas of loss or extensive restoration, an L-shaped damage in the paint and ground layers exists on the plate of candies behind the nuts. The varnish layer is somewhat dull here. The painting has not been treated since its acquisition in 2013.

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## TECHNICAL NOTES

- [1] The wood was identified by the NGA scientific research department (see report dated November 13, 2015 in NGA conservation department files).
- [2] Infrared reflectography was performed with a Santa Barbara InSb Focal Plane Array camera fitted with an H astronomy filter.
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## PROVENANCE

Acquired, probably in 1827, by private collector, England; by descent in the family;[1] (sale, Sotheby's, London, 8 July 1999, no. 4); (consortium of dealers,



including Otto Nauman, Ltd., New York); sold to James X. Mullen, Boston;  
purchased 26 November 2013 through (Otto Naumann, Ltd., New York) by NGA.

[1] This provenance is given in the 1999 sale catalogue, entry by Martina Brunner-Bulst.

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## EXHIBITION HISTORY

2002 *The Poetry of Everyday Life: Dutch Paintings in Boston*, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2002, unnumbered catalogue, repro.

2005 Pieter Claesz: *Master of Haarlem Still Life*, Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem; Kunsthhaus, Zurich; National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2005, not in catalogue (shown only in Washington).

2016 *Asia in Amsterdam: The Culture of Luxury in the Golden Age*, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, 2015-2016, 263 fig. 1 (shown only in Salem).

2017 *Slow Food: Dutch and Flemish Meal Still Lives, 1600-1640*, Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis, The Hague, 2017, no. 5, repro.

2021 *Clouds, Ice, and Bounty: The Lee and Juliet Folger Fund Collection of Seventeenth-Century Dutch and Flemish Paintings*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2021, no. 13, repro.

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## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 2002 Baer, Ronni. *The Poetry of Everyday Life: Dutch Paintings in Boston*. Exh. cat. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2002: repro. 85.
- 2004 Brunner-Bulst, Martina. *Pieter Claesz.: der Hauptmeister des Haarlemer Stillebens im 17. Jahrhundert: kritischer Oeuvrekatalog*. Lingen, 2004: 161-164, 218, no. 25.
- 2014 Wheelock, Arthur K, Jr. "The Evolution of the Dutch Painting Collection." *National Gallery of Art Bulletin* no. 50 (Spring 2014): 2-19, 24, repro.
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