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Art

In Dutch Still Lifes, Dark Secrets Hide behind Exotic Delicacies

Julia Fiore

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Jan Davidsz de Heem, *Still Life with Ham, Lobster and Fruit*, c. 1653. Photo via Wikimedia Commons.

The Dutch Golden Age led to a tremendous outpouring of still-life paintings in the 17th century. Since then, critics have generally belonged to two opposing schools of thought when it comes to interpreting them.

On one side, the generally somber scenes are read symbolically through the lens of Christian religious traditions, often underscoring life's transience (the proliferation of rotting fruit, withered flowers, and slowly draining hourglasses offer sobering examples of *memento mori*, reminders of death). Alternatively, scholars assess the artist's skill in employing an array of visual effects in these banquet scenes, floral arrangements, or *vanitas* paintings. But while still lifes are generally thought to be devoid of narrative, certain deeper meanings come into focus once you look beyond the metaphors and showy artistic tricks.

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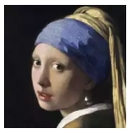
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The prosperous Dutch Golden Age was largely fostered by wealth reaped from overseas trading and colonial ventures. Exotic luxuries from all over the world poured into Dutch ports: fruits from across the Mediterranean; tobacco from the New World; spices and precious gems from India; tea, silk, and porcelain from China and Japan; sugar from colonies in Brazil and Guyana; and slaves from Africa. Private organizations like the Dutch East India Trading Company and the Dutch state aggressively pursued their economic agendas overseas, and the brutal legacy of colonialism is still felt today.

Hendrik Cornelisz Vroom
The Return to Amsterdam of the Second Expedition to the East Indies, 1599
"Asia > Amsterdam" at Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

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As the prosperity of Dutch society increased, the general public became more engrossed with the amusements of everyday life, including education, commerce, and material goods. These changes had enormous repercussions on the art market, and it's no coincidence that the still life arose as an independent genre in Europe parallel to the birth of early market capitalism and the world's first consumer society.

Naturally, Dutch citizens wanted to celebrate, and immortalize, the trappings of their newfound luxury. Therefore, from the beginning of the 17th century, Dutch artists started to incorporate these highly valued imports into their paintings. The genre evolved from smaller, modest compositions spotlighting locally available goods early in the century to larger, more sumptuous arrays of predominantly foreign commodities. The paintings became increasingly lavish and elaborate, in step with the growing affluence from trade that the Netherlands enjoyed.

In the early decades of the century, colorful *ontbijtjes* ("breakfast pieces")—which typically show the ingredients of a simple meal—were in vogue. Clara Peeters, one of the few female artists from the time, is credited with helping to introduce this type of still life into the Dutch painting tradition. Her *Still Life with Cheeses, Artichoke, and Cherries* (ca. 1625) shows a richly painted, though humble, spread of mostly local products.

Indeed, the painting has a nationalistic flavor. The butter and huge cheese wheels that dominate the composition evince cultural pride in Dutch agriculture (milk, called the "noble liquid," has become such an integral marker of Dutch heritage that Johannes Vermeer's *Milkmaid*, 1657–58, seems almost a cliché). At the same time, this still life's humility reflects prevailing Calvinist sentiments. The crust of the hard biscuit, symbolizing daily life, crumbles on the counter. The work is intensely realistic—every scrape of the serrated knife is reflected in the butter, for instance. The flowering artichoke and beautiful red cherries reflected on a silver plate punctuate the largely brown-hued composition. An eaten cherry at the edge of the table, only the stem and pit remaining, is a gentle reminder of the impermanence of life. But paintings, of course, were valued for their permanence. Here, the food never spoils.

