

Step 4: Interpretation

Interpretation involves bringing together your close observation, analysis, and any additional information you have gathered about a work of art to try to understand what it means.

There can be multiple interpretations of a work of art. The best-informed ones are based on visual evidence and accurate research.

Some interpretive questions to consider for this painting might be:

Why would a wealthy Dutch merchant want to own this painting?

What does it tell us about seventeenth-century Holland or Flanders?

What does it tell us about the relationship between art, science, and religion in the seventeenth century?

Step 5: Critical Assessment and Response

This final stage involves a judgment of the success of a work of art. Critical assessment deals with questions of value and can include more personal and subjective responses to art.

Do you think this painting is successful and well done?

Do you like it? Does it move you? Is it relevant to your life?

We hope this approach has enhanced your exploration and enjoyment of this painting. If you like, you can try this method with other works of art. Simply ask yourself with each work:

What do I see?
(Close Observation)

What do I think?
(Analysis)

How can I learn more?
(Research)

What might it mean?
(Interpretation)

How do I feel about it?
(Critical Assessment and Response)

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MUSEUM OF ART

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Jan Davidsz. de Heem, Dutch,
1606–1684

A Still-Life with Grapes
1660s

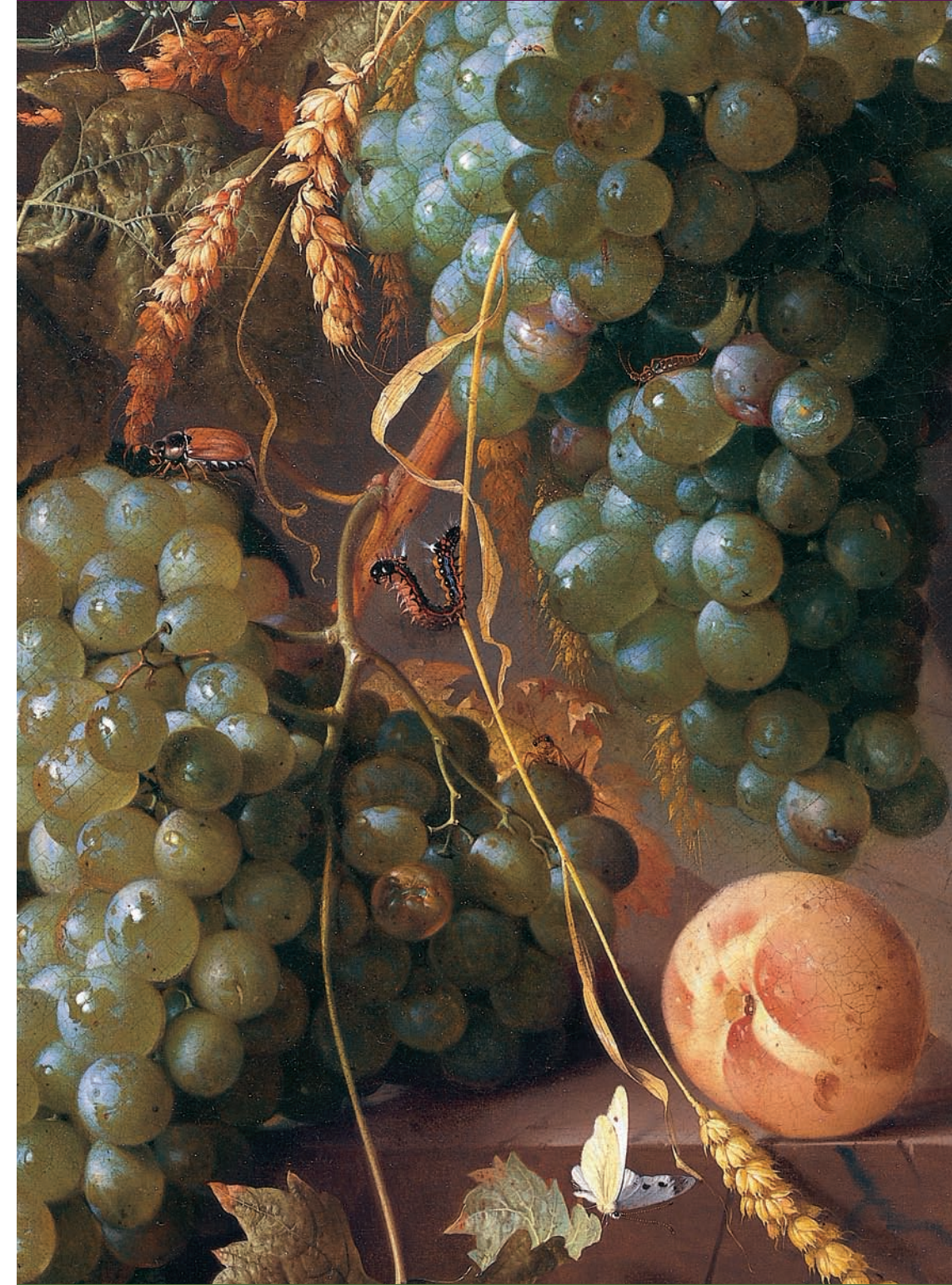
Oil on canvas
Purchased through the Mrs. Harvey P. Hood W'18 Fund and the Florence and Lansing Porter Moore 1937 Fund;
2006.11

