



Jan Davidsz. de Heem's *Still-Life with Grapes*

IN APPRECIATION

For many years the collection of the Hood Museum of Art has included several exceptional American and European still-life paintings executed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Foremost among them is Pablo Picasso's *Guitar on a Table* of 1912, donated by Nelson A. Rockefeller, Dartmouth Class of 1930. These examples either reflect or question themes initially developed around 1600, when artists began to explore the descriptive and dramatic potential of the natural world in pure landscapes, floral arrangements, and other non-figurative subjects. Until recently, however, the museum did not possess an early work to illustrate the basic subjects that painters were responding to in later periods. In 2006 the Hood Museum of Art purchased *Still-Life with Grapes* by Jan Davidsz. de Heem, a mid-seventeenth-century painter active in both Flanders and Holland, and one of the most talented and renowned artists of this genre.

To commemorate this remarkable acquisition by the Hood, the Currier Museum of Art and the National Gallery of Art have lent two other seventeenth-century paintings with similar subjects. The display of these works by three generations of Dutch artists highlights the early development of *pronkstilleven*s, or sumptuous still-lives. We are indebted to Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., the curator of northern Baroque painting at the National Gallery of Art, for contributing an essay that deftly elucidates these intriguing compositions. Readers are encouraged to refer to his many other publications, listed below, for further insights into this fascinating subject.

The ability to acquire a spectacular still-life by de Heem has been made possible through the generous support of the Mrs. Harvey P. Hood W'18 Fund and the Florence and Lansing Porter Moore 1937 Fund. We are proud and honored to have their support, along with other alumni, parents, and friends of Dartmouth College, who enable us to enhance the quality and scope of the collections of the Hood Museum of Art.

Brian Kennedy
Director

Dr. Wheelock's publications on still-life painting include "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* (National Gallery of Art, 1989); "Trompe-l'oeil Painting: Visual Deceptions or Natural Truths?" in *The Age of the Marvelous* (Hood Museum of Art, 1991); *A Collector's Cabinet* (National Gallery of Art, 1998); *From Botany to Bouquets: Flowers in Northern Art* (National Gallery of Art, 1999); "Illusionism in Dutch and Flemish Art," in *Deceptions and Illusions: Five Centuries of Trompe L'Oeil Painting* (National Gallery of Art, 2002); *Small Wonders: Dutch Still Lifes by Adriaen Coorte* (National Gallery of Art, 2003); and *Pieter Claesz* (National Gallery of Art, 2005).

In Celebration of Jan Davidsz. de Heem's *Still-Life with Grapes*

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

CAPTIONS

FIGURE 1. Balthasar van der Ast, *Still Life of Fruit on a Kraak Porcelain Dish*, 1617, oil on panel, 22 x 35 in., monogrammed and dated: B.V.A. An° 1617. Currier Museum of Art. Museum Purchase: Henry Melville Fuller Fund; 2004.15

