cat. no. 6

**Pieter Claesz**
Berchem near Antwerp, c.1597 – 1660 Haarlem

*Still life with a Bread Roll, a Roemer and a lying Berkemeyer, a Plate of Olives, a Knife, Oysters with Pepper and Salt on a Pewter Dish atop a Table*

Signed with monogram and dated lower left: PC 1642
oil on panel
37.1 x 51.3 cm.

**Provenance**:
Sale London, Christie's, London, 8 October 1976, lot 16
London, Alfred Brod Gallery, by 1977
United States, Mr. and Mrs. J. Seward Johnson
Sale New York, Sotheby's, 8 January 1981, lot 9
Sale New York, Christie's, 15 January 1985, lot 36. private collection

**Literature**:
Advertisement Brod Gallery, in: *Apollo* 105 (May 1977), p. 400, ill.
Advertisement Brod Gallery, in: *Die Weltkunst* 47 (June 1977), p. 1147, ill.
N.R.A. Vroom, *A modest message as intimated by the painters of the 'Monochrome Banketje'*, 2 vols., Schiedam 1980, 1, p. 155; 2, p. 51, no. 242, ill.
N.R.A. Vroom, *A modest message as intimated by the painters of the 'Monochrome Banketje'*, Nuremberg 1999 (vol. 3 of Vroom 1980), p. 63, fig. 51, p.81 (as Franchoys Elout)

**Exhibited**:
Maastricht, Pictura, European Fine Art Fair, May 1977 (Brod Gallery London)

1642

The painting is made from one panel of oak wood, likely of Polish origin. In a 2018 restoration, a horizontal strip (ca. 2cm) on top from a former intervention, was removed. The original bevel of the oak panel is conserved on three sides (left, right and bottom), visible on the reverse side. A (19th century?) inscription reads *Paulus Creulz. Berger 1642,* which is not an indication of provenance, rather a misnomer.[1] Vroom's opinion that this is a work by Franchoys Elout (1589-1635) is easily discredited as this still life is unlike any others by Elout. Moreover, Elout died in September of 1635, seven years before this painting was done[2].

In the first half of the seventeenth century, Pieter Claesz was Haarlem's most renowned still life painter. He was born in Berchem, near Antwerp around 1597.[3] Little is known of his early years and artistic training. There is however a clear influence in his early works of Antwerp masters Osias Beert (c. 1580-1623) and Clara Peeters (c. 1587-after 1636). In 1620, a *Pieter Clasens* was mentioned as a master painter in the membership roll of the Antwerp Guild of St Luke.[4] Roughly a year later, he moved from the Southern Netherlands to the prosperous Haarlem. It was in Haarlem, in 1622, where his son Nicolaes Berchem (1622-1683), who would go on to become famous for his Italianate landscapes, was born.[5] Claesz's earliest known still life dates to 1621. This early work features fruit and a stoneware jug,[6] revealing his stylistic Antwerpian roots as well as the influence of the elder Haarlem still life painter, Floris van Dijck. This painting places Claesz in Haarlem in 1621. In the following period, he matured and developed his skills as an expert still life painter of food, tobacco and *vanitas*. Claesz limited his use of objects and colour to develop his own style of still life: the *monochrome banketje*. He masterfully rendered materials such as silver and gold, pewter, ceramic, glass and various different foods, which he illuminated with an invisible source of bright light. Inventories of 17th century Haarlem collections reveal Pieter Claesz as the most represented still life painter in the city.[7] His fellow citizen Willem Claesz Heda (1594-1680) followed his example and began to paint still lifes in 1628. Into the early 1630's the two competed closely as successful painters of still lifes. After a forty-year long career, Pieter Claesz died in 1660 at 63, leaving an oeuvre of roughly 260 still lifes.[8]

Small in size and simple in depiction: why we are so attracted by this warmly-lit still life?

In *Still life with a Bread Roll, a Roemer and a lying Berkemeyer, a Plate of Olives, a Knife, Oysters with Pepper and Salt on a Pewter Dish atop a Table*, Pieter Claesz paints a simple meal on the far right edge of a stone table.

