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

Willem Claesz Heda
Dutch, 1594 - 1680

Banquet Piece with Mince Pie

1635

oil on canvas
overall: 106.7 x 111.1 cm (42 x 43 3/4 in.)
framed: 143.8 x 147 x 10.5 cm (56 5/8 x 57 7/8 x 4 1/8 in.)
Inscription: lower right on edge of tablecloth: .HEDA.1635.; lower left on edge of tablecloth: (unidentified monogram) [1]

[1] This unidentified monogram is an unusual feature of this painting, as it does not appear to be an artist's monogram. Dr. Pieter Biesboer, former curator at the Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem, has suggested (verbally) that it is the mark of the linen maker.
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ENTRY

This imposing painting displays the remains of a feast on a sumptuously laden table. The care with which the precious vessels were arranged prior to the meal is still evident despite the disarray of the white linen tablecloth, the snuffed-out candle, the tipped-over silver tazza and glass *roemer* (glass for white wine), and the broken *roemer* lying on a pewter dish. The focal point of the meal has been the mince pie, which, flavored with currants, raisins, and exotic spices from the Far East, was a special dish reserved for holidays and lavish banquets. Freshly cut slices of lemon added to its flavor. Oysters, seasoned with vinegar from the shell-shaped Venetian glass decanter, complemented the meal. Salt, prominently displayed in the silver salt cellar, and pepper, contained within the paper cone made from an almanac page, were expensive seasonings available to the guests as well. Imported olives and a simple roll rounded out the feast, which would have been washed down with ample glasses of beer.

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This banquet piece, one of the largest known still lifes by Willem Claesz Heda, may well have been a commissioned work, although nothing is known of its early provenance. Because of its scale, Heda painted it on canvas rather than on a wood support, which was his norm. Partly because the original canvas has never been lined, the remarkable sheen of glass, pewter, silver, and gilded bronze, for which Heda is so admired, is extremely well preserved. The rich impastos of the lemon peel hanging over the table's edge likewise have maintained their character. Adding to the harmonious whole is the soft shimmer of the white linen tablecloth as light catches the nuances of the fabric's texture.

Despite the apparent reality of the scene, which is reinforced by the lifelike scale of the objects, this composition is an artificial construct and does not record the aftermath of an actual meal. By 1635, the date of this work, Heda had already executed a number of similar, albeit smaller still lifes that include many of the same objects in different arrangements and combinations. The silver tazza, for example, appears in three earlier paintings, one dated 1632 and two dated 1634.[1] It also occurs in two still lifes from 1635, including the *Banquet Piece with Oysters* in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam [fig. 1].[2] The broken *roemer* recurs in one of the still lifes from 1634.[3] The Venetian glass decanter, the salt cellar, the large glass *roemer,* and the pewter pitcher all appear in other works (see especially the *Banquet Piece with Oysters*).

As far as one can determine, Heda intended to bring together food and objects that might be found on a festive occasion and present them in a harmonious and convincing manner. The composition is arranged in a broad triangular form, its apex defined by the magnificent gilt bronze goblet, whose decorative top is surmounted by the figure of Triton. Heda enlivened his scene through the suggestion of light reflecting off the various objects, and gave the whole immediacy by situating the table in the frontal picture plane. By placing the lemon rind, the pewter plates, and the black-handled knife over the table's front edge, he created the illusion that they actually protrude into the viewer's space. Although these compositional ideas had been current in Dutch and Flemish still-life painting from the first decades of the century, Heda utilized them here with unprecedented forcefulness and conviction.

Heda carefully selected the objects in this painting to convey a general thematic message, one frequently encountered in still-life paintings of the time, that the sensual pleasures of the feast and the luxuries of the world are only temporary and

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not eternal.[4] The snuffed-out candle indicates not only the end of the meal, but also the transience of life itself.[5] The same message is expressed by the broken glass and the page of the almanac used to hold the pepper.[6] Theological issues current in both Catholic and Protestant thought underlay these warnings: sensual pleasures threaten to distract man from the message of Christ's sacrifice and from the overriding significance of God's word. Jan Davidsz de Heem (Dutch, 1606 - 1684), a Catholic artist, explicitly conveyed this Christian message in *Flowers with Crucifix and Skull,* c. 1665 by juxtaposing a crucifix with a luscious bouquet of flowers, and by including a text that laments that man does not observe the "most beautiful flower of all" [fig. 2].[7] Instead of focusing on the message of Christ's sacrifice, man is distracted by temporal pleasures such as flowers and fruit.[8] Heda expresses the same idea in a more subtle way. Here, while man has enjoyed the delights of exotic spices, rich meats, and oysters,[9] and dined with expensive and finely wrought objects made of rare materials, he has overlooked the most fundamental nourishment of all, the simple bread roll in the foreground. Given bread's traditional eucharistic connotations and its central placement on a plate that extends into the viewer's space, its untouched state is neither accidental nor without iconographical significance.[10]

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES

fig. 1 Willem Claesz Heda, *Banquet Piece with Oysters*, 1635, oil on panel, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

fig. 2 Jan Davidsz de Heem and Nicolaes van Veerendael, *Flowers with Crucifix and Skull*, c. 1665, oil on canvas, Alte Pinakothek, Munich. Photo: bpk, Berlin / Alte Pinakothek, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich / Lutz Braun / Art Resource, NY

NOTES

[1] See Nicholaas Rudolph Alexander Vroom, *A Modest Message*, 2 vols. (Schiedam, 1980), 1: no. 335, fig. 71 (private collection, the Netherlands), signed and dated 1632; no. 340, fig. 74 (Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam), signed and dated 1634; no. 341, fig. 67 (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam), signed and dated 1634.

