NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS
Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century

Gerret Willemsz Heda
Dutch, active 1640s and 1650s

Still Life with Ham

1650

oil on panel
overall: 98.5 x 82.5 cm (38 3/4 x 32 1/2 in.)
framed: 123.2 x 108 x 8.9 cm (48 1/2 x 42 1/2 x 3 1/2 in.)
Inscription: on the right edge of the tablecloth: .HEDA. 1650
Gift of John S. Thacher 1985.16.1

ENTRY

This impressive still life, signed and dated “Heda 1650” at the lower right edge of the white tablecloth, came to the National Gallery of Art in 1985 as a work by Willem Claesz Heda (Dutch, 1594 - 1680). Despite its high quality and the many similarities to paintings by Willem Claesz Heda, subtle differences in style and concept pointed to the hand of that artist’s talented son Gerret Heda. The attribution was subsequently changed, with the realization that Gerret, who emulated his father’s style, may well have worked with the elder Heda to produce generic “Heda” paintings for the open market. Complicating such an attribution is the assumption, occasionally found in the literature, that Gerret Heda is the unnamed son of Willem Claesz Heda who died in 1649, a year before this painting was executed.[1] No compelling documentary reason, however, exists for accepting this assumption. Stylistic similarities between signed Gerret Heda paintings from the 1640s and “Heda” still lifes from the 1650s, moreover, are so striking that it must be assumed that Gerret not only remained alive, but was active for at least ten years after this purported death date.[2]

Among the paintings that can be used as a basis for the attribution of this work to Gerret Heda is a comparable still life by him, signed and dated 1645 (see the 1995 catalog entry PDF for this comparative image). This painting, which is likewise on wood and has similar dimensions (98 x 79 cm), also depicts an upright tabletop still life situated against a plain gray background. In each instance an identical tall fluted glass provides a vertical accent to the display of food, plates, pitchers, glasses, and overturned vessels that are placed either on a dark green, fringed tablecloth or on the white linen that covers it.

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Characteristic for Gerret Heda is the relative disarray of the still-life elements, despite the basic pyramidal composition. The white linen is arranged in a haphazard manner so that objects nestle down in its crumpled folds. Even the objects resting on the flat green tablecloth seem slightly askew, in part because Gerret Heda never quite managed to achieve the same mastery of perspective found in paintings by his father (see, for example, *Banquet Piece with Mince Pie*). The distinctive way in which Gerret Heda has bunched the white linen cloth to activate the surface with an array of shimmering folds adds to this effect. By doing so, he sacrificed the stabilizing function that the horizontal and vertical shapes of similar linens perform in his father's paintings. Further comparison with paintings by Willem Claesz Heda also confirms that, as talented as he was, Gerret did not achieve his father's sensitivity of touch: his paint is somewhat denser, reflections are not as nuanced, and distinctions between materials are not as finely wrought.[3]

The objects on the table do not represent a specific meal, as is quite clear when one compares this work to other examples where like elements are found in similar arrangements (see the 1995 catalog entry for this comparative image). Whereas the same fluted glass and pewter pitcher are found in the Frans Hals Museum painting, the identical mustard pot and a similar ham appear in the Pushkin Museum still life.[4] In all three of these still lifes Heda has displayed a sumptuous feast, each of which calls to mind the richness and bounty that the Dutch had come to enjoy around mid-century. In each instance the partial consumption of the food and drink, the disarray of the tablecloth, and the way the vessels are overturned all hint at a human presence.

Given the explicit iconographic programs found in certain paintings by his father (see entry on *Banquet Piece with Mince Pie*), it may well be that in his choices of objects and their arrangement Gerret also strove to provide a moralizing message. Just as his compositional organization lacks the structure of his father's works, however, so too is his message less clear. In the Washington painting the ham, wine, and beer have been only partially consumed, perhaps evidence that the enjoyment of this meal has been undertaken with proper restraint. Nothing in the work seems to hint of the transience of life found in the comparable Pushkin Museum still life, where a snuffed-out candle occupies a corner of the table ([fig. 1]). Whether or not such a warning was included in some other guise in the *Still Life with Ham* cannot be determined with our current knowledge of the significance of the various elements of this composition. Would, for example, the open lid of the

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pewter pitcher have symbolized an idea along these lines to a Dutch viewer of the mid-seventeenth century? Another unanswered question is whether the untouched bread roll in the Pushkin and Washington paintings has eucharistic allusions similar to those found in paintings by Pieter Claesz (Dutch, 1596/1597 - 1660) and Willem Claesz Heda (see *Banquet Piece with Mince Pie*). In neither instance is the evidence compelling, and it may well be that Gerret adapted many of the motifs found in his father's work without providing a comparable intellectual and theological foundation to his still lifes.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES

fig. 1 Gerret Willemsz Heda, *Still Life with Ham*, 1649, oil on panel, Pushkin Museum, Moscow. Photo: Scala / Art Resource, NY

NOTES

[1] See note 1 in the Biography of Gerret Willemsz Heda (Dutch, active 1640s and 1650s).