Fig. 1 Pieter Claesz, *Still Life with Oysters, Herrings and Smoking Implements*, signed and dated 1624, oil on panel, 35.8 x 51.5 cm., private collection

Bright light flows in from the upper left and rests on all of the objects. The eye goes immediately to the big, crunchy bread roll on the left side of the table, illuminated by the warm mid-day light. On the right of the bread, an olive green *Roemer* filled with white wine, dominates the composition. The beaker and the stem's elaborate prunts reflect the gleaming light in a myriad of directions. Nearly hidden behind the roemer and the bread, two glossy olives in a tin bowl. To the right of the Roemer, a smaller cone-shaped glass, a *Berkemeyer*, lies on its side giving the composition a strong diagonal pull. The glass offers an illusion of spatial dimension, while the loose brush work is such that it almost disappears in the background. A large shiny plate with two oysters and a crumpled sheet from an almanac sits in front of the Berkemeyer so close to the right edge that the lip of the plate bleeds over the table's edge. The triangular paper holds salt and pepper which spills on to the tin plate. The mollusks, in their shiny mother-of pearl beds, are painted with fluid brushwork with white, grey and ochre as well as minimal pink and blue tones. The interiors of the shells are contrasted by the brown greys on the outsides. A shell in the right front corner of the table lies upside down and its rough exterior is acutely perceptible. Beside the plate, sits the knife to open the oysters. This table knife with a precious mother-of-pearl patterned handle is one of the artist's favourite motifs. It lies diagonally from the table's edge to the center of the composition. The knife cutting across the table creates a trompe l'oeil which compellingly invites the viewer to take part in this intimate meal. The knife guides the eye back to the center, where its

blade reflects the light cast to the table from the roemer. The balance of Pieter Claesz's composition is characterized both by the carefully calculated arrangement of objects as well as the empty space of the table. A particular compositional accent in this still life is given to the triangle created by the knife, the Roemer's stem and its reflection on the table. Here the bright light highlights two splinters of oyster shell ennobling this otherwise insignificant motif at the center of the table.

Fig. 2 Hendrick van Balen and Jan Brueghel, *The Feast of Acheloüs*, oil on panel, 56 x 92 cm., Dayton (OH), Dayton Art Institute

Fig. 3 Frans Floris, *Banquet of the Gods*, signed and dated 1550, oil on panel, 150 x 198 cm., Antwerp, Royal Museum of Fine Arts

Of Pieter Claesz's complete work of 260 paintings, 38 still lifes include oysters. The earliest one is dated 1624[9] (fig. 1), and seems to be the first oyster still-life painted in Haarlem. Preceding Haarlem still-life painters such as Floris van Dijck (1574/75-1651), Nicolaes Gillis (c. 1592/93-in or after 1632) and Floris van Schooten (1585/88-1656) had not yet painted oysters. As such, it seems that Pieter Claesz was the one to introduce this delicacy of a subject matter to the repertoire of Haarlem still lifes. Why might Claesz have been interested in this special food? From antiquity through to the present day, oysters have been regarded a luxury, a culinary delight.[10] This is in part due their rich flavor as well as the widespread belief that of they are an aphrodisiac.[11] In this context, oysters and oyster meals became a favoured motif for artists in Southern Netherlands around 1600 in the compositions of the feasts for the Pagan gods, i.e. mythological figures from antiquity gathering around a laid table in a paradisiacal landscape. Hendrick van Balen (1575-1632) and Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568-1625) had been the authors of such paintings at the beginning of the 17th century (fig. 2), but it was Frans Floris (1517-1570) in *Feast of the Gods* (fig. 3) in 1550 who introduced oyster shells, likely for the first time in this theme.

A member of the prolific Francken family, Hieronymus Francken the younger (1578-1628), a versatile painter of many genres (art galleries and *Kunstkammern*, elegant feasting couples and allegorical paintings) was the artist behind the earliest known still lifes of meals, two widely copied works, presumably a dyad: *A rich man's meal* and *A poor man's meal*.[12] The small panel (dated *1600* or *1601*) considered to be the prototype of the first one with the meal of a rich man (fig. 4), features a table with drinking vessels and luxury foodstuffs. In the foreground sit the shells of an opened oyster, white bread, confectionary, Mediterranean fruits such an orange, lemons and olives. Through an open window in the background, we see a lavishly dressed couple to reinforce the denoted prosperity.[13] This type of background scene that created additional symbolic meaning was character of the first generation of Antwerp still life painters.[14]

