# Jacob Fopsen van Es

*a biography*

Wenceslaus Hollar (Bohemian, 1607–1677), *Portrait of Jacob van Es*, n.d., engraving, 6 1/4 x 4 1/4 in. (16 x 11 cm), Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library

Jacob Fopsen van Es was born in 1596 in Antwerp, a center for the arts in Flanders (now northern Belgium). Although little is known about his life and training, records show that he registered as a master with the Guild of Saint Luke in 1617. Like many Netherlandish artists at the time, van Es specialized in a particular genre of painting. Aside from a few bouquets and garlands of fruit and flowers, he primarily painted still lifes of meals, particularly "breakfast pieces" like *Still Life* (1630). Van Es was one of several Flemish artists working in this genre, which originated in Antwerp in the early seventeenth century, around 1600. Artists like Osias Beert (c.1580–1623) and Clara Peeters (active 1607–1621) were among the earliest artists to depict still lifes of foodstuffs and costly objects, referencing the prosperity of this part of Europe at the time. Although certainly aware of and perhaps influenced by each other's work, van Es and other artists working in this genre created their own compositions and forms to develop their subject matter.

Van Es' works are representative of Flemish still lifes of the early seventeenth century, where objects are separated into distinct entities with little or no overlapping. Over the course of the century, more elaborate banquet, fruit still lifes, and game pieces quickly replaced this older style. Thus, van Es' work, which shows little evidence of stylistic shifts, is often classified as conservative. While some of his contemporaries experimented increasingly with dynamic and complex compositions characteristic of the Baroque period, van Es continued to paint clearly lit and separate forms distributed across an elevated plane.

Jacob Fopsen van Es (Flemish, c. 1596–1666), *Still Life with Pitcher,* n.d., oil on wood, 15 1/4 x 22 in. (38.8 x 56.2 cm), Museum of Fine Arts, Valenciennes, France, P46-1-100. Photo © RMN-Grand Palace / René-Gabriel Ojéda

Van Es achieved renown during his lifetime for his meticulously rendered still lifes, as evidenced by his inclusion in a collection of artist portraits published in 1649. His engraved likeness bears the inscription "Jacobus van Es, painter who excels in fruit, fish, birds and flowers which he renders naturally extremely well." Numerous artists and collectors acquired his work, including his celebrated countryman Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640). He trained at least two students during the 1620s, and fellow artists were godfathers to his children, demonstrating his elevated status in the arts community. Van Es spent most of his life in Antwerp, though sources claim he visited Rome in 1636. After a fifty-year career, he died in 1666 and was buried on March 11 at the Cathedral of Our Lady in Antwerp.

## Jacob Fopsen van Es

**Flemish, c. 1596–1666**

***Still Life***

**1630**

oil on wood panel, 29 3/4 x 42 in. (75.5 x 106.7 cm)
Museum purchase with funds from the Art Acquisition Endowment Fund and Major Art Purchase Fund in memory of Edith Larsen Jonas, 1974.56

*Still Life* is an example of a "breakfast piece," a type of still life Jacob Fopsen van Es painted often. Known as *ontbijt* in Dutch, these works are representations of informal meals with eating- and drinking-related objects arranged on a table top. The table usually extends across the entire width of the picture, often covered in linen, wool, or damask. The background is generally kept neutral, drawing the viewer's focus to the exquisitely rendered foodstuffs and costly objects.

Although composed of items present in the Netherlands at the time, these still lifes did not depict realistically a seventeenth-century meal. Instead, artists composed these images to present the viewer with a visual feast. Foodstuffs and objects, chosen on the basis of material, form, color, and luster, were carefully arranged to suggest and invite consumption.

Although larger than many of his other works, *Still Life* is a typical example of van Es' style. He often painted clearly lit and separate forms spread evenly across an inclined plane, where each object occupies its own space and casts its own shadow. The repetition of some shapes, found in the rounded edges of the foreshortened plates and sliced fruits, combined with a harmonious color scheme seen in the subdued yellow of the butter shavings, cheese, and lemon, presents both unity and compositional balance.