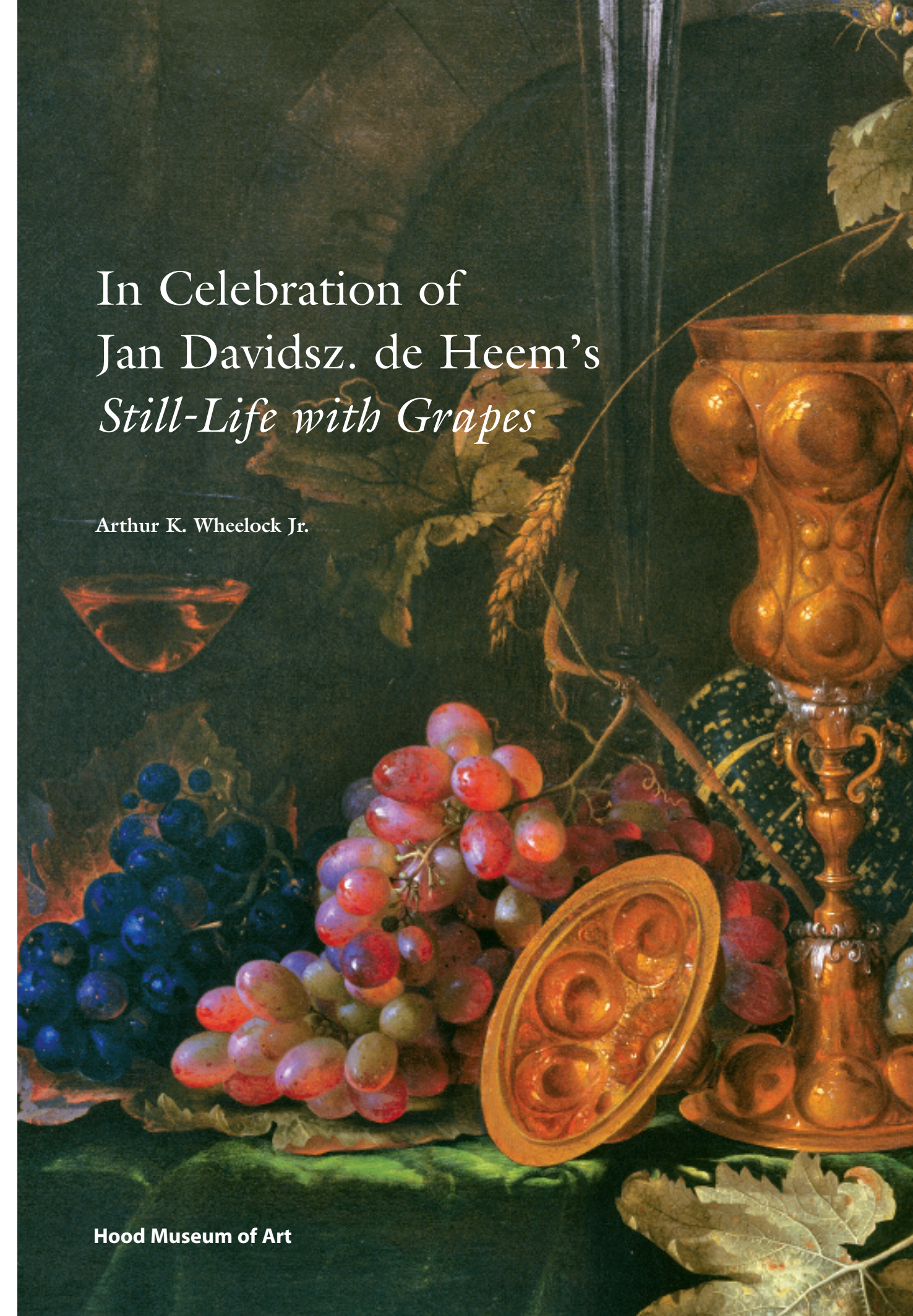
FIGURE 2. Jan Davidsz. de Heem, *Still-Life with Grapes*, late 1660s, oil on canvas, 28 1/2 x 34 1/4 in., signed in the upper left corner: J D' De Heem f. Hood Museum of Art. Purchased through the Mrs. Harvey P. Hood W'18 Fund and the Florence and Lansing Porter Moore 1937 Fund; 2006.11

FIGURE 3. Abraham Mignon, *Still Life with Fruit, Fish, and a Nest*, about 1675, oil on canvas, 36 1/4 x 28 3/4 in., neither signed nor dated. National Gallery of Art. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. H. John Heinz III; 1989.23.1

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Fruits are one of life’s great delicacies. Sensuous to look at, hold, and taste, their visceral delights have inspired artists and writers throughout the centuries. The etymology of the word “fruit” stems from the Latin *fructus*, “to enjoy,” and, indeed, whether with Bacchus and his grapes or Tom Jones and his figs, the associations brought forth by fruit are primarily ones of intense sensual pleasure. The most notorious of these associations, of course, is with Eve, who so effectively enticed Adam with the forbidden apple that the wayward couple was thrown out of the Garden of Eden.

Fruits, of course, provide sustenance as well as pleasure. They grow and ripen with the nourishment



FIGURE 1

of sun and rain, yet their bounty increases when they are nurtured through careful husbandry of the land. A “fruitful harvest” may well be the pride of an individual farmer, a village, or a nation, but it may also be a metaphor for the rewards of a life well lived. As the Bible relates: “By their fruits ye shall know them” (Matthew 7:16). Metaphorical associations of fruit with bounty and well-being abound but are particularly well expressed in a mid-seventeenth-century poem by Andrew Marvell:

What wond’rous life is this I lead!
Ripe apples drop about my head;
The luscious clusters of the vine
Upon my mouth do crush their wine;
The nectarine and curious peach,
Into my hands themselves do reach;
Stumbling on melons, as I pass,
Insnar’d with flow’rs, I fall on grass.
 (“Thoughts in a Garden,” verse 5, in
The Oxford Book of English Verse, 1250–1918,
Oxford, 1961, 403).