Clara Peeters
Still Life with Cheeses, Artichoke, and Cherries, ca. 1625
Los Angeles County Museum of Art

A decade or two later, commercial goods from all over the world began to be imported with more frequency. Such products became necessary, widely available property for everyday Dutchmen. A group of Haarlem-based painters, led by Pieter Claesz and Willem Claesz Heda, introduced *banketjes* ("banquet pieces") into the still-life repertoire. These sumptuous paintings reflect and celebrate this increasing prosperity and the country's international exploration (and dominance).

Heda's *Banquet Piece with Mince Pie* from 1635 gathers a far more extravagant spread than Peeter's quaint breakfast scene. The warm and muted palette here exemplifies the so-called "monochrome" style Dutch artists preferred for still lifes and landscapes between the 1620s and late 1640s. The gold, silver, and pewter accents pop against the neutral background and white tablecloth. The scale of this painting shows these foods and objects near life-size, and viewers are further drawn into the scene by the plates and lemon peel balancing precariously off the table ledge.

Among the offerings here are olives and a lemon imported from across the Mediterranean, oysters with vinegar, and precious seasonings like salt and peppercorn. The star of this banquet, however, is the mince pie. Seasoned with expensive imported currants and spices from India and the Near East, mince pie was a delicacy served only on festive occasions.

Willem Claesz Heda
Banquet Piece with Mince Pie, 1635
National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.
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As Washington's National Gallery of Art notes, among these trappings of wealth and indulgence, familiar omens of impermanence—and ultimately death—linger in the picture, where much is amiss: glasses are broken and goblets toppled; the pie lies half-eaten; the candle has gone out. The empty oyster shells littering the table advise a similar moral caution. As today, oysters were regarded as powerful aphrodisiacs. Juxtaposed with the uneaten roll in the center of the painting, the oysters suggest that these unseen banqueters, after enjoying the pleasures of the flesh, have ignored their salvation, signified by the bread of life.

In his 1990 book of essays *Looking at the Overlooked*, art historian Norman Bryson calls such a scene—of tipped-over goblets, stacked plates, rumpled tablecloths, and broken glasses—a "still life of disorder" that represents the ongoing battle between vice and pleasure, virtue and abstention. But symbols are often slippery: A broken glass, for instance, might also stand for wealth. It was an odd custom for pub patrons to throw glasses over their heads and pay extra for broken glassware (anyone who couldn't afford to do this drank beer with the unwashed masses).

Following the end of the Eighty Years' War with Hapsburg-controlled Spain in 1648, the Netherlands emerged as a vital political, economic, and cultural force. One of the consequences of independence was a shift in the balance of power. In increasingly urbanized Dutch cities like Amsterdam and Haarlem, an upper middle class of wealthy merchants, bankers, and traders held sway, rather than the aristocracy or a monarch.

The rising Dutch merchant class now had more expendable income than ever before, which they chose to use on improving their standard of living, including furnishing their homes with paintings. Much of the subject matter of Dutch art reflects the experiences and aspirations of middle-class urban elites, and the demand for high-quality pictures at affordable prices was insatiable. “Works of art, ranging from simple prints and copies to originals hung in almost all Dutch homes,” writes John Michael Montias in his 1991 book *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History*. In 2004’s *Enchanting the Eye: Dutch Paintings of the Golden Age*, Christopher Lloyd estimates that between 1580 and 1800, approximately 5,000 artists produced between 9 and 10 million paintings (of those, less than 1 percent have survived).

Willem Kalf
Still Life with a Chinese bowl, a Nautilus Cup an...
"Asia > Amsterdam" at Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Johannes Vermeer, *Girl Reading a Letter by an Open Window*, ca. 1659. Courtesy of the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden.

Still lifes helpfully reminded viewers of the prosperity of their republic. At the height of the Golden Age, painters such as Willem Kalf produced fancy *pronk* (“display”) paintings depicting items like Chinese porcelain, Venetian glassware, and silver-gilt cups and trays. In Kalf’s *Still Life with a Chinese bowl, a Nautilus Cup and Fruit* (1662), the glistening effects of light, texture, and color foreground Kalf’s aspiration, like other painters of the era, to outcraft the craftsmen of the precious objects he depicts—such as the Persian carpet on the table, silver tray, and Chinese porcelain sugar bowl.

