



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



1 Hungry for New Foods

In Holland four hundred years ago, daily meals consisted of bread and butter, cheese, fruit, fish, and stews of meats and vegetables. With expanding international trade in the seventeenth century, a wider variety of foods became available. Dutch ships traveled around the world in search of luxury items: salt from France and Portugal; grains from Poland and Prussia; raisins, dates, figs, nuts, and olives from the Mediterranean; sugar from the Caribbean and Brazil; and pepper, nutmeg, cloves, cinnamon, and other spices from Indonesia. Paintings of these rare and expensive delicacies were especially popular.

2 A Feast for the Eyes

Paintings of elaborate arrangements of exotic foods were created to delight the senses of sight, smell, touch, and taste. Artists recorded with great detail the textures of objects—the rough peel of a lemon, the translucence of glass, the softness of a linen tablecloth. Still-life paintings were valued for their subject matter as well as for the artist's skill. By carefully observing the natural world, artists strove to achieve an astonishing degree of illusion.

3 Tempting Treats

Dishes with Oysters, Fruit, and Wine by Osias Beert the Elder (c. 1580–1624) presents elegant sweets meticulously arranged on a tabletop in fine bowls and platters for a special occasion.

Beert invites you to select from:

freshly shucked oysters

candied cinnamon bark and candied almonds

quince jelly (stored in round wooden boxes)

pastries

dried raisins, figs, and chestnuts



4 Lavish Banquets

Willem Claesz Heda (1593/1594–1680) specialized in banquet scenes. Set in a dining room owned by a wealthy merchant, Heda's *Banquet Piece with Mince Pie* presents the remains of a sumptuous banquet served on expensive dishes made of gold, pewter, and ivory.

Clues that this meal is over include:

tipped goblets

a snuffed-out candle

a rumpled tablecloth

half-eaten food

platters resting at the edge of the table

The main course was mince pie. Made of rich meat flavored with fruit, currants, raisins, and spices, it was a special dish reserved for holidays and feasts. Slices of fresh lemon add flavor.



Willem Claesz Heda, *Banquet Piece with Mince Pie*, 1635, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Patrons' Permanent Fund

While depicting beauty and abundance, symbols of living well, these paintings also conveyed moral and religious messages. They were intended to remind viewers of the need for moderation and the brevity of life.

A Fragrant Bounty

Jan Davidsz de Heem (1606–1683/1684) was known for his ability to create paintings of objects that look amazingly real. With his versatile technique, he could paint a wide range of textures—from a soft blossom and a drop of water to a hard table top—in a convincing manner. Despite this realistic depiction, the arrangement of flowers could not have really existed: the vase holds more than twenty kinds of plants, some of which grow at different times of the year. Although De Heem relies on the exact observation of nature, his painting emphasizes the importance of the artist's imagination. He harmoniously arranged a bouquet that will be in bloom forever.

Discover:

- long stalks of wheat
- a caterpillar wiggling along the stem of a big, white poppy
- three butterflies
- a black-and-white honeybee perched atop a red and white poppy
- peas in their pods
- pink roses
- a spider lowering itself to the marble shelf, where a small lizard hungrily waits for it
- two snails
- tiny ants
- a window reflected in the glass vase
- red and white striped tulips



Dutch gardeners were experts in botany, the science of plants. They studied new kinds of flowers that were imported by merchants and brought back by traders traveling the globe. Tulips, which came to the Netherlands from Turkey in the late sixteenth century, were especially popular. Painters depicted colorful tulips and other rare and expensive flowers in their works, making them available for others to study and enjoy, even in the middle of the cold winter.

Jan Davidsz de Heem, *Vase of Flowers*, c. 1660, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Andrew W. Mellon Fund