Van Es, like his contemporaries, sometimes incorporated symbols derived from earlier religious paintings. Although it is difficult to be certain if this is the case in *Still Life,* the items he included in his composition all carry particular significance, whether as possible religious symbols or references to everyday life at the time.

### Discussion Questions

Why did Jacob Fopsen van Es and other artists create still-life paintings?

❍

How did van Es demonstrate his technical skills in *Still Life*?

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What items would you include in a still life? What meaning would the objects have?

Teachers: go to www.joslyn.org/education for this poster's related academic standards and lesson plans.

## Symbolism in *Still Life*

**Bread and wine:** The bread and wine might reference the Christian sacrament of the Eucharist, the commemoration of Christ's Last Supper, as well as Christ's Passion, the short final period of his life before the crucifixion. More likely, the presence of bread and wine, like other objects in the work, reflects everyday life and the prosperity of the Netherlands during this period. Bread accompanied almost every meal in the Low Countries and therefore appears frequently in still lifes in the form of small rolls or loaves. Although heavy rye bread was more common, fine wheat bread, considered a luxury at the time, is depicted here. Similarly, only the most affluent drank wine with their meals as beer was far cheaper. Imported from Germany, France, or Spain, white wines from the Rhineland were also particularly popular.

**Pomegranate:** In Christian art, a pomegranate, particularly when opened to show seeds bursting from within, references Christ's suffering and subsequent Resurrection. It is also often a symbol of both temptation and fertility because of its previous ancient association with Persephone, daughter of the Greek goddess Demeter. According to myth, because Persephone ate pomegranate seeds while imprisoned by Hades she was condemned to spend several months each year in the underworld, emerging every spring to bring new life.

**Lemons and oranges:** Citrus fruits were luxury items at this time and thus symbols of wealth. Originally from China, Malaysia, Persia, and the Indus Valley, they were expensive and difficult to transport by land over the Alps to Europe because they could not be exposed to cold temperatures. They became available only as sea routes developed in the seventeenth century; traders packed them in a barrel of salt water to preserve them during the long journey. Also, van Es' depiction of the pulp, pith, and peel of the fruit demonstrates his technical skill and reveals his virtuosity as an artist.

**Grapes:** The purple and green grapes may refer to the wine turned into blood at the Last Supper or signify blood and water flowing from Christ's pierced side on the Cross. Their exquisite detail also attests to van Es's technical skill.

**Cheese, butter, and ham:** Not luxury objects like many of the others in this work, cheese and butter were staples of the Netherlandish diet from the early sixteenth century onwards. Dramatic growth in the Dutch livestock population caused these products to be produced on a large scale, intended for the domestic market as well as for export. Although inexpensive, cheese and butter were associated with prosperity; their presence in this work references the riches earned from dairy products in the Netherlands during this period. Similarly, the ham, although a common sight on Netherlandish tables, can be associated with wealth; the cut depicted here is a jawbone, the most prized, and therefore expensive, piece of the pig.


**Tableware:** Expensive tableware made of pewter, silver, gold, and glass symbolizes luxury and wealth and was available to an increasing number of Dutch and Flemish households during the prosperous seventeenth century. Portraying a variety of reflective materials in a work also indicated the artist's technical skill. The large lidded goblet is a **bokaal**, or an ornate, partially gilt-covered cup. A **bekerschoref**, or elaborate cupholder, is an intricate sculptural creation (often gilded, as seen here). It was highly prized for its workmanship and was passed around banquets as a gesture of friendship. A **glass of white wine** is placed on top of the bekerschoref. Cups like these typically had little prunts (small globules of glass fused to other pieces of glass) or rounded raspberry decorations on the base to provide the user with a good grip. A **goblet** made entirely of glass can be seen to the right of the bekerschoref. This type, known as *façon de Venise,* was an imitation of Venetian glassware and was popular in many parts of Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

