



Willem van Aelst  
Dutch, 1627 - 1683

## *Still Life with Dead Game*

1661

oil on canvas

overall: 84.7 x 67.3 cm (33 3/8 x 26 1/2 in.)

Inscription: lower right below table top: Guill.mo van. Aelst. 1661.

Pepita Milmore Memorial Fund 1982.36.1

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### ENTRY

Van Aelst depicts a number of dead animals hanging above, and resting upon, a blue, gold-trimmed hunter's game pouch that lies on a stone ledge. He painted the animals so precisely that most of them can be identified. The scene is dominated by a European hare (*Lepus europaeus*) and a large white rooster. A European partridge (*Perdix perdix*) hangs before the legs of the hare, while in the upper left an adult kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*) and a common wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) are suspended from the same string as two falconer's hoods. Another large bird, possibly a black rooster, is partially hidden and cannot be identified. The animals must have been killed by a falcon, as no bullet wounds are visible. [1]

The tightly cropped and carefully orchestrated composition is characteristic of Van Aelst's paintings from the 1650s and 1660s. Through his use of light, color, and texture, Van Aelst focuses our attention on the animals and the game pouch. He carefully records the various textures of the fur, feathers, stone, and satin, and even includes a fly on the rooster's comb. The dark background gives the scene a somber, almost brooding quality. The impact of the painting, however, comes from its extraordinary illusionism, and one wonders whether it was installed in such a way that its trompe l'oeil qualities were enhanced. The trompe l'oeil illusionism of the design is compromised by the way the strap of the game pouch is cut by the lower edge of the painting. Hence, one wonders whether the design was originally intended to be onto its frame or onto the wall itself. One could also imagine that illusionistic nails could have been painted above the composition from which the dead game would have appeared to hang. Despite its exceptional state of preservation, the painting no longer looks today as it did when Van Aelst executed it. Technical examinations have revealed that the brilliant blue game bag was

initially green in color. Van Aelst painted the bag with a mixture of natural ultramarine and a yellow lake, which proved to be fugitive.

Such paintings may have been collected by rich burghers who owned game parks and hunting lodges. Scott Sullivan has argued that these paintings appealed to the aristocratic aspirations of the Dutch burgher because hunting and falconry traditionally had been pastimes of the Dutch nobility. [2] The diversity of animals indicates that Van Aelst composed the scene from a repertoire of studies that he had made after specific models. Virtually the same kingfisher, hanging in a similar position, occurs in a signed and dated 1664 painting (Nationalmuseum, Stockholm). [3] The game pouch is also found in other Van Aelst paintings, such as *Still Life with Game and Hunting Gear* (Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe). [4]

That Van Aelst's painting was intended to represent the general theme of the hunt rather than the spoils of a specific outing is evident from the relief on the front of the stone ledge depicting Diana, the chaste goddess of the hunt, and Actaeon, a mortal huntsman who surprised her at her bath. Diana, visible between the shoulder straps of the game pouch, leans over to splash water on Actaeon. He recoils, but stag horns are already sprouting from his head as punishment for his intrusion. Van Aelst's relief is based on one of the most famous mannerist compositions, Paulus van Vianen's gilded silver plaquette of 1612 [fig. 1]. [5] The exquisite works of both Paulus and his older brother Adam elicited great admiration in the seventeenth century, and their silver basins and ewers appear frequently in paintings by Dutch artists. Intricate silver vessels, similar to those created by the Van Vianens, occur in a number of Van Aelst's flower still lifes. As Rudiger Klessmann has pointed out, artists included these finely wrought objects in their biblical and mythological paintings as symbols of worldly treasures that should be forsaken for more lasting values. [6] In this instance, because Van Aelst has depicted a stone relief rather than the gilded silver plaquette, he emphasizes instead the thematic relationship of the story of Diana and Actaeon to the hunt. [7]