[2] Since Gerret is not named in a 1661 testament made by his parents, it is reasonable to assume that he had died previously.

[3] Fred Meijer, who believes that Gerret Heda died in 1649, attributes the ham in the Gallery's painting to Gerret's father, Willem Claesz Heda. See Fred G. Meijer, Alan Chong, Wouter Kloek, et al., *Still-Life Paintings from the Netherlands 1550–1720/Het Nederlandse Stilleven 1550–1720*, exh. cat., Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; The Cleveland Museum of Art (Amsterdam, 1999); Arie Wallert, ed., *Still Lifes: Techniques and Style; An Examination of Paintings from the Rijksmuseum* (Amsterdam, 2000); and N. R. A. Vroom, *A Modest Message as Intimated by the Painters of the 'Monochrome*

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Banketje,' Vol. 3," *Oud-Holland* 114, nos. 2–4 (2000): 233. The modeling of this ham, however, is virtually identical to that seen in Gerret Heda's *Still Life with Ham*, 1649, in the Pushkin Museum, Moscow [fig. 1].

[4] The identical salt cellar can be found in Gerret Heda's masterpiece in the Hermitage, *Still Life with Lobster,* signed and dated "Heda 1648," a painting frequently attributed to Willem Claesz Heda. See Nicholaas Rudolph Alexander Vroom, *A Modest Message*, 2 vols. (Schiedam, 1980), 2:77, no. 372.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The panel consists of three vertically grained oak boards.[1] All of the boards are of similar width, and the outer ones are slightly thicker. Dendrochronology gives a use date of 1646 onward.[2] Bevels appear on all sides of the reverse, which was not smoothly finished. A thin, off-white ground is visible through the brushstrokes of the tablecloth and background, giving a warm tonality, while the wood grain is prominent overall.

Paint was applied thinly and smoothly in multiple layers with great transparency, much glazing, and crisp brushwork in the fuller bodied light passages. Impasted highlights are blended wet-into-wet. A pentimento of a plate or tablecloth appears beneath the ham, a short length of fringe was begun and abandoned in the lower left of the tablecloth, and the artist changed the bottom contour of the white cloth. Discolored varnish and inpainting were removed in 2008.

[1] The wood was analyzed by Dr. Peter Klein, Universität Hamburg (see report dated May 4, 1987, in NGA conservation files).

[2] Dendrochronology by Dr. Peter Klein, Universität Hamburg (see report dated May 4, 1987, in NGA conservation files).

PROVENANCE

John S. Thacher [1904-1982], Washington, D.C.; bequest 1985 to NGA.

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EXHIBITION HISTORY

1997 Rembrandt and the Golden Age: Dutch Paintings from the National Gallery of Art, The Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, 1997, unnumbered brochure, repro.

2002 Matters of Taste: Food and Drink in 17th Century Dutch Art and Life, Albany Institute of History and Art, 2002, no. 23, repro.

2004 Pieter Claesz: Master of Haarlem Still Life, Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem; Kunsthaus Zürich; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 2004-2005, not in catalogue (shown only in Washington).

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1986 Sutton, Peter C. *A Guide to Dutch Art in America*. Grand Rapids and Kampen, 1986: 309.

1995 Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr. *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*. The Collections of the National Gallery of Art Systematic Catalogue. Washington, 1995: 96-98, color repro. 97.

1997 Chrysler Museum of Art. *Rembrandt and the Golden Age: Dutch paintings from the National Gallery of Art*. Exh. brochure. Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk. Washington, 1997: unnumbered repro.

1997 Hess, Catherine and Timothy Husband. *European Glass in The J. Paul Getty Museum*, Los Angeles, 1997: no. 50j, repro.

2000 Meijer, Fred G. "Boekbespreking van...[three books related to still-life paintings, primarily from the Netherlands]." *Oud Holland* 114, no. 2/4 (2000): 233, fig. 7, 236 n. 37, as by Gerret Willemsz Heda and Willem Claesz Heda.

2000 Meijer, Fred G. "Review of three books on still-life paintings " *Oud Holland* 114, no. 2/4 (2000): 233, fig. 7, repro; and 236, note 37, as by both Gerret Willemsz Heda and Willem Claesz Heda.

2002 Barnes, Donna R., and Peter G. Rose. *Matters of Taste: Food and drink in seventeenth-century Dutch art and life*. Exh. cat. Albany Institute of History & Art. Syracuse, 2002: 74-75, no. 23, repro.

2003 Gregory, Quint (Henry D. Gregory V). "Tabletop still lifes in Haarlem, c. 1610-1660: a study of the relationships between form and meaning." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Maryland, College Park, 2003: 3-18, 172, 201.

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