

theory. For the listing of a Gerret Heda in the register of the Saint Luke's Guild in Haarlem for the year 1658, see Miedema 1980, 2: 1035.

Bibliography

Bergström 1956: 136–140.

Vroom 1980, 1: 166–176; 2: 56–65.

Delft 1988: 133–136.

1985.16.1

Still Life with Ham

1650

Oil on oak, 98.5 x 82.5 (38½ x 32½)

Gift of John S. Thacher

Inscriptions

On the right edge of the tablecloth: ·HEDA· 1650

Technical Notes: The panel consists of three vertically grained oak boards joined vertically. All boards are of similar width, and the outer ones are slightly thicker. Dendrochronology gives a use date of 1646 onward.¹ Bevels appear on all sides of the reverse, which was not smoothly finished. A thin, off-white ground is visible through the brushstrokes of the tablecloth and background, giving a warm tonality, while the wood grain is prominent overall.

Paint was applied thinly and smoothly in multiple layers with great transparency, much glazing, and crisp brushwork in the fuller bodied light passages. Impasted highlights are blended wet into wet. A pentimento of a plate or tablecloth appears beneath the ham, and a short length of fringe was begun and abandoned in the lower left of the tablecloth. Scattered small losses and abrasions have been retouched in at least two distinct restorations, and the shadow below the white cloth has been reinforced. Pale hazy spots have formed in the aged varnish layer. No major conservation has been carried out since acquisition.

Provenance: John S. Thacher, Washington.

THIS IMPRESSIVE STILL LIFE, which is signed and dated “Heda 1650” at the lower right edge of the white tablecloth, came to the National Gallery in 1985 as a work by Willem Claesz. Heda (q.v.). Despite its high quality and the many similarities to paintings by Willem Claesz. Heda, subtle differences in style and concept pointed to the hand of his talented son Gerret Heda. The attribution was subsequently changed, with the realization that Gerret, who emulated his father's style, may well have worked with the elder Heda to produce generic “Heda” paintings for the open market. Complicating such an attribution is the assumption, occasionally found in the literature, that Gerret Heda is identical

with the son of Willem Claesz. Heda who had died in 1649, a year before this painting was executed.² No compelling documentary reason, however, exists for accepting this assumption. Stylistic similarities between signed Gerret Heda paintings from the 1640s and “Heda” still lifes from the 1650s, moreover, are so striking that it must be assumed that Gerret not only remained alive, but was active for at least ten years after this purported death date.³

Among the paintings that can be used as a basis for the attribution of this work to Gerret Heda is a comparable still life by him, signed and dated 1645 (fig. 1). This painting, which is likewise on wood and has similar dimensions (98 x 79 cm), also depicts an upright tabletop still life situated against a plain gray background. In each instance an identical tall fluted glass provides a vertical accent to the display of food, plates, pitchers, glasses, and overturned vessels that are placed either on a dark green, fringed tablecloth or on the white linen that covers it.

Characteristic for Gerret Heda is the relative disarray of the still-life elements, despite the basic pyramidal composition. The white linen is arranged in a haphazard manner so that objects nestle down in its crumpled folds. Even the objects resting on the flat green tablecloth seem slightly askew, in part because Gerret Heda never quite managed to achieve the same mastery of perspective found in paintings by his father (see, for example, *Banquet Piece with Mince Pie*, 1991.87.1). Adding to this effect is the distinctive way in which Gerret Heda has bunched the white linen cloth to activate the surface with an array of shimmering folds. By creating this effect he sacrificed the stabilizing function that the horizontal and vertical shapes of similar linens perform in his father's paintings. Further comparison with paintings by Willem Claesz. Heda also confirms that, as talented as he was, Gerret did not achieve his father's sensitivity of touch: his paint is somewhat denser, reflections are not as nuanced, and distinctions between materials are not as finely wrought.

The objects on the table do not represent a specific meal, as is quite clear when one compares this work to other examples where like elements are found in similar arrangements (figs. 1 and 2).⁴ Whereas the same fluted glass and pewter pitcher are found in the Frans Halsmuseum painting, the identical mustard pot and a similar ham appear in the Pushkin Museum still life.⁵ In all three of these still lifes Heda has displayed a sumptuous feast, each of which calls to mind the richness and bounty that the Dutch had come to enjoy around mid-century. In each instance Heda has indicated a human presence in the way that the food and drink have been partially con-



Gerret Willemsz. Heda, *Still Life with Ham*, 1985.16.1



Fig. 1. Gerret Willemsz. Heda, *Still Life with Shrimp*, 1645, oil on panel, Amsterdam, private collection, on loan to Frans Halsmuseum, Haarlem

sumed, the tablecloth left in disarray, and vessels overturned.

Given the explicit iconographic programs found in certain of his father's paintings (see entry on *Banquet Piece with Mince Pie* 1991.87.1), it may well be that in his choices of objects and their arrangement Gerret also strove to provide a moralizing message. Just as his compositional organization lacks the structure of his father's, however, so too is his message less clearly evident. In the Washington painting the ham and the wine and beer have been only partially consumed, perhaps evidence that the enjoyment of this meal has been undertaken with proper restraint. Nothing in the work seems to hint of the transience of life found in the comparable Pushkin Museum still life, where a snuffed-out candle occupies a corner of the table (fig. 2). Whether or not such a warning was included in some other guise in the *Still Life with Ham* cannot be determined with our current knowledge of the significance of the various elements of this composition. Would, for example, the open lid of the pewter pitcher have symbolized an idea along these lines to a Dutch viewer of the mid-seventeenth century? Another un-



Fig. 2. Gerret Willemsz. Heda, *Still Life with Ham*, 1649, oil on canvas, Moscow, Pushkin Museum

answered question is whether the untouched roll in the Pushkin and Washington paintings has eucharistic allusions similar to those found in paintings by Pieter Claesz. and Willem Claesz. Heda (see *Banquet Piece with Mince Pie*). In neither instance is the evidence compelling, and it may well be that Gerret adapted many of the motifs found in his father's work without providing a comparable intellectual and theological foundation to his still lifes.

Notes

1. Dendrochronology by Dr. Peter Klein, Universität Hamburg, 4 May 1987.
2. See note 1 in Biography.
3. Since Gerret is not named in a 1661 testament made by his mother and father, it is reasonable to assume that he had died previously.
4. *Still Life with Ham*, oil on wood, 97 x 80 cm, inv. no. 1947.
5. The identical salt cellar can be found in Gerret Heda's masterpiece in the Hermitage, *Still Life with Lobster*, signed and dated "Heda 1648," a painting frequently attributed to Willem Claesz. Heda. See Vroom 1980, 2: 77, no. 372.

References

- 1986 Sutton: 309.