The juxtaposition of the relief with the dead game may also have been chosen for moralizing reasons. [8] The story of Diana and Actaeon frequently was interpreted in Dutch seventeenth-century literature as a warning against succumbing to sensual pleasure. Actaeon's downfall resulted from his unregulated desires, which led him to overstep the bounds of chastity by peering at Diana. [9] The partridge, hare, and rooster hanging above the relief are all animals that, like Actaeon, are associated with unbridled lust. [10] Thus, the unusual array of animals in this trophy painting may have less to do with the specifics of a hunt than with the underlying

iconographic content of the painting. The entire scene, painted with such trompe l'oeil illusionism, probably also alluded to the transience of sensual pleasure.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

April 24, 2014

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## COMPARATIVE FIGURES



**fig. 1** Paulus van Vianen, *Diana and Actaeon*, 1612, gilded silver plaquette, Centraal Museum, Utrecht

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## NOTES

- [1] George E. Watson, curator, Division of Birds, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, letter, July 13, 1982, in NGA curatorial files.
- [2] Scott A. Sullivan, *The Dutch Gamepiece* (Montclair, NJ, 1984), 41–42; and Scott A. Sullivan “Rembrandt’s Self-Portrait with a Dead Bittern,” *Art Bulletin* 62 (1980): 236–243.
- [3] Inventory no. NM 301.
- [4] Inventory no. 350.
- [5] Inventory no. 14745. The connection with Van Vianen was pointed out to me by Joaneath Spicer. For information on Van Vianen’s work, see Th. M. Duyvene de Wit-Klinkhamer, “Diana en Actaeon door Paulus van

Vianen,” *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 6 (1955): 185–190; and A. L. den Blaauwen, ed. *Dutch Silver, 1580–1830*, trans. Patricia Wardle (The Hague and Amsterdam, 1979), 42–54.

- [6] Rudiger Klessmann, “Ad Tragoedias, non ad Vitam,” in *Ars Auro Prior: Studia Ioanni Bialostocki Sexagenario Dicta* (Warsaw, 1981), 367–372.
- [7] Van Aelst used this relief in at least four other paintings, including *Still Life with Poultry* (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inventory no. A1669) and *Still Life with Game Pouch* (art market, London, 1993).
- [8] For the following analysis I am indebted to Pamela Hall, who, as a graduate student at the University of Maryland, analyzed this painting in a seminar report in 1987 (in NGA curatorial files).
- [9] See Eric Jan Sluijter, *De “Heydensche Fabulen” in de Noorddederlandse schilderkunst circa 1590–1670* (The Hague, 1986), 168–187.
- [10] The most comprehensive assessment of the symbolic implications of dead birds is Eddy de Jongh, “Erotica in vogelperspectief: De dubbelzinnigheid van een reeks 17de eeuwse genrevoorstellingen,” *Simiolus* 3 (1968–1969): 22–74. See also Peter C. Sutton, *Masters of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting* (Philadelphia, 1984), 184–185, 251. For a genre painting with sexual overtones where the same types of dead animals occur, see Hieronymous van der Mij’s *A Kitchen with a Servant Girl and Two Boys* (Derekamp, Stichting Adwina van Heek, Huize Singraven), repro. in Eric Jan Sluijter et al., *Leidse fijnschilders: van Gerrit Dou tot Frans van Mieris de Jonge, 1630–1760* (Zwolle, 1988), 171.

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## TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support is a fine-weight, plain-weave fabric that has been lined and the tacking margins have been trimmed. Like many of Van Aelst’s works of the 1650’s and 1660’s was prepared with a double ground: a lower layer of chalk toned with earth and a gray-brown upper ground.[1] The precision of the forms suggests that Van Aelst used some form of preliminary design. There is evidence that most of the composition was underpainted in tones of brown and gray. The handling of the final paint is extremely disciplined, with minute wet-into-wet strokes defining individual fibers in the feathers and building finely textured passages such as the rooster’s wattles.

Technical analysis revealed a significant, unintended alteration in the painting. In this work, as in most of Van Aelst’s hunt compositions, the game bag originally was not blue but green. The green bag was painted with a pigment mixture composed

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of ultramarine blue and a yellow lake based on a fugitive dyestuff such as weld.

The yellow dyestuff has faded leaving only the blue pigment visible.[2]

The overall condition of the painting is excellent, with losses confined to the edges and the hare's muzzle. Thin upper layers and glazes are moderately abraded, particularly in the rooster and partridge feathers, the pouch and strap, bas-relief shadows, and background. The painting was treated in 2010 to remove a discolored varnish and to inpaint the losses and abrasion.

