



Willem Heda (1594 - 1680)

Still Life with a Fruit Pie

Signed and dated 'HEDA. 1644'

Oil on panel, 31 7/8 x 39 7/8 inches (80.6 x 101.5 cm.)

Still Life with a Fruit Pie is a splendid addition to the oeuvre of Willem Claesz. Heda and to the genre of still life painting in the Dutch Golden Age. Painted on panel and in excellent condition, the painting dates from Heda's maturity, when his compositions combined monumental simplicity, aristocratic reserve and unmatched observational skills.

Juxtaposing creamy passages in the drapery with precise touches in the metals and glassware, Heda arranges repeatedly used motifs with a new grandeur and classical harmony. Placed off-center and surrounded by space, a silver jug is illuminated by a beam of light. Barely touching the jug is an overturned tazza that together with the discarded napkin animate the composition with an air of luxurious informality. Heda invites us to compare colors, shapes and textures; for instance, the thick crust of the blackberry pie with the freshly baked roll; the embossed underside of the tazza with the smooth surfaces of its neighbors; or the yellow lemon peel with the blue ribbon of the knife case. Heda trims the tablecloth with fine stitching. At the top of the pyramidal composition is a halberdier enjoying the view. Joining him are a façon de Venise glass and the cover of the jug, resembling a searchlight. The interplay of rounded forms, empty spaces and crossing diagonals are held in check by the pewter plates, which funnel the drama from back to front, slaloming over the white fabric towards the viewer.

While Heda's birthplace is unknown, he is recorded in the Haarlem Guild of St. Luke in 1631. His first dated painting is a vanitas still life of 1628. A city of 40,000 inhabitants, Haarlem was a center for still life painting, which became an independent genre in the Northern Netherlands around 1610. The early banquet-pieces by Nicolaes Gillis and Floris van Dijck featured crowded compositions, bright colors and a raised horizon line. Together with Pieter Claesz in the 1630's, Heda narrowed his palette to achieve a warmer atmosphere and an advanced naturalism. These monochrome still lifes (monochrome banketje) share similarities with the tonal phase of Dutch 17th century landscape painting.

Still Life with a Fruit Pie was painted on the cusp of change in Heda's art and in the mid-century taste of the prosperous middle class who bought his paintings. Increasingly sumptuous compositions, featuring expensive glass and silver, were being painted in Amsterdam, possibly under the influence of still lifes from Antwerp. In our painting, Heda shows that he too can paint a pronk (fancy) still life without sacrificing the solemn, magisterial quality of his monochrome works. In turn, Heda's paintings influenced those by Willem Kalf of the 1650's. Here, the brilliant white paint, the prominent bare wall and the glittering highlights presage the works of Johannes Vermeer of the 1660's.

The sophistication and refinement of Heda's Still Life invites comparisons with those by Zurbarán, Chardin and Cézanne, amongst others. These artists appeal to our intellect and to our senses. With Heda as our host, we are here served an astonishing repast.

Provenance:

Private collection, Europe from the early 19th century until sold
London, Christie's, July 8, 2014, lot 31.

Literature:

cf. Ingvar Bergstrom, Dutch Still Life Painting in the Seventeenth Century, 1956. Jakob Rosenberg, Seymour Slive, E.H. ter Kuile, Dutch Art and Architecture: 1600 to 1800, (The Pelican History of Art) 1977. N.R.A. Vroom, A modest message as intimated by the painters of the 'Monochrome Banketje', 2 vols. 1980. Still Life Paintings from the Netherlands 1550-1720, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam 1999. Pieter Claesz, Master of the Haarlem Still Life, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2004-5.