The seventeenth-century Dutch artists who created the sumptuous still lifes on display at the Hood Museum of Art, organized to celebrate the recent acquisition of Jan Davidsz. de Heem’s *Still-Life with Grapes* (figure 2), fully embraced both the sensual and the bountiful associations of fruit. De Heem, along with Balthasar van der Ast in his *Still Life of Fruit on a Porcelain Dish* (figure 1) and Abraham Mignon in his *Still Life with Fish, Fruit, and a Nest* (figure 3), understood how to convey the softness of the fruits’ surfaces, the organic rhythms of their stems and leaves, and the varied colors and textures of each and every plant. These artists could capture the fragile beauty of fruit as well as the sense of hope and joy that it represents. Their paintings are so real we almost believe that we could wet our fingers on the water droplets, and that the fruits’ aroma—and not the artist’s brush—has drawn the dragonflies, birds, and bees to alight on their surfaces.

These paintings, with their focus on fruit, represent a fascinating facet of Dutch still life, one intimately related to the flower still lifes for which these artists are also famous. In fact, early-seventeenth-century Dutch painters often created fruit and flower still lifes as pendants. They painted complementary images of fruit and flowers to celebrate the beauty and abundance of God’s creation. Fine Wan-Li porcelain plates tucked into baskets of fruit and exotic shells arrayed on tables, moreover, reflected the Dutch fascination with distant lands, a fascination enhanced by the successful trade expeditions of the Dutch East India Company. Allegorically, these various pictorial components also represent the four elements; fruit was traditionally associated with the earth, flowers with air, shells with water, and fine china with fire.

Van der Ast (1593–1657) grew up in Middelburg as the brother-in-law and pupil of the earliest seventeenth-century Dutch still-life artist, Ambrosius Bosschaert (1573–1639). He then followed his master to Bergen op Zoom in 1615, and shortly thereafter to Utrecht, where, in 1619, van der Ast became a master in the Saint Luke’s Guild. After a successful career in Utrecht, he moved to Delft in 1633, where he lived for the rest of his life. The large and beautifully preserved still life by van der Ast from the Currier Museum of Art, which is signed and dated 1617, is his earliest dated work. Executed even before he became a master in the painter’s guild, it demonstrates what an extremely precocious artist he really was.

Van der Ast learned about the fundamentals of still-life painting from Bosschaert, in particular the accurate depiction of flowers, fruit, shells, insects, baskets, and porcelain. He also adapted Bosschaert’s compositional ideas, including the central placement of a large pictorial element amidst an array of objects situated on a stone ledge. Finally, van der Ast’s allegorical framework would also have been quite familiar to his master. Not only did he choose pictorial motifs that reflected the four elements, he also embraced the philosophical notion that the careful rendering of flora and fauna rendered homage to God.

Van der Ast, however, expressed his distinctive artistic personality in this early work by focusing upon fruit rather than the flowers favored by Bosschaert. He also imbued his still life with a new sense of realism. *Still Life of Fruit on a Porcelain Dish* feels alive because turning leaves and twisting tendrils are silhouetted against the dark background, and because inquisitive insects, including flies, a snail, a butterfly, and a dragonfly, populate the scene. Apricot leaves, moist with water droplets, seemingly invade the viewer’s space by spilling over the front edge of the cracked and chipped stone ledge. All of these effects are brought into harmony through the subtle play of light and shadow across the painting’s surface.

FIGURE 2



Abraham Mignon (1640–1679) worked at the opposite end of the seventeenth century, and although his visual vocabulary was far more complex than van der Ast’s, he too sought to evoke an aura of abundance and fertility in his paintings. In *Still Life with Fish, Fruit, and a Nest*, executed in the mid-1670s, Mignon placed together the fruits of the land and of the sea in a dark, cavernous setting. The catch of the day, still hanging from hooks attached to lines that drape over the edge of the bait box, glistens in the cavern’s subdued light. A fishing pole and its case lie at rest on the brilliantly lit and colorful pears, plums, grapes, and peaches spilling over the wicker basket. A nest with four eggs sitting in the branches of the hibiscus is watched over by various birds, including a pair of goldfinches and a great tit. Frogs, snails, caterpillars, and lizards further enliven this woodland scene.