[1] For an overview of Van Aelst's materials and painting practices see E. Melanie Gifford, Anikó Bezur, Andrea Guidi di Bagno, and Lisha Deming Glinsman, "The making of a luxury image: van Aelst's painting materials and artistic techniques," *Elegance and Refinement: The Still-life Paintings of Willem van Aelst*, Houston and Washington, 2012, 66-89.

[2] Analysis of paint cross-sections by light microscopy, SEM-EDX and microspectrofluorimetry was carried out by the NGA Scientific Research department. See Gifford et al. 78-80.

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### PROVENANCE

Probably (sale, Amsterdam, 14 October 1749, no. 16).[1] Dr. C.J.K. van Aalst, Huis-te-Hoevelaken, by 1939;[2] (sale, Sotheby Mak van Waay, Amsterdam, 18 May 1981, no. 1); (Richard Green, London); sold 8 June 1982 to NGA.

[1] This sale was kindly brought to the attention of Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. by Tanya Paul; see her letter of 30 October 2007, in NGA curatorial files. The sale consisted of works from the collections of Johan Diedrick Pompe van Meerdervoort, Burgemeester of Dordrecht, and the painter Jan van Huysum (1682–1749), although the consignor of individual lots is not specified. The work is described as "Een doode Haan en Haas en verder bywerk, kunstig geschilderd door van Aalst, h 2v. 7 en een half d., br. 2 v. 3 d., in een zwarte Lyst met een verguld binnen Lysje. 18-10," and Paul writes that the NGA painting is the only Van Aelst to her knowledge that depicts both a rooster and a hare. See Gerard Hoet, *Catalogus van schilderyen*, reprint, Soest, 1976: 268–269.

[2] [2] J.W. von Moltke, ed. *Dutch and Flemish Old Masters in the Collection of Dr. C.J.K. van Aalst. Huis-te-Hoevelaken, Holland*, foreword by W.R. Valentiner, Verona, 1939: 50, pl. 11.

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## EXHIBITION HISTORY

1997 Rembrandt and the Golden Age: Dutch Paintings from the National Gallery of Art, The Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia, 1997, unnumbered brochure.

2002 Deceptions and Illusions: Five Centuries of Trompe L'Oeil Painting, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 2002-2003, not in catalogue.

2012 Elegance and Refinement: The Still Life Paintings of Willem van Aelst, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 2012, no. 15, repro.

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- 1984 Sullivan, Scott A. *The Dutch Gamepiece*. Montclair, New Jersey, 1984: 91 n. 32.
- 1984 Walker, John. *National Gallery of Art, Washington*. Rev. ed. New York, 1984: 306, no. 405, color repro.
- 1985 National Gallery of Art. *European Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. Washington, 1985: 17, repro.
- 1988 Grimm, Claus. *Stilleben: die niederländischen und deutschen Meister*. Stuttgart, 1988: 172, repros. 115-117.
- 1992 National Gallery of Art. *National Gallery of Art, Washington*. New York, 1992: 134, repro.
- 1995 Barolsky, Paul. "Still Life and Metamorphosis." *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 14, no. 2 (1995): 36, repro.
- 1995 Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr. *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*. The Collections of the National Gallery of Art Systematic Catalogue. Washington, 1995: 3-4, color repro. 2.
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*Netherlands, 1550-1720*. Exh. cat. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; Cleveland Museum of Art. Zwolle, 1999: 244, fig. 61a.

- 2008 Paul, Tanya. "Beschieldert met een Glans': Willem van Aelst and artistic self-consciousness in seventeenth-century Dutch still life painting." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, 2008: x, 130, 245, 282, 379, fig. 50.
- 2012 Paul, Tanya, et al. *Elegance and Refinement: The still-life paintings of Willem van Aelst*. Exh. cat. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; National Gallery of Art, Washington. New York, 2012: 130-133, no. 15, repro.
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**To cite:** Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "Willem van Aelst/*Still Life with Dead Game*/1661," *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*, NGA Online Editions, <https://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/61174> (accessed April 11, 2025).