A contemporary of Hieronymus Francken was Osias Beert, who enrolled as a master in the Antwerp guild in 1602. He was one of the most innovative and influential painters of Antwerp still lifes and is often considered the "pioneer of the genre".[15] He built upon the sixteenth century iconographical tradition of his predecessors such as Pieter Aertsen (1508-1575) and Joachim Beuckelaer (c. 1533-c. 1574). In his early still lifes Osias Beert depicted biblical scenes in the background. Take for example his still life of oysters and pastries (fig. 5), where he renders

Fig. 4 Hieronymus Francken the Younger, *A Rich Man's Meal*, 1601, oil on panel, 34.5 x 44 cm., private collection

Fig. 5 Osias Beert, *Still Life with Oysters and Pastries, with Lazarus and the Rich Man*, c. 1605-1610, oil on panel, 51 x 73 cm., England, private collection

Fig. 6 Osias Beert, *Still Life with Oysters, Wine and Delicacies*, c. 1610-1620, oil on panel, 53 x 73 cm., Washington, National Gallery of Art, Patrons' Permanent Fund

Fig. 7 Clara Peeters, *Still Life with Oysters, Bread and Shrimps*, 1608, oil on panel, 23,5 x 36.5 cm., private collection

Fig. 8 Pieter Claesz, *Still Life with Roemer, Oysters, Salt Cellar and Roll*, signed and dated 1642, oil on panel, 33 x 47,3 cm, private collection

Fig. 9 Pieter Claesz, *Still Life with Roemer, Berkemeyer, Oysters and Roll*, signed and dated 1643, oil on panel, 32 x 47 cm, private collection

the parable of the rich man and the poor Lazarus from Luke (Luke, 16, 19-31).[16] In his later work, he moved away from these biblical narratives, becoming a key figure in the development of the genuine still life. His technically excellent still lifes of transparent drinking vessels, goblets, tazzas of confections, bowls of sugared almonds and dried fruit and large pewter plates of oysters were immediately sought after by collectors (fig. 6).[17]

Art historians speculate that Pieter Claesz was an apprentice of Osias Beert or of Clara Peeters who was active in Antwerp between 1607 and roughly 1621. Clara Peeters had painted a still life of oysters as early as 1608 (fig. 7).[18] While it can not be proved that such relationships existed, Pieter Claesz's work reveals that both of these Antwerp painters had a major impact on him. Consider, Pieter Claesz's *toebackje* from 1624 (fig. 1). The features in this painting such as the way that the objects are displayed from an aerial view, the light flooding in, as well as the dark table that is cut off on both ends prove Beert's and Peeter's influence on him. Even in this early work, we can see Pieter Claesz's dedication to the coherence in the arrangement of the motifs which becomes a dominant trait in his art. In the *ontbijtje* dated 1642 here presented, we see the painter at the height of his mastery. Each object is impeccably placed within the composition. This painting belongs to a group of still lifes from the early 1640's (figs. 8, 9)[19] that is characterized by the artist's careful trimming of objects, ultimately culminating in a single free standing monumental Roemer. While these still lifes are titled *ontbijtjes* in contemporary written sources, they do not accurately represent a seventeenth century light meal. Pieter Claesz pays here particular attention to the oysters, the perfect subject to suit his preference for a colour palette of chromatic minimalism, as they are symbols of status and wealth. He chooses not a "modest message" [20] in his motifs and treatment of the paint, but rather he gives us the perfect expression of refined artistic reflection.

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**Notes**

1 Pieter Claesz, who signed nearly all of his paintings just with his monogram, was therefore only known as the monogramist PC until the late 19th century. His true identity was rediscovered only in 1882/3 by Abraham Bredius and Sydney Colvin; see M. Brunner-Bulst, *Pieter Claesz : der Hauptmeister des Haarlemer Stillebens im 17. Jahrhundert : Kritischer* Œuvrekatalog, Lingen 2004, pp. 125-126. In 1988 a little tobacco still-life by Pieter Claesz with the unique signature *pieter Claessen A° 1622* was discovered. This was the first indisputable confirmation of the identification proposed by Bredius and Colvin; cf. Brunner-Bulst 2004, cat. no. 4, pp. 12, 13 (colourplate), 155, 156, 352. P. Biesboer (ed.), *Pieter Claesz : Master of Haarlem Still Life*, exh. cat. Haarlem, Frans Hals Museum, Zürich, Kunsthaus Zürich, Washington (DC), National Gallery of Art 2004-2006, cat. no. 2. In 2018 another still-life with the signature *Pclaessen 1625* turned up; cf. M. Brunner-Bulst, in: J. Hillegers et al., *Salomon Lilian Old Masters 2018*, Amsterdam 2018, cat. no. 3, pp. 22.