Jan Davidsz. de Heem, active in both Flanders and Holland, was one of the most talented, versatile, and influential still-life painters of the seventeenth century. He was a key figure in the development of fancy or sumptuous still-lives and then as now was admired for his uncanny ability to simulate on canvas the appearance of fruit, flowers, and beautiful objects fashioned from silver, gold, or other precious materials.

A Still-Life with Grapes testifies to de Heem's standing as an artist of the first rank. A triumph of illusionistic painting in its rendering of textures, space, and the effects of light, it presents a lavish display of natural and man-made objects. The close observation of details and the superior craftsmanship of *A Still-Life with Grapes* easily met the expectations of a growing number of wealthy middle-class Netherlanders who placed the highest value on the artist's ability to record "with a sincere hand and a faithful eye" a variety of natural and man-made objects. These expectations coincided with an equally deep interest in the natural sciences and optics. Animal and plant life were being studied and documented as never before, and previously unknown worlds were revealed through the lenses of the microscope and telescope, both invented in the early 1600s. The squash and corn reflect Dutch interests in foreign lands and the successful trade expeditions of the Dutch East India Company.

De Heem's painting offers much more than knowledge of the physical world, however. Like many other still-life paintings from the period, it contains hidden symbols. For instance, the many insects, because of their short life spans, signify the transience of life. The objects in the picture can be appreciated for what they are—products of nature—but to many seventeenth-century viewers they also revealed specifically religious associations. The grapes, wine, wheat stalks, and corn are traditional symbols of the bread and wine served at Holy Communion, a central act of Christian worship. This ritual is emphasized especially by the goblet in the center of the composition, framed by a stone arch barely visible in the painting's background. It is given pride of place as if it were the chalice containing the communion wine. The peach nearby represents salvation. A masterful combination of Christian symbolism and superbly rendered forms, *A Still-Life with Grapes* encourages the viewer to ponder the sacraments of Christianity at the same time that it celebrates the splendor of the material world.

A Closer Look



HOOD MUSEUM OF ART

DARTMOUTH COLLEGE

NUMBER FOUR IN A SERIES

A Closer Look

As a teaching museum, the Hood Museum of Art is committed to helping visitors develop visual literacy skills—the ability to construct meaning from all that we see. One way it does this is through a method called **Learning to Look**. This five-step approach to exploring works of art is designed to empower visitors to observe carefully and think critically about any work of art they encounter.

Simply follow the steps below to practice this technique.

Step 1: Close Observation

Look carefully at this painting.

What do you see?



What do you notice about the skill of the artist? The colors used?

Where is the light coming from? What does it illuminate?

What is the setting for this composition? Is it inside? Outside?



What fruits and vegetables do you see?



What do you notice about the grapes? The different varieties? Their freshness?



Something is lurking among the leaves. How many insects can you find?



What do you notice about the goblet and glassware?

How are these objects arranged on the canvas?



Can you see the nail in the blue bow in the upper right corner holding the cascade of grapes and wheat in place?

Step 2: Analysis

Without reading the label, think about all of this visual information.

What time of year does this painting show?

Where in the world do you think this painting was made? When do you think it might have been made?

Do the objects depicted have anything in common? Do they bring to mind any associations?

Why do you think there are so many bugs?

As you consider each of these questions, look to the painting for clues to support your ideas.

Step 3: Research

Now that you have had a chance to look carefully and begin forming your own ideas about this work of art, feel free to read the label printed on the back of this brochure. It provides information you cannot get simply by looking at the painting.

When you have finished reading the label, consider the following:

Does the information in the label reinforce what you observed and deduced on your own?

Did it mention anything you did not see or think about previously? If so, what?

How would your experience of this painting have been different if you had read the label first?