This bounty draws in different corners of the globe, a proud nod to the ever-expanding Dutch empire. By unpacking specific objects here, seemingly disparate cultures come together, connected by the Netherlands’s globalizing ambitions. The Ming sugar bowl, for instance, simultaneously suggests two different cross-cultural exchanges, one more sinister than the other. The sugar obliquely references one of the most barbaric elements of the global Dutch empire: the horrific, widely documented treatment of slaves on South American plantations. Meanwhile, the typical blue-and-white pattern on the bowl would later be adopted by Delft potters, leading to the famous “Delft Blue” of Dutch earthenware—which, therefore, has Chinese origins. Timothy Brook contends that such Chinese porcelains were so highly valued that the dish in Vermeer’s *Girl*

Reading a Letter at an Open Window, painted around 1657, would have drawn the contemporary viewer's eye from the young woman.

Abraham van Beyeren's *Still Life with Lobster and Fruit* (ca. 1650s) is a far cry from the relative modesty of breakfast paintings made earlier in the century. Instead of white cloth, here the table is laid with a Persian carpet. Lobster replaces herring, imported wine is on offer instead of beer. Exotic fruits from warmer climates spill out of silver-gilt trays. Amidst these extravagant luxuries, the pocket watch in the lower right corner would have suggested to viewers the brevity of life.

Abraham van Beyeren, *Still Life with Lobster and Fruit*, early 1650s. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Juriaen van Streeck, *Still Life with Moor and Porcelain Vessels*, ca. 1670–80. Courtesy of the Sammlung Shack/Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen

Towards the end of the 1600s, still-life painting reached an apex of materialism and cultural insensitivity. In Juriaen van Streeck's *Still Life with Moor and Porcelain Vessels* (ca. 1670), an African slave exotically dressed in a striped silk costume and crimson headgear carries a Chinese bowl filled with lemons and oranges behind a marble table spread with an oyster banquet. Incredibly, the presence of a human being doesn't seem to violate the terms of the still life. Horrifying as it might seem to contemporary audiences, the slave signified wealth as an object much in the same way the lobster or jewels did; here, the Moor is offered up as if on a silver platter himself. The inclusion of African servants in still lifes was actually quite common. Sometimes, the sitter didn't even own a slave, but requested one for an added sense of luxury and flamboyance—and textual luster—to the picture.

The embarrassment of riches in these paintings brings up an obvious question: Who consumes what, and at whose expense? The focus on commodity fetishism in still-life paintings from this era tends to ignore the colonial histories outside the frame, but they are central to the understanding of these works. Julie Berger Hochstrasser set the stage for a postcolonial critique of these works with her seminal 2007 book *Still Life and Trade in the Dutch Golden Age*. On the very first page, she establishes her innovative approach, quoting Karl Marx (who himself wrote quite a bit about early market capitalism in the Netherlands): "What is the value of a commodity? The objective form of the social labour expended in its production." Mainstream critics, as well as arts institutions, have just begun to pick up the charge, thinking critically about the narratives these still lifes represent.

Far from examining some distant phenomenon, 17th-century Dutch still lifes offer an uncanny perspective on our own times, in which globalism and consumer culture seem to be reaching a peak, once again in tandem with one another. What are the true social costs of today's most sought-after items, and why do people love to show them off? Nikes, iPhones, and designer clothes are imported from many of the same international sites the Dutch traded with hundreds of years ago (and employ similarly dubious labor practices). The next time you scroll past an Instagram influencer's photo of an open suitcase artfully stuffed with exotic luxuries, remember that dark complexities can lurk behind even the most seemingly trivial of objects. ∎

Julia Fiore

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Caragh Thuring, installation view of *Eruzione del 2020*, 2020. Photo by Brechenmacher & Baumann. Courtesy of Le Sirenuse.