2 See F.G. Meijer, 'Een nieuwe kijk op Franchoys Elaut (1589 – 1635)', in: *Oud Holland* 109 (1995), pp. 18-31; Brunner-Bulst 2004, pp. 167-169.

3 Two notarial acts of 29 September and 11 October 1640 record that Pieter Claesz was at that time 43 years old. In elder literature he was thought to be from Steinfurt (Westfalia), but this was a misunderstanding. He came from Berchem, as it is stated in the register of the Haarlem Municipal Orphanage, where his twin daughters were admitted several days after his death; see Brunner-Bulst 2004, pp. 134, 194 (note 185); P. Biesboer in: Haarlem/Zürich /Washington 2004-2006, p. 16; I. van Thiel-Strohman, in: N. Köhler (ed.), *Painting in Haarlem 1500 – 1850 : The collection of the Frans Hals Museum*, Ghent/Haarlem 2006, p. 124.

4 P. Biesboer in: Haarlem/Zürich/Washington 2004-2006, pp. 16, 137 (note 22).

5 In a notarial act from 9 June 1661 in Amsterdam (GAA, ONA, J. Hellerus 2488, fol. 555) Berchem is recorded as 39 years old; P. Biesboer, 'Nicolaes Pietersz. Berchem : Meister aus Haarlem", in: P. Biesboer et al., *Nicolaes Berchem : Im Licht Italiens*, exh. cat. Haarlem, Frans Hals Museum, Zürich, Kunsthaus Zürich, Schwerin, Staatliches Museum Schwerin 2006-2007, pp. 11, 160.

6 Private collection; see Brunner-Bulst 2004, cat. no. 1, pp. 9 (colour plate), 137, 138, 145, 146, 206; Haarlem/Zürich/Washington 2004-2006, cat. no. 1.

7 P. Biesboer, *Collections of Paintings in Haarlem 1572 – 1745* (*Documents for the history of collecting : Netherlandish Inventories* I), Los Angeles 2001; P. Biesboer in: Haarlem/Zürich/Washington 2004-2006, p. 25.

8 My catalogue raisonné published in 2004 includes 243 paintings. About 17 hitherto unknown paintings by the master have been discovered in the last 15 years.

9 Brunner-Bulst 2004, cat. no. 9.

10 See W. Richter, Auster, in: K. Ziegler (ed.), *Der Kleine Pauly : Lexikon der Antike*, Munich 1979, I, pp. 776-777.

11 See L. de Girolami Cheney, 'The Oyster in Dutch Genre Paintings: Moral or Erotic Symbolism', in: *Artibus et Historiae* 15/8 (1987), pp. 135-157.

12 F.G. Meijer, 'Meal Still Lifes in the Southern and Northern Netherlands: Reciprocal Inspiration?', in: Q. Buvelot et al., *Slow Food : Dutch and Flemish Meal Still Lifes 1600 – 1640*, exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis 2017, pp. 33, 34, fig. 19.

13 Sam Segal, *A Prosperous Past : The Sumptuous Still Life in the Netherlands 1600 – 1700*, exh. cat. Delft, Museum Het Prinsenhof 1988, pp. 41-43, fig. 3, 4.

14 J.A. Emmens, 'Eins aber ist nötig' : Zu Inhalt und Bedeutung von Markt-und Küchenstücken des 16. Jahrhunderts', in: *Kunsthistorische Opstellen*, 2 vols., Amsterdam 1981, 2, pp. 189-221.

15 Meijer 2017, p. 34.

16 From about 1605-1610, panel, 51 x 73 cm, England, private collection; see The Hague 2017, p. 91, fig. 1d.

17 C. Rulkens, 'Osias Beert', in: The Hague 2017, pp. 88-93.

18 Meijer 2017, p. 35, fig. 22.

19 Brunner-Bulst 2004, cat. nos. 110, 115, pp. 269, 270.

20 So the title of N.R.A. Vroom's pioneering study published in 1980.

Detail of cat. no. 6