A lack of written sources makes it difficult to know the general meaning these pictures would have conferred to contemporary viewers. Whether they represented hospitality, were given as gifts, or functioned as conversation pieces is all a matter of conjecture. It is possible that *Still Life* expressed the general idea of vanitas, or a warning of the transience of earthly goods. This kind of message was common in other types of still lifes in the Dutch Republic at this time and emphasized that the items pictured, though beautiful and appetizing, were fleeting pleasures soon to decay. The suggestion that someone has been at this table drinking wine and eating delicious food before abruptly leaving reminds the viewer that death can seize at any moment, even in the midst of enjoying earthly temptations. Regardless of whether this moralizing message was intended here, the painting certainly illustrates the variety of goods, both domestically produced and imported, available in the Low Countries in the first half of the seventeenth century. Sumptuously laid tables surely appealed to an increasing desire to convey prosperity and high social status.

# Still Life in the Netherlands

Jacob Fopsen van Es (Flemish, c. 1596–1666), *Breakfast Piece with Cheese, Ham and Goblets,* n.d., oil on oak, 19 3/4 x 33 in. (50 x 84 cm), National Museum, Sweden, Bequeathed in 1872 by Carl Leonard Kinmanson, NM 1146

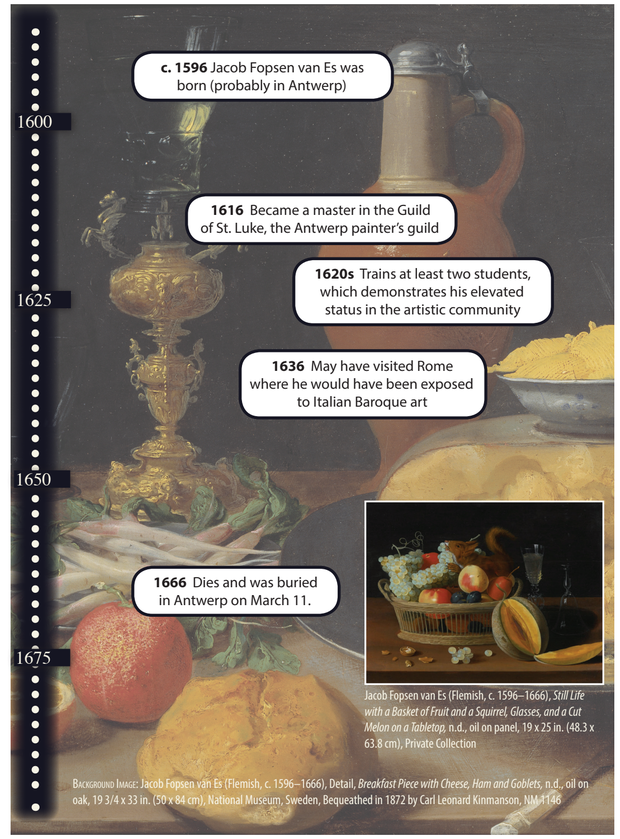
The late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were a tumultuous time in the Low Countries, a region comprised of modern Belgium and the Netherlands. In 1556, Holy Roman Emperor Charles V transferred rule of the Low Countries to his son, Philip II of Spain. Eager to keep the region Catholic, Philip continued his father's anti-Protestant policies, additionally increasing taxation and centralizing power. Although Charles, Dutch by birth, was tolerated, Philip, who had never lived in the region, drew the locals' ire. In 1566, Protestants rioted across the Low Countries, smashing images in Catholic churches. By 1579 the northern provinces seceded, creating the Dutch Republic, while the southern provinces remained under Spanish rule. The independent Dutch Republic drew Protestant intellectuals, merchants, and artists from the provinces controlled by the Catholic Spanish. Although war continued until 1648, this influx of a skilled population, the success of local industries such as breweries and textiles, and the domination of the global trade market by the Dutch East India Company, ushered in a period of economic prosperity known as the Dutch "Golden Age."