Portrait of Antonio Sersale by Weston Wells. Courtesy of Le Sirenuse.

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Traditional and contemporary touches mingle in the architecture of Le Sirenuse, the beloved hotel that Antonio Sersale runs with his wife Carla and two sons in Positano, Italy, on the Amalfi Coast, a 40-minute ferry ride south of Naples. A similar medley has also characterized the Neapolitan collector's particular eye for art, which continues across the hotel and his family apartment in Rome.

Artists have long felt energized by the coastline outside of Naples. Sol LeWitt lived in Praiano where his wife Carol's ancestors were from—their 1700s villa still houses a few murals by the artist—and today, the painter Francesco Clemente has a house in Amalfi where his wife Alba is from. The Amalfi Coast itself is also a favorite destination for the art world during the summer.

"This area has always accommodated artists," said Sersale. Art, he knew from the start, could not just be simply placed around the hotel's bougainvillea vines and lemon trees. In 2016, the hotelier tapped the British curator Silka Rittson-Thomas to oversee an art program that would stem from visiting artists' creative responses to Positano as well as the hotel's effortless embodiment of *la dolce vita*. "Together, we crafted the idea of the 'Artists at Le Sirenuse' program to install permanent site-specific artworks based on each artist's stay here for a few days," Sersale explained.

Stanley Whitney, installation view of *Untitled (160049)*, 2016. Photo by Brechenmacher & Baumann. Courtesy of Le Sirenuse.

Matt Connors, installation view of *Continuous Color Circuits (Columns), for Positano*, 2018. Photo by Roberto Salomone. Courtesy of Le Sirenuse.

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After growing up with his late father Franco's classics-driven aesthetic across the hotel and their homes in Naples and Rome, it was a bold decision to interject works by contemporary artists into the patriarch's vision. "My father was an aesthete, a man of incredible taste, so he was responsible for all the decoration and art around the hotel," he told Artsy. "But he had no interest in today's art—he in a way disliked it."

When the British artist Martin Creed stepped into Le Sirenuse to inaugurate the program in 2016, Franco was still alive and even met the British artist in his own stomping ground. "He looked at Martin with a realization that times were changing and he had to accept the beginning of a new chapter," his son recalled. Veering away from his father's aesthetic philosophy was "stressful," he said, but synthesizing tradition with the new direction became a fitting start of a new chapter for the Pompeii red hotel.

For Sersale, Creed's work, fittingly titled *DON'T WORRY* (2016), is a reminder to ease his concerns about his own path. With each letter in a different color, the neon text work is suspended from the ceiling at a hotel bar. The invitation for optimism beams day and night, whether the sharp Positano sun fills the bar or the candles at the hotel's adjacent restaurant La Sponda provide the only light. The bar's crowning with the artwork's name was due to the work's popularity, affirming Antonio's decision to introduce a new accent to his father's legacy.

Martin Creed, installation view of *Don't Worry*, 2016. Photo by Brechenmacher & Baumann. Courtesy of Le Sirenuse.

The initial project's success also encouraged Sersale to acquire works for his own collection. A work by Tracey Emin was followed by a work by William Nelson Copley. "We for a while wanted a neon by Emin but soon we fell in love with her paintings," he said, "and Copley's colorful universe in painting reflects his character." Later came a work by David Novros, a contemporary and friend of Donald Judd who also had an exhibition last year at the Judd Foundation's space in New York.

After Creed, the hotel's residency program has continued to flourish, with visits from the likes of Stanley Whitney, Rita Ackermann, Alex Israel, Matt Connors, Lucy Stein, and Caragh Thuring, who each left their artistic mark. Whitney's lushly colored abstraction *The Jitterbug Waltz* (2017) echoes the color palette in the vicinity: A blue as bright as the sea and a bold-hued red like a glass of wine sit on a grid in the New York–based artist's signature fashion. The painting hides behind the plants on a lounge corner, not too far from the artist's similarly colored drawings on two opposite walls.

