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Representation of Food and Feasting in Seventeenth-Century Dutch *Pronkstillevens* (1640-1672)

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Abstract This study investigates the meaning of foods in *pronkstillevens* and the reasons for their appeal to mid-seventeenth-century beholders based on both primary and secondary sources. While Svetlana Alpers argued that still lifes evoked visual pleasure, Eddy de Jongh pointed out their hidden symbolism. *Pronkstillevens* also offered cultural insights and reflected socio-economic conditions of seventeenth-century Netherlands. Julie Berger Hochstrasser claimed that the primacy of Dutch trade was a key to understanding Dutch still life. The major finding of this research is that *pronkstillevens* were captivating, especially for a mercantile class, because of their exquisite lifelikeness, the representation of admirable affluence and the association to powerful commerce.

Pronkstillevens (Sumptuous still lifes) first emerged in the 1640s. They were characterised by large compositions of extravagant banquets, featuring lavish foods and *pronk* artefacts such as intricate silverware, gold goblets and Chinese porcelains.¹ (Fig. 1)



Figure 1. Jan Davidsz. de Heem, *A Table of Desserts*, 1640. Oil on canvas, 149 x 203 cm (Louvre Museum, Paris).

Visual qualities

The rendering of textures: The diverse textures of food are imitated painstakingly.

Houding: A degree of pictorial depth that is reached by harmonious use of composition, colour and lighting, is evident in *pronkstillevens*.

Light and shade: The use of a dark background draws the viewers' attention to colours, textures and compositions and generates a striking light effect.²

Reflections: The subtle reflections enliven the painting as a visual masterpiece. (Fig. 2)



Figure 2. Willem Kalf, *Still life with Drinking-Horn*, c. 1653. Oil on canvas, 86.4 x 102.2 cm (National Gallery, London).

Deeper meanings

Christian symbols: Grapes, bread and citrus fruit can be interpreted as religious items.³

The vanity of earthy life: While rotten fruit can symbolise evanescence, handmade crafts might allude to everlasting life.⁴

A moral lesson on moderation: The inscription 'NIET hoe veel' (Not too much) on a 1652 painting by de Heem alludes to the theme of temperance.⁵ Most other still lifes do not include texts.

A celebration of wealth: The great variety of exotic foods and remarkable valuables embody incomparable natural bounty and material prosperity, evoking satisfaction.⁶ (Fig. 3)

Conclusion *Pronkstillevens* were visually pleasing for 17th-century audiences. Although there might be moralising messages in paintings with texts, *pronkstillevens* were most likely to be associated with satisfactory wealth. Foods were fascinating because they embraced Dutch prosperity and powerful trade. More than everyday objects, foods signify pride to Dutch burghers. Colonialism represented in *pronkstillevens* can be explored further.

References 1. Sam Segal, *A Prosperous Past: The Sumptuous Still Life in the Netherlands, 1600-1700* (The Hague: SDU Publishers, 1988), 15; 2. Alan Chong, "Contained Under the Name of Still Life: The Associations of Still-Life Painting" in *Still lifes from the Netherlands 1550-1720*, 29-30; 3. Segal, *A Prosperous Past*, 149; 4. Ibid., 100; 5. Ibid., 148-9; 6. Chong, "Contained Under the Name", 174; 7. Segal, *A Prosperous Past*, 20-30; 8. Norman Bryson, *Looking at The Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion, 1990), 125-8; 9. Donna R. Barnes and Peter G. Rose, *Matters of Taste: Food and Drink in Seventeenth-century Dutch Art and Life* (Albany: Albany Institute of History & Art, 2002), 22; 10. Johan van Beverwyck, *Schat der Gesontheyt* (1636), quoted in Julie Berger Hochstrasser, *Still Life and Trade in the Dutch Golden Age* (London: Yale University Press, 2007), 63; 11. John Loughman, "The Market for Netherlandish Still Lifes, 1600-1720" in *Still Lifes from the Netherlands 1550-1720*, 87; 12. Barnes and Rose, *Matters of Taste*, 14; 13. Hochstrasser, *Still Life and Trade*, 63-9; 14. Ibid., 75-7.

Cultural Significance

Humanist interests: Foods may have been appreciated for their earthly nature and for the sake of study triggered by Renaissance ideals.⁷

Conspicuous consumption: Comestibles are brought out of their natural habitat to suggest utilisation and are displayed within an abstract space to embody wealth.⁸ (Fig. 2)

Food customs: *Pronkstillevens* indicated eating habits of the rich in the 1600s, for example, white bread was the food of the rich.⁹

Health benefits: Cold oysters can be digested more easily when they are paired with lemons and the lemon can prevent eaters from being poisoned.¹⁰



Figure 3. Jan Davidsz. de Heem, *Abundant Still Life with a Parrot*, c. 1655. Oil on canvas, 115.5 x 169.5 cm (Gemäldegalerie der Akademie der bildende Künste, Vienna).

The Dutch Golden Age - a period in the 1600s characterised by the economic growth of the Dutch Republic, a maritime nation.

Patronage and art market: 17th-century European royal and aristocratic members loved illusionistic paintings.¹¹

Artists added grandeur to their paintings to meet the demand of an elite merchant and regent class, who built grand houses. Delicacies depicted in *pronkstillevens* could imply the owners' good taste in food and stimulate the appetite of their guests, thus conveying hospitality.¹²

Dutch primacy in trade: Bread was a principal product of Dutch commerce. The Netherlands proudly protected its citizens from hunger crises.¹³ As a result of sea trade, lemons were transported more easily to the Netherlands from the Mediterranean.¹⁴ Oranges in still lifes were a sweet variation from China. Today oranges are still called *sinaasappel* (China's apple) in Dutch.¹⁵

The absence of domestic foods: Cheese, butter and herrings are replaced by foreign items. (Fig. 4)



Figure 4. Willem Kalf, *Still Life with a Nautilus Goblet*, 1662. Oil on canvas, 79.4 x 67.3 cm (Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, Madrid).