



Still Life, 1645

Jan Davidsz. de Heem (Dutch, 1606 – 1684)

Oil on canvas | 36 x 46 ½ in. (91.4 x 118.1 cm)

- What kinds of people had access to these foods in the 17th century?

VISUAL ANALYSIS

This painting depicts serving trays of food consisting of fruit, seafood, and drinks that have been set out on a small table. The painting exhibits extraordinary detail that can only be appreciated with a close look at the minute brush strokes that construct this work. The artist uses a palette of muted, though colorful, tones: the two items that stand out the most

are the pomegranate, as the inside is a bright red, and the zested lemon, as the rind has been painted a bright yellow-gold. The scene is balanced and logical in a way that adds to the appearance of reality, with a vertical line of symmetry, groupings of threes and four, and balancing different colors and textures throughout. The differing stages of consumption and aging of the food depicts the ephemeral nature of the material world and creates the illusion of time passing in a singular moment.

FUNCTION/Form & Style

The concept of *vanitas* defined a painting that contrasts the ephemerality

- Why would the issues of decadence, death, and material gain were subjects that the middle class felt the need to contemplate?
- How does the subject of “decaying decadence” as seen through the aging fruit accurately encompass the idea of vanitas?

of mankind in his world of desire and material possessions to the inevitability of death and destruction. De Heem immortalized this concept by developing the *pronkstillevens*, which was a stilllife painted for the sole purpose of showing off or impressing others; this type of painting was the direct result of the marriage of ideals and objects associated with vanitas with the fruit and flower subjects De Heem had become so famous for painting. He expressed these concepts in his work by incorporating exotic and luxurious foods and fruits to which the common man would not have had access, such as crustaceans, pomegranates, and elaborate glass carafes. In this way, De Heem used his work to reflect on daily life for the expanding middle class in the Netherlands during this time.

CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE

The works of de Heem had a pervasive effect on the other artists in his contemporary community, and on painters of still-lives for years to come. His work had the strongest impact in Antwerp, Utrecht, and Leyden where he lived. During his tenure in Antwerp he founded and ran a successful studio, through which his theories and techniques of painting became the standard for numerous 17th century Dutch and Flemish painters of flowers and stilllives.

Additionally, a portrait that was a part of his *oeuvre* was quoted as having the highest value of any painting during this Golden Age, showing the overall importance, popularity, and quality of the work he produced.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Jan Davidz. de Heem was born in Utrecht, a city in the Netherlands, in 1608. During his life, he also spent ten years in Leyden and thirty years in Antwerp, where he would eventually die in 1684. The botanical garden in the city of Leyden offered ample opportunity for de Heem to make studies of organic elements, as seen in *Still Life*. The most memorable works from this period were his *vanitas* still-lives, which were less somber than other contemporary pieces and had none of the complicated symbolic elements. The greater population, however, did not begin to take note of his career until he began work in Antwerp in 1636. The city was an international port of some renown, famous for exotic fruits imported from all over the world. These fruits were often featured in De Heem’s works, as exemplified in this painting. By 1667, he returned to his hometown of Utrecht, but political deterioration and a subsequent war with France drove him back to Antwerp in 1672, where he remained until his death.

VOCABULARY

Oeuvre: The works of a writer, painter, or the like, taken as a whole.

Pronkstillevens: Ornate or sumptuous still-lives meant to display wealth and decadence.

Vanitas: Type of painting concerned with the fragility of man and his world of desires and pleasures in the face of the inevitability and finality of death.

OHIO ACADEMIC CONTENT STANDARDS

Study of this work and its related classroom activities meets some or all of the following K-12 benchmarks:

- **Language Arts:** Acquisition of Vocabulary; Concepts of Print, Comprehension Strategies and Self-Monitoring Strategies; Informational, Technical, and Persuasive Text; Literary Text; Writing Process; Writing Applications; Research; Communications: Oral and Visual
- **Sciences:** Earth Science; Life Sciences; Science and Technology
- **Social Studies:** History; People in Societies; Geography; Economics; Skills and Methods
- **Visual Art:** Historical, Cultural, and Social Contexts; Analyzing and Responding; Valuing the Arts/Aesthetic Reflection; Connections, Relationships, and Applications

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

LANGUAGE ARTS: What kind of people do you think would have partaken in this meal? Do a “Mad Gab”: write down different adjectives that could describe those people, then pick out different verbs and adverbs that could describe their actions. Then, try to put the different lists of words into sentences. (*Elementary School*)

MATHEMATICS: Count how many different pieces of each fruit there are in this work. What if the number of cherries and the number of grapes were added together? The number of plums and the number of lemons? (*Elementary School*)

SCIENCE: What happens when plants and fruits get older? What is important to make sure that plants stay alive? Design an experiment to test for important factors in plant life—do they need sunshine? Water? Food?

Start a composting project to dispose of aging fruit. Why is composting important? What good things come from fruit that is decaying? What affect does the composted soil have on the growth of the plants in your experiment? (*Elementary and Middle School*)

Start a unit on the hormones that are in plants, perhaps in conjunction with a unit on the human endocrine system. What hormones control the aging of fruits? (*High School*)

SOCIAL STUDIES: Given the different limitations of the environment in 17th century Europe, who would have access to fruits like pomegranates and lemons? Learn about what requirements are needed to grow these foods, and look at their social aspects, such as economic concerns in farming, trading, and differentiations between the classes. (*Middle and High School*)