Ackermann's two pastel-colored paintings of mermaid-like young women crown another seating arrangement near the hotel bar Aldo's, waiting to be discovered during idyllic lemon spritz–soaked afternoons. Israel's mural is harder to miss: Covering a large wall by the staircase that leads to the same bar, the artist's large-scale drawings of bird of paradise plants mirror the fauna that adorns Positano's steep and narrow cobblestone streets. If all the roads lead to the sea in this town, Israel's mural leads to sunset feasts at the oyster bar below.

Rita Ackermann, installation view of *Le Sirenuse*, 2019. Photo by Brechenmacher & Baumann. Courtesy of Le Sirenuse.

Sersale determines each work's location at the hotel with the artist during their sojourn. "It is fascinating to see the world through their sensitive perceptions," he said, on the relationships he has built with guest artists. "The natural light and the surrounding colors have been their strongest inspirations." Connors's fascination for these effects, for example, led to his covering two columns—one at the lobby and the other at the restaurant—with metal laminate panels in hues that capture the local environment.

Art spills out a few steps outside the hotel where the azure-hued Franco's Bar hosts a large-scale, yellow-glazed terracotta fountain by Giuseppe Ducrot. The bright, dramatic sculpture rises like the sun amid the bar's aquatic ambiance. "Giuseppe's father was a friend of my dad, so having his work at the bar we named after him is a special homage," Sersale said. Those who look away from the bar's spectacular view catch Karl Holmqvist's poetry painting on the mirrored wall, including the chorus line from the Eurythmics hit "Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This)."

Giuseppe Ducrot, installation view of *The Fountain*, 2015. Photo by Brechenmacher & Baumann. Courtesy of Le Sirenuse.

Subtlety is key in the art's penetration into the hospitality experience: Chance encounters contribute to a dialogue between the guests and the works, but Sersale is not interested in a dictated orchestration. "If you look for the art, it's there, but you don't have to interact with any of it either," he said. "We are not trying to show off or impose any awareness of what is on view—the beauty is in the fact that the works' harmony puts you at ease."

Unlike museums where art is displayed in a designated and static setting, a hospitality space in constant transformation provides an effortless backdrop to art created with a similar serenity. "I am not a believer in collecting to put everything in a warehouse," Sersale added. The new Milan home that he and his wife are putting the final touches on will be the next space to host their personal collection, which also includes works by Leon Polk Smith and Betty Woodman. They are still trying to find the right spot for their new Laure Prouvost sculpture: a duck and turtle hybrid in handblown Murano glass, which was Antonio's gift for Carla's 60th birthday.

He sees a specific visionary trait in Italian contemporary art collectors. "Some of the greatest collections of early works by established artists can be found in Italy," Sersale said. He noted that many artists like Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat had their early career shows with Italian gallerists. "You will see many dentists or lawyers with incredible collections—they are not moguls who buy when artists are in high demand," he underlined. "They spot the talent and collect them early on."

Alex Israel, installation view of *Amalfi Dr.*, 2017. Photo by Roberto Salomone. Courtesy of Le Sirenuse.

Staying in touch with the local community has been another key in Sersale's merger of art with hospitality. Letting hotel guests who often happen to be collectors experience art in a lived-in setting rather than a "white cube" gallery space helps them to contextualize an artist in an environment similar to their own home.

"One of the great aspects of the art program has been seeing some of the artists being collected by guests," he said. For example, Christian Louboutin commissioned a work by Ducrot for his new hotel in Portugal after staying at Le Sirenuse, and a collector who learned about Whitney's work at the hotel later acquired one of his paintings.

In these cases, art gently penetrates the Italian pace of living, but also follows those who experience it as a memory, obsession, or curiosity. ∎

Osman Can Yerebakan

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