Mignon shares van der Ast’s attraction to certain still life elements for their allegorical interest as well as their pictorial appeal. His painting may well create an aura of abundance, but it also suggests various stages of the cycle of life, including birth (the nest of eggs), maturity (the ripe fruit and blossoming flowers), and death (the fish and a lizard whose lifeless body has attracted a horde of ants). Moreover, woven throughout this complex composition are stalks of wheat, which, in combination with the

prominently displayed grapes, have strong Eucharistic connotations.

Mignon was born in Frankfurt in 1640, where he was baptized in the Calvinist Church. He studied there with the still-life painter and bulb dealer Jacob Marrell (1614–1681), then moved with Marrell to Utrecht in 1669, where both artists joined the Saint Luke’s Guild. In that very year Jan Davidsz. de Heem, an artist who would prove to be an even greater influence on Mignon’s style than Marrell, joined the Utrecht painters’ guild as well. De Heem, who was Catholic, had been born in Utrecht in 1606, but in 1626 he moved to Leiden and then to Antwerp, where he remained for some years while maintaining close contacts with his native city. By the time de Heem rejoined the Utrecht Saint Luke’s Guild, he had become one of the most famous still life painters of the day. Not only was he renowned for his sensitive rendering of flowers and fruit but also for the realism with which he depicted elegant silver and silver-gilt objects in his elaborate, or “*pronk*,” compositions. Despite their religious differences, de Heem’s artistic impact on Mignon was immediate and enormous. The bright colors, complex composition, and allegorical and religious associations underlying Mignon’s *Still Life with Fish, Fruit and a Nest* are, in large part, the result of de Heem’s influence.

With its array of fruit, delicate glassware, costly silver-gilt goblet, and gold-fringed green velvet cloth, de Heem’s *Still-Life with Grapes* is the type of tour de force patrons would have sought from such a master. It is so profoundly dynamic in character, with its flowing rhythms of cascading grapes, curled leaves, twisting tendrils, and stalks of wheat, not to mention the teeming insects flying, gliding, and crawling over these forms, that the painting can hardly be termed a “still” life. Indeed, it is fascinating to realize that this imposing work and Van der Ast’s spare and symmetrically arranged tabletop still life actually belong to the same pictorial tradition.

De Heem probably executed this still life in the late 1660s in Utrecht, although it should be noted that he might have painted it for a Flemish patron, as he was also active in Antwerp in that decade. The still life’s distinctive asymmetrical composition, with grapes and wheat streaming down from the upper right corner, suggests that it was conceived for a specific location, perhaps with a liturgical function. De Heem goes Mignon one better in the implicit religious connotations of these elements: he has arranged the grapes and wheat so that they seem to caress the large, silver-gilt, bulbous cup at the center



FIGURE 3

of the composition, a cup whose Eucharistic significance is further emphasized by the stone arch that frames it.

A particularly unusual aspect of this composition is the fact that the blue bow, stalks of wheat, and grape tendrils are visually cut at the painting’s upper and right edges. Technical examinations have revealed that the painting still has its original tacking margins; thus, de Heem probably originally extended the still life image onto a surrounding frame, thereby enhancing the painting’s already extraordinary pictorial illusionism. In this way the two-dimensional world of the painting would have quite literally become part of the three-dimensional world of the viewer.

These three paintings are stunning to behold, for each of these artists, in his own way, depicted aspects of the visual world that have profound associations for mankind. In these works one can enjoy the sensual appeal of fruits—not only their rich colors and evocative shapes, but also their pliant skins and moist textures. One can witness their organic rhythms and explore the ways in which these artists have enriched their scenes by juxtaposing natural forms and man-made objects. These still lifes, however, also challenge the viewer to ponder a range of philosophical and religious ideas that enhance their enormous visual appeal. In the midst of these works we come to see the world with new eyes, and even to understand ourselves more fully.