

Willem Claesz. Heda

1593/1594–1680

ALTHOUGH documents do not indicate the date or place of his birth, Willem Claesz. Heda was probably born in Haarlem either in 1593 or 1594. This assumption is based on the inscription “aetate 84” found on a 1678 portrait of Heda by the Haarlem painter Jan de Braij (c. 1626/27–1697). Heda’s entire career was spent in Haarlem, where he took an active role in the Guild of Saint Luke. His name first appears on the guild rolls of 1631, the year in which he assisted Salomon de Bray (1597–1664) in its reorganization.¹ Heda was elected *deken* in 1642 and 1652, and was a *hoofdman* in 1637, 1643, and 1651. One of his sons, Gerret Willemsz. Heda (q.v.) was mentioned as his apprentice in a document dated 7 July 1642.

Although he painted some portraits and figural compositions, Heda specialized in still-life painting. He was unquestionably one of the greatest masters of the genre. As is evident from his early vanitas still lifes, Heda was influenced by the Haarlem painter Floris van Schooten (active c. 1617–1655). His breakfast pieces also grew out of the Haarlem still-life tradition of the early seventeenth century, as was already noted during his lifetime by Haarlem historian Theodorus Schrevelius, who wrote that Heda painted “fruit, and all kinds of knick-knacks” in the manner of Floris van Dijck (1575–1651). Heda’s paintings evolved from additive compositions to monumental, monochrome breakfast and banquet pieces, executed with delicate brushwork that captured a wide range of materials and textures.

Heda and Pieter Claesz. (1597/1598–1660) were the principal still-life artists in Haarlem until well after mid-century. Heda also had great influence on painters in other artistic centers, among them the Amsterdam artist Jan Jansz. den Uyl (c. 1595–1640).

Notes

1. See Taverne 1972–1973, 50–69.

Bibliography

- Schrevelius 1648: 390.
Van der Willigen 1870: 156–157.
Van Gelder 1941.
Bergström 1956: 123–134.
Vroom 1980, 1: 53–78; 2: 65–80, nos. 324–392.
Delft 1988: 121–140.

1991.87.1

Banquet Piece with Mince Pie

1635

Oil on canvas, 106.7 x 111.1 (42 x 43¾)

Patrons’ Permanent Fund

Inscriptions

On edge of tablecloth at right: ·HEDA· 1635·

On edge of tablecloth at left: unidentified monogram

Technical Notes: The support, a medium-weight, plain-woven fabric, is unlined and delicate, with small tears and fraying where folded over the stretcher. Small 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 primed on a stretching frame. A thick mustard-colored ground layer is employed as a mid-tone in the tablecloth.

Paint is applied in smooth wet-over-dry layers with impasted highlights, transparent glazes, and thin opaque scumbles. Scattered small losses and areas of slight abrasion have been retouched. A small remnant of an aged varnish remains in the shadows to the right of the fallen tazza. No conservation has been carried out since acquisition.

Provenance: Private collection, the Netherlands, 1948; by inheritance to a subsequent owner; (sale, Ader-Picard-Tajan, Paris, 22 June 1990, no. 39); (Galerie Sanct Lucas, Vienna; Bruno Meissner, Zurich; and Otto Naumann, New York).

DISPLAYED in this imposing painting are the remains of 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*, and the broken one lying on a pewter dish. Heda has led us to believe that 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. As an adjunct to the meal were oysters, to be seasoned with vinegar from the shell-shaped Venetian glass decanter. Salt, prominently displayed in the silver salt cellar, and pepper, contained within the paper cone made from an almanac page, were also expensive seasonings available to the guests. Imported olives and a simple roll rounded out the feast,



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



Fig. 2. Jan Davidsz. de Heem and Nicolaes van Veerendael, *Flowers with Crucifix and Skull*, c. 1665, oil on canvas, Munich, Alte Pinakothek

which would have been washed down with ample glasses of beer.

This banquet piece, one of the largest known still lifes by Willem 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 relined, the remarkable sheen of glass, pewter, silver, and gilded bronze, for which Heda is so admired, is extremely well preserved. The rich impasto 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, which 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 1634.² It also occurs in two still lifes from 1635, including the *Still Life with Gilt Goblet* (fig. 1).³ The same broken *roemer* occurs in one of the still lifes from 1634.⁴ The Venetian glass decanter, the salt cellar, the large glass *roemer*, and the pewter pitcher all appear in other works (see especially the Amsterdam painting).

