Within Images of Excess, a Glimpse of Moral Theater

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WASHINGTON - "We are very rich, and the world is ours to have." If art could speak for its owners, that is what 17th-century Dutch still-life paintings might say. And they might add something else: "We are very afraid."

"Pieter Claesz: Master of Haarlem Still Life" is at the National Gallery of Art, Fourth Street and Constitution Avenue, NW, Washington, (202) 737-4215, through Dec. 31. The show was organized in Washington by Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., curator of Northern Baroque painting at the National Gallery, in collaboration with the Frans Hals Museum in Haarlem and the Kunsthaus Zurich.

You can hear those bold and nervous voices speaking in "Pieter Claesz: Master of Haarlem Still Life," a chamber-music-size exhibition installed in a suite of wood-paneled rooms at the National Gallery of Art. Or rather you can see their conflicted emotions playing out in paintings of flatware, beakers and food.

Here, for example, is a table set for a simple but sumptuous breakfast, with a fresh hard roll, a plump mince pie, a glass of wine and one expensive, exotic treat: a Mediterranean lemon, just peeled and sliced, still succulent. All this is presented on a crisp white cloth, along with a little book, an almanac, which will tell the merchant how the weather will be for ships at sea.

And here is another painting with most of the same components, but with everything slightly changed. Judging by a dusting of crumbs, the hard roll is going stale; the pie looks depleted and tired. The wine glass is upside down, and a gilded cup, a gaudy addition, lies on its side. A napkin appears to have been discarded, as if the diner had rushed away. There is an atmosphere of interruption, even alarm.

Both pictures exemplify a specific art genre within a genre, the tabletop still life, popular in what is called the Dutch Golden Age. And both are exercises in art as moral theater. With their shared cast of inanimate characters, they might be the first and last acts of a tragedy, one that begins with a
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"Vanitas Still Life With Writing Implements," 1628.

Scene from a prosperous, get-ahead, everyday life, and ends with a scene of that same life brought fatefully low.

Both paintings, along with 23 others in the show, are by Pieter Claesz, an artist who gained a degree of fame in the era of Rembrandt, Frans Hals and Jacob van Ruisdael, but about whom we know little.

He was born in 1596 or 1597 in the village of Berchem, near Antwerp, where still-life painting had an early vogue, and where he probably trained as an artist. Around 1621, perhaps in search of a less competitive market, he moved to Haarlem.

There he was twice married and twice a widower, raised a family (a son, Nicolaes Berchem, became a landscape painter), and seemed to have lived until his death in 1660.

At the time Claesz settled in Haarlem, the Dutch Republic was hugely rich. It controlled grain supplies on which its much larger neighbors depended, and had developed a lucrative international maritime trade. It also purposefully distinguished itself as a Calvinist nation of industrious, hard-headed, God-fearing people, for whom wealth was a badge of grace, ostentation a mark of decadence and salvation a promise that could be withdrawn in a twinkling.

And for the burghers of Haarlem, hungry for tangible signs of grace to fill their homes, Claesz's still lifes were just the ticket: subdued in scale and tone, jewel-like in execution and judiciously edifying.

In some cases, a moral message was subtly disguised. But in the type of picture known as the "vanitas," at which Claesz excelled, it was baldly stated. There is no mistaking, for instance, the mortal import of a 1628 painting of a skull surrounded by a smoldering lamp, a worn-down quill pen, and a tipped-over goblet.

Even in this relatively early, straightforward work, however, Claesz isn't content with a simple lineup of symbols. Instead, he choreographs a witty and macabre little dance. The feather end of the quill tickles the skull's cheek. The skull leans against the base of the tipped-over glass, like someone eavesdropping through a wall. The glass itself reflects the light-filled windows of a room, presumably the one where the painter - and the viewer - is sitting.

Interpreting such pictures, with their slippery conventions and hallucinatory realities, is a chancy business, easily overdone. Scholars disagree on what means what, and on where moral or religious significance ends and plain old over-the-fireplace decoration begins.

And what about personal content? Is Claesz's art the work of a religious man? (Surviving documents suggest he may have been Roman Catholic.) A moralist? A patron-pleaser? A melancholic? The individualistic pulse of a Chardin may be beating in his work, but if so, it is muffled under layers of period artifice.

What we do know is that the tabletop still life as a genre grew ever more elaborate toward mid-century, as social proscriptions on the showy display of wealth weakened. The sort of decorous, near-monochromatic breakfast scenes that established Claesz's Haarlem reputation swelled into pageant-like depictions of banquet tables, feasts crowded with game, shellfish, fruit, pastries and beakers of wine and beer.

At the same time, vanitas-type images became cataclysmic. In a painting from 1647, Claesz shows a laden table in chaotic disarray with, center stage, a skinny roast capon lying like a sacrificial victim, a knife protruding from its breast. With its air of decay in progress, the picture is like a snapshot of a flooded and abandoned city after the waters have begun to subside.

Unsurprisingly, as Dutch taste for extravagance continued unchecked, interest in a conscience-pricking art declined, as did Haarlem's economic fortune. The market for paintings crashed. Maybe that explains why, after Claesz's death, his twin daughters had to be sent to a city orphanage.

Certainly the admonitory impulse in his painting feels quaint, at best, in the context of our own materially fixated culture. For most viewers the virtuosity of his work - its technical finesse, its uncanny illusionism - is its point. We marvel at his skill in depicting details of his world that are also details of our world: the sheen on ripe fruit, the glint of gold, light
welling up from a half-filled glass.

Even devotees of modernist abstraction will find Claesz rewarding. Viewed close up, an expanse of white tablecloth in one of his pictures is almost identical, in its restrained but vivacious brushwork, to a passage of white in a Mondrian. And surely Mondrian himself scrutinized Claesz's compositions, monumental in their ordered probity, but also inventive, varied, never rigid.

The mention of Mondrian raises the question of moral purpose in art. Mondrian's art is utopian; utopias are absolutist. They are about yes or no, right or wrong. They are based on an idea of perfection. Perfection requires control, creates dominion, believes in its own election. Such a sense of election fueled, for a little while, the superpower Dutch Republic of the 17th century, and will continue to fuel, for a little while, the superpower United States of today.

Claesz's paintings, even with their Calvinist roots and formal perfections, offer a different vision: unutopian, worldly, realistic, tragic. They speak of power, and the contingency of power; of materiality, and the vulnerability of material; of absolutes, and the absolute law of constant change. Their voices will almost certainly fall on deaf ears, but Washington is a place they should be heard.