

Hungarian University of Fine Arts

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Additional thoughts on a painting by Willem Claesz Heda

DLA dissertation theses

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As part of a research on *vanitas* symbols, the present work aims to provide an analysis of a portion of the painting *Prumstilleben* by Willem Claesz Heda, dated 1638. Each chapter of the dissertation has been devoted to a separate object found in the portion under analysis. The approach is basically identical with the research method of art historians. Beside consulting relevant source-books and literature, technical knowledge and personal experience in painting also serve as a basis to reconstruct a possible meaning and the painter's intentions and concept. While bearing in mind questions of form, there is a strong emphasis on the analysis of content.

The primary findings are as follows:

1

Objects overhanging the table edge are common in still lifes painted in the art of the Low Countries. However, research shows that Willem Claesz Heda is apparently the only painter who depicts objects placed on the table edge that defy the laws of physics.

The irregular position of the plate that is about to leave the plane of the table is not at all accidental and not a result of bare professional oversight. This phenomenon is not unique in Heda's art as he seems to apply it deliberately in a number of paintings; it is a conscious behavioral pattern from the artist, a creative method to depict ambiguity. It is suggested to be a reference to human (civic) existence, i.e. to *vanitas*.

2

Beside the ambiguous position of the plate, its material is also of major importance. We cannot exclude a symbolism that derives from the Latin name of tin (*stannum*), meaning "separation". The "art of alchemy" can be regarded as an integral part of the 17th century culture and science of the Low Countries, therefore its symbolism may as well appear in still

lives; the position and material of Heda's plate may have a specific message in the alchemical framework, too. The use of alchemical symbolism does not contradict the moral tendency behind the notion of *vanitas*.

Tin vessels appearing frequently in still lifes may also have a reference to the events of the Dutch Revolt.

3

In picture analysis and in history it is a common view to regard lemon as an exotic tropical fruit in 17th century Holland. It is thought to have been imported from distant colonies and sold at a high price.

However, research seems to reveal that lemon was already produced at that time in Holland. A tropical fruit grown locally had special significance, which can be a true explanation as to why this fruit was so expensive.

Lemon is an indispensable item in the still lifes of the Low Countries. In painting, the spirally peeled fruit is a well-known, common topos that cannot be reconciled with the notion of 'exotic'. Lemon is much rather a (national) symbol with a specific reference to Holland.

4

Those aware of the painting techniques applied in the 17th century find a number of 20th century picture analyses to be misguided, and that of Svetlana Alpers is one them. The use of colour primer cannot, or can only circuitously be harmonized with the theory and practice of "optical vision".

The analysis of the portion of the painting seems to confirm that no actual setting was composed as the very sight was not meant to be important. Instead of a mere naturalist portrayal, this piece of art aims to attach meaning to the world.