Heda's intent, so far as one can determine, was 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 in the way he suggested



Willem Claesz. Heda, *Banquet Piece with Mince Pie*, 1691.87.1

light reflecting off the various textures of the 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's selection of objects was carefully chosen to convey a general thematic message, one frequently encountered in still-life paintings of the time.⁵ The sensual pleasures of the feast and the luxuries of the world are only temporary and not eternal. The snuffed-out candle indicates not only the end of the meal, but also the transience of life itself.⁶ The same message is conveyed by the broken glass and the sheet of the almanac used to hold the pepper.⁷ Underlying these warnings were theological issues current in both Catholic and Protestant thought: sensual pleasures threatened to distract man from the message of Christ's sacrifice and from the overriding significance of God's word. Jan Davidsz. de Heem (q.v.), a Catholic artist, explicitly conveyed this Christian message by juxtaposing a crucifix with a luscious bouquet of flowers (fig. 2).⁸ De Heem included a text in his painting that laments that man does not observe the "most beautiful flower of all." The implication is that instead of focusing on the message of Christ's sacrifice, man is distracted by the temporal pleasures of flowers and luscious fruit.⁹ With Heda, the same idea is conveyed in a more subtle way. Here, while man has enjoyed the pleasures of exotic spices, rich meats, and oysters¹⁰ and dined with expensive and finely wrought objects made of rare materials, he has overlooked the most fundamental nourishment of all, the simple roll in

the foreground. Given the central placement of the roll on a plate that extends into the viewer's space, and the fact that it has traditional eucharistic connotations, its untouched state is neither accidental nor without iconographical significance.¹¹

Notes

1. An unusual feature of this painting is this unidentified monogram. It does not appear to be an artist's monogram. Dr. Pieter Biesboer, curator, Frans Halsmuseum, Haarlem, has suggested (verbally) that it is the mark of the linen maker.

2. See Vroom 1980, 1: no. 335, fig. 71 (private collection, the Netherlands), signed and dated 1632; no. 340, fig. 74 (Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam), signed and dated 1634; no. 341, fig. 67, (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam), signed and dated 1634.

3. Inv. no. A 4830, acquired in 1984, oil on wood, 88 x 113 cm. The other 1635 dated picture where the tazza appears was auctioned at Sotheby's, New York, 10 January 1991, no. 66.

4. Vroom 1980, 1: no. 340.

5. For a discussion of these issues see Wheelock in Washington 1989a, 11–25.

6. Cats 1629, 1: section title "Emblemata Moralia et Aeconomica," Emblem XX, "Liceat Sperare Timenti." I would like to thank Quint Gregory, a graduate student at the University of Maryland, for calling my attention to this emblem.

7. See Delft 1988, 137.

8. Alte Pinakothek, Munich, inv. no. 568.

9. See the entry on De Heem's *Flowers with Crucifix and Shell* in Washington 1988, cat. 33, 136–138.

10. Oysters were seen as a potent aphrodisiac. For a discussion of the meaning of oysters in Dutch art see Cheney 1987, 135–158.

11. This interpretation was first suggested to me by Quint Gregory. Similar ideas are found in still-life paintings by Pieter Claesz. See Lowenthal 1986b, 188–190. See also Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., "Introduction," in Winterthur/Washington 1989, 26; and also 50, cat. 11.

Jan Davidsz. de Heem

1606–1683/1684

JAN DAVIDSZ. DE HEEM was born in Utrecht to a Catholic family. He received his early training with his father, David de Heem the Elder (1570–1632), who was also a painter. In 1626 he moved to Leiden where he married his first wife, Aletta van Weede, a native of Utrecht. Nearly a decade later, in

1635, De Heem moved to Antwerp and entered its Saint Luke's Guild. A year after the death of Aletta in 1643, the painter married Anna Ruckers, a native of Antwerp. Although he would spend many years in her hometown, De Heem also spent periods of time in the north. In addition to an extended stay in