[2] The other 1635-dated picture in which the tazza appears was auctioned at Sotheby's, New York, January 10, 1991, no. 66.

[3] Nicholaas Rudolph Alexander Vroom, *A Modest Message*, 2 vols. (Schiedam, 1980), 1: no. 340.

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[4] For a discussion of these issues see Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., “Still Life: Its Visual Appeal and Theoretical Status in the Seventeenth Century,” in *Still Lifes of the Golden Age: Northern European Paintings from the Heinz Family Collection* (Washington, 1989), 11–25.

[5] Jacob Cats, *Proteus, ofte, minne-beelden verandert in sinne-beelden*, 3 vols. (The Hague, 1629), 1: section title “Emblemata Moralia et Aeconomica,” Emblem XX, “Liceat Sperare Timenti.” I would like to thank Quint Gregory for calling my attention to this emblem.

[6] See Sam Segal, *A Prosperous Past: The Sumptuous Still Life in the Netherlands, 1600–1700*, trans. P. M. van Tongeren, ed. William B. Jordan (Delft, 1988), 137.

[7] Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

[8] See the entry on De Heem’s *Flowers with Crucifix and Shell* in Beverly Louise Brown and Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., *Masterworks from Munich: Sixteenth- to Eighteenth-Century Paintings from the Alte Pinakothek* (Washington, DC, 1988), no. 33, 136–138.

[9] Oysters were seen as a potent aphrodisiac. For a discussion of the meaning of oysters in Dutch art, see Liana de Girolarni Cheney, “The Oyster in Dutch Genre Paintings: Moral or Erotic Symbolism,” *Artibus et Historiae,* no. 15 (1987): 135–158.

[10] This interpretation was first suggested to me by Quint Gregory when he was a doctoral student at the University of Maryland in the early 1990s. See Henry D. Gregory, “Tabletop Still Lifes in Haarlem, c. 1610–1650: A Study in the Relationship Between Form and Meaning” (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 2003), 3–18 and passim. Similar ideas are found in still-life paintings by Pieter Claesz. See Anne Walter Lowenthal, “Response to Peter Hecht,” *Simiolus* 16, nos. 2–3 (1986): 188–190. See also Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., “Introduction,” in Margarita Russell, *Images of Reality, Images of Arcadia: Seventeenth-Century Netherlandish Paintings from Swiss Collections* (Washington, DC, 1989), 26 and also 50, no. 11. See also Henry D. Gregory, “A Repast to Savor: Narrative and Meaning in Pieter Claesz’s Still Life,” in *Pieter Claesz: Master of Haarlem Still Life*, ed. Pieter Biesboer et al., (Haarlem, 2004), 97–108.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support, a medium-weight, plain-woven fabric that is heavily textured. It is unlined, but because it was delicate, with small tears and fraying where folded over the stretcher, it was strip-lined when the painting was treated in 2011. Small

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patched holes are found in the upper right corner and in the glass ewer at center. The paint layer continues onto the original tacking margins, suggesting it was painted on a stretching frame.

The support was prepared with a thick mustard-colored ground layer, which is employed as a mid-tone in some passages, namely in the tablecloth. The paint was applied in smooth wet-over-dry layers with impasted highlights. Glazing and fine, opaque scumbling was used to create the transparency of the glass objects. Further texture and definition were given to the reflection of the glass and metallic objects by the application of carefully placed highlights.

The painting is in good condition. A discolored varnish layer was removed during the 2011 treatment. Scattered small losses and areas of slight abrasion were inpainted at that time as well .

PROVENANCE

Private collection, the Netherlands; acquired 1948 by private collection; by inheritance to a subsequent owner;[1] (sale, Ader-Picard-Tajan, Paris, 22 June 1990, no. 39); purchased by (Galerie Sanct Lucas, Vienna; Bruno Meissner, Zurich; and Otto Naumann, New York); sold 27 February 1991 to NGA.

[1] According to the 1990 Ader-Picard-Tajan auction catalogue.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

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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2004 Gregory, Quint (Henry D. Gregory V). "A Repast to Savor: Narrative and Meaning in Pieter Claesz's Still Life." In *Pieter Claesz : master of Haarlem still life*. Edited by Pieter Biesboer. Exh. cat. Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem; Kunsthaus Zürich; National Gallery of Art, Washington. Zwolle, 2004: 107, fig. 1.

2004 Hand, John Oliver. *National Gallery of Art: Master Paintings from the Collection*. Washington and New York, 2004: 192-193, no. 153, color repro.

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