

JOHNNY VAN HAEFTEN

OLD MASTER PAINTINGS

VP4586

JACOB VAN HULSDONCK
(1582 – Antwerp – 1647)

A Still Life with a laden Table partly covered by a white Cloth

Signed lower left: VAN HULSDONCK. FE and monogrammed lower right on the plate: IVH



PROVENANCE

In the possession of the grandmother of the previous owner in the Middle-Rhine region of Germany, and believed to have passed to her by inheritance from her great-grandmother in Düsseldorf
Inherited by the previous owner in 1964
Private collection, Germany, 1964-2012

NARRATIVE

A selection of plates and bowls of meat and fish, two bread rolls and a basket of fresh fruit and vegetables appears on a tabletop, partly covered with a white damask cloth. In the centre of the table are two platters bearing a large ham and some pig's trotters. To the right and in front are a Wan-li style porcelain plate with a piece of tongue and a pewter plate containing a few slices of ham. Beside them are a blue and white porcelain cup of mulberries, a plate of butter, a finely wrought knife and a linen napkin. To the left, is a smoked herring, served on a red earthenware charger, accompanied by a bread roll and half a lemon. Behind is a large wicker basket, overflowing with artichokes, asparagus, white radishes, plums, apricots and cherries: the stems of a single rose and a carnation are tucked into the wickerwork. Strewn about the table are more cherries and a radish, a lemon, a bunch of grapes and some sprigs of parsley. Lying beside the basket is an overturned, broken wine glass: drops of clear liquid appear on the wooden surface of the table and on a fallen rose leaf. A fly, a damselfly and a Red Admiral butterfly animate the arrangement. The very precise handling and extreme clarity of detail are characteristic of van Hulsdonck's style, as is the use of bright, decorative colours that emerge strongly from the uniformly dark background.

One of the most talented representatives of the first generation of Flemish still-life painters, Jacob van Hulsdonck was born in Antwerp in 1582 and worked there throughout 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, or in monogram, but only one example is known to bear a date¹. The lack of dated works has always made it difficult to establish a coherent chronology for van Hulsdonck, but it is generally considered that the early still lifes are those in which the bottom edge of the table

is close to the picture plane and the top edge is shown from a high view point. By contrast, in the later works, some space is shown beneath the table, the left-hand side of the table and occasionally both sides are visible, and the arrangement is presented more frontally and in a more natural manner. Typically, the backgrounds in his early works are 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 magnificent banquet-piece, which has only recently come to light, 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. It is therefore reasonable to assume that all the other paintings in the group can be dated around the same time. A tree-ring analysis of the present panel conducted by Dr. Ian Tyers in October 2012 concluded that the most recent of the three planks of Baltic oak of which the panel is composed was still growing in 1605 and that a felling date between c.1611 and c.1627 is likelyⁱⁱⁱ. A dating of this painting to around 1615 is therefore plausible, but it is unlikely to have been painted much earlier. The paintings in this group all employ a steeply pitched table, with the plates and other containers of food arranged in such a fashion that the overlapping of forms is minimised, thus providing as comprehensive an account of each object as possible.

This exceptionally lavish still life ranks among the largest and most ambitious of all van Hulsdonck's paintings. Only one other banquet-piece, which was with the Koetser Gallery in 2007^{iv}, and another version of this composition, formerly with Colnaghi's in London^v, is comparable in scale and complexity. The Colnaghi painting, which is only signed in monogram, is almost identical except for a few minor variations, while the former Koetser painting shares many of the individual elements, but arranged in a different way. The plates of ham, pig's trotters, tongue, herring and butter all appear in the latter, but the basket of fruit of vegetables is absent and in its place is a plate bearing a large cheese. A number of motifs in our painting also recur in the artist's other still lifes of laid tables. For example, the exact same knife and the plates of butter, herring and pig's trotters all appear in a new arrangement in a smaller tabletop still life in the Rijksmuseum Twenthe, Enschede^{vi} and the plate of pig's trotters and the large ham also appear in a smaller banquet-piece, which was with Artemis, in London, in 1999^{vii}. This repetition of certain motifs indicates that like many seventeenth-century still-life painters van Hulsdonck built up his compositions with the aid of a stock of studies.

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. The wicker basket of fruit and vegetables which appears in this painting thus seems to anticipate the development of his mature fruit still lifes.

Early seventeenth-century still lifes often contain some symbolism, but in van Hulsdonck's works, it does not seem to be his primary concern. The presence of the fly, associated with decay, the holes nibbled in the leaves of the radishes and the broken, overturned glass, all

serve to remind us of their temporary existence, thus expressing the *vanitas* notion that all earthly things are transient. However, this is surely secondary to the delight the artist takes in describing the variety of colours and textures in the foodstuffs he presents to his viewer, who is reminded of the delicious sensations that await the diner.

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. 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.

P.M.

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 A copy of the full report conducted by Ian Tyers of Dendrochronological Consultancy Limited in October 2012 (Report No. 567) is available on request.

^{iv} Jacob van Hulsdonck, *A Table laid with Cheese, Herring and Ham*, signed in full, on panel, 72 x 104 cm, Koetser Gallery, Zurich, 2007.

^v Jacob van Hulsdonck, *A Banquet-Piece*, signed in monogram, on panel, 72.5 x 103.5 cm, with Colnaghi's, in London, 1997.

^{vi} Jacob van Hulsdonck, *A Breakfast Still-Life*, signed in full, on panel, 48.5 x 64.5 cm, Rijksmuseum Twenthe, Enschede, inv. no. 273.

^{vii} Jacob van Hulsdonck, *A Still Life of Meat and Fish*, signed in full, on panel, 56 x 85 cm, with Artemis, in London, in 1999.