

JOHNNY VAN HAEFTEN

OLD MASTER PAINTINGS

VP5053

JACOB VAN HULSDONCK

(1582 – Antwerp - 1647)

A Still Life with a Herring, Cheese and other
Comestibles on a Table



Signed, lower left: *IVHVLSDONCK·FE* (IVH in ligature)

Oil on panel, 18¼ x 27½ ins. (46.5 x 69.9 cm)

Framed: 26½ x 35¼ x 3⅞ ins. (62.5 x 89.5 x 8.5 cm)

PROVENANCE

With Somerville & Simpson, London

From whom acquired by the late Sir Joseph Hotung (1930-2021), 1982

Anon. sale, Sotheby's, New York, 26 January 2023, lot 114

This early work by the Antwerp painter Jacob van Hulsdonck features various dishes and plates of food arranged on a table, covered with a grey cloth. A large Gouda cheese on a pewter plate takes pride of place, flanked on one side by a pewter-lidded stoneware jug, and on the other, by a *façon de Venise* glass, filled with red wine. In front of the cheese are a porcelain bowl containing curls of butter, a bread roll, a blue and white porcelain plate of almonds, raisins and dried figs. A red-painted trencher (*teljoor*) containing a sliced herring and a shallot appears in the left foreground, and to its right are a knife with a finely wrought handle, half a bread roll and a neatly folded white napkin upon which rests an orange. Scattered between the larger objects are nuts, raisins, citrus leaves, a wedge of lemon and some pieces of silvery fish skin. The still life is enlivened by a fly that has landed on the snowy white napkin, and another on the butter, and a cockchafer beetle. The slightly haphazard placement of objects and the fallen crumbs from the half-consumed bread roll suggest that someone has recently left the table.

The artist took great care to accurately describe the appearance of the various foodstuffs: the crumbly texture of the cheese and the knife marks in its irregularly cut surface, the creamy butter curls, the shimmering skin of the herring and the lightly dusted surface of the dried fruits. He also captured the subtle play of light across the smooth surfaces of pewter, glass, and porcelain. The positioning of the red charger and the handle of the knife in such a way that they project beyond the edge of the table lends the objects a sense of tangible reality.

Jacob van Hulsdonck was one of the most talented of the early Flemish specialists in still-life painting, a branch of art that only emerged as an independent genre in the first decade of the seventeenth century. He was born in Antwerp in 1582, and apart from a period in his youth when he lived in Middelburg, he worked there all his life. His small oeuvre – numbering far fewer than one hundred paintings – is devoted exclusively to still lifes. More than half of these are signed either with the artist's characteristic full signature, as we see here, or in monogram, but only one example is known to bear a dateⁱ. The lack of dated paintings has always made it hard to establish a coherent chronology for his work, but it is generally considered that the early still lifes are those which employ a steeply pitched table on which the plates and other utensils and containers of food are set out in a regular fashion so that the overlapping of the objects is minimised. In contrast, in the later works, the arrangement is viewed from a lower vantage point in a more natural manner. The backgrounds in his early works are generally dark, but they become lighter in the course of time. A meticulous attention to detail is characteristic of all van Hulsdonck's work and this may partly account for his relatively small production.

This painting belongs to a small group of a half dozen or so closely related still lifes depicting laid tables that belong to van Hulsdonck's early career. All of them display the hallmarks of his early style and, by good fortune, one of the group, a *Laden Table Still Life*, of 1614, in the Bowes Museum, Barnard Castle, is van Hulsdonck's only known dated workⁱⁱ. The latter, therefore, provides a valuable yardstick for the other paintings in this group, which it is reasonable to assume can be dated somewhere around the same time. The present painting has a few motifs in common with the Bowes Museum still life, but it probably originated slightly later, around 1615-20, given that it displays a more compact grouping of objects and a lower, more focused viewpoint.

A number of objects and foodstuffs depicted here recur in other still lifes of laid tables. The fish on a red charger and the finely wrought knife, for example, appear in almost all the other paintings in this group, including the still life in the Bowes Museum, as well as in still lifes in the Cleveland Museum of Artⁱⁱⁱ, the Rijksmuseum Twenthe, Enschede^{iv}, and in a private collection^v (Slow Food p. 41). The latter also contains a very similar large Gouda cheese on a pewter plate, as well as an almost identical glass of red wine and cut bread roll. The knife was very likely a studio prop as its distinctive features are easy to recognise: the end of the patterned handle is decorated with a miniature horse's hoof, and in some of the paintings, it is possible to see that the blade bears a maker's mark in the form of a flower with an unidentifiable mark beneath it. This repetition of motifs indicates that like many still-life painters of his day, Jacob van Hulsdonck built up his compositions with the aid of a stock of studies. The present painting contains extensive revisions and pentimenti. These changes show that the artist was still working out the composition even after he started painting.

After painting these few large still lifes, comprising tables laid with a variety of foodstuffs, Hulsdonck apparently rarely worked on this scale again, but instead made a speciality of painting smaller, simpler compositions, usually consisting of a single basket or bowl of fruit, occasionally with a small vase of flowers to one side.

BIOGRAPHY

Few biographical details exist for Jacob van Hulsdonck. He was born in Antwerp in 1582, but was taken by his parents at an early age to Middelburg, where he is reported to have received at least part of his training. The name of his teacher is not known, but a close look at his known oeuvre does not suggest a pupillage with Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder, as has sometimes been proposed. Closer affinities can be found in the works of Osias Beert the Elder (c. 1580-1623/24), one of the leading still-life painters in early seventeenth-century Antwerp, suggesting that he may have worked in Beert's circle before enrolling as a master in the Antwerp Guild of St. Luke in 1608. He did, however, apparently have ties with members of the Brueghel family inasmuch as he is recorded as a witness to the will of Ambrosius Brueghel (1617-1675), a son of Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568-1625)^{vi}. On 14 November 1609, Hulsdonck married Maria la Hoes: the couple had seven children, including a son Gillis (b. 1626), who also became a painter. Following the death of his first wife in 1629, the artist married Josina Peeters on 17 August 1632. From 1609 until his death in early 1647, Hulsdonck lived in the same house in the Happartstraat in Antwerp.

ⁱ Jacob van Hulsdonck, *Breakfast Piece*, inscribed and dated on wooden platter: *soit attentive et de bonnaire/continuant sans autre affaire/1614* (Be attentive and pleasant and go about your business without distraction), oil on panel, 65.4 x 106.7 cm, Bowes Museum, Barnard Castle, Founders' bequest, inv. no. 99. Illustrated in *European Paintings from the Bowes Museum*, exh. cat., by Bryan Crossling, National Gallery, London, 1993, p. 14.

ⁱⁱ See footnote i above.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jacob van Hulsdonck, *Still Life with Meat, Fish, Vegetables and Fruit*, c. 1615-20, fully signed, oil on panel, 73 x 104 cm, Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio, inv. no. 2018.258. Formerly Johnny Van Haeften Ltd., London.

^{iv} Jacob van Hulsdonck, *Still Life with Herring and Calf's Trotters*, c. 1615, full signed, oil on panel, 48.5 x 64.5 cm, Rijksmuseum Twenthe, Enschede, inv. no. 273.

^v Jacob van Hulsdonck, *Meal Still Life with Ham, Cheese and Herring*, c. 1610-1615, oil on panel, 72 x 104 cm, private collection.

^{vi} E. Duverger, *Antwerpse kunstinventarissen uit de zeventiende eeuw*, vol. 4, 1989, pp. 277-278.