As a result of the Protestant Reformation, religious patronage was no longer a source of income for artists in the Dutch Republic. Fortunately, their robust economy translated into a sizeable urban middle class with disposable income to purchase art. Thus, rather than working on commission, artists sold their works on an open market in fairs, bookstores, and through dealers. This open market, and a patrician class seeking paintings to decorate their homes and display their wealth, led to the rise of five major categories of painting: portraiture, scenes of everyday life, history painting, landscapes, and still lifes. Without the financial security of church commissions, artists in the Dutch Republic began to specialize in very specific categories, like flower or meal still lifes, in order to hone an individualized style and create a high volume of works in a specific niche. In contrast to the Dutch Republic, artists in the Catholic southern provinces continued to paint religious subjects and rely on church commissions, which proliferated after iconoclastic riots like those in 1566 destroyed many church sculptures and altarpieces. However, though politically divided, people still moved between the northern and southern provinces and brought wealth and ideas across the borders, allowing the new art genres to flourish throughout the Netherlands.

Jacob Fopsen van Es (Flemish, c. 1596–1666), *Still Life with Oysters,* c. 1635–1640, oil on wood panel, 21 1/4 x 29 in. (54 x 73.7 cm), The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, Florida, Museum Purchase, 1952, SN661

Still lifes, particularly the meal still lifes in which artists like Jacob Fopsen van Es specialized, were incredibly popular with buyers in the seventeenth century. In addition to decorating middle-class homes, still lifes appealed to people of all classes and stations, as they gave them access to objects and practices financially beyond their grasp. These works were not only popular in the Netherlands, but collectors throughout Europe treasured their pictorial illusionism and consummate craftsmanship, though by and large still-life painters depended on the vagaries of the domestic market for survival. Their relative affordability, and flexibility, possibly contributed to still lifes' popularity as well; of the five genres, history paintings were the largest and most expensive. Still lifes, though still exquisite, were generally smaller and more affordable, perhaps furthering their ubiquity in the Netherlands during the seventeenth century.

# Timeline




Jacob Fopsen van Es (Flemish, c. 1596–1666), *Still Life with a Basket of Fruit and a Squirrel, Glasses, and a Cut Melon on a Tabletop,* n.d., oil on panel, 19 x 25 in. (48.3 x 63.8 cm), Private Collection

Background Image: Jacob Fopsen van Es (Flemish, c. 1596–1666), Detail, *Breakfast Piece with Cheese, Ham and Goblets,* n.d., oil on oak, 19 3/4 x 33 in. (50 x 84 cm), National Museum, Sweden, Bequeathed in 1872 by Carl Leonard Kinmanson, NM 1146

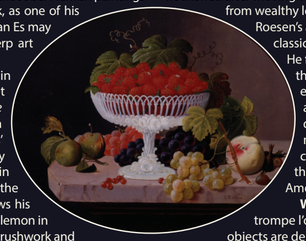
## More Still Lifes at Joslyn Art Museum

A still life is a work of art that depicts inanimate objects, often commonplace items either natural or man-made. Although mosaics and decorative frescos containing objects seen in still lifes occasionally appeared in antiquity and later in religious and historical scenes, still-life painting emerged as its own genre in the sixteenth century, particularly flourishing in the Low Countries and Italy. Although ranked as the least important genre in the hierarchy of art (history painting was the most prestigious), still life has persisted as one of the principal genres of Western art. It has been used to celebrate material pleasures, to warn of life's ephemerality, and to experiment with new compositional techniques, among other purposes. The works in Joslyn Art Museum's permanent collection demonstrate the range of objectives and styles seen in still lifes across various countries and eras.

Attributed to **Giovanni Battista Ruoppolo** (1629–1693), *Still Life* (n.d.) is set against a dark background with peaches and figs contained in a wicker basket and pomegranates on the table. Ruoppolo, a prominent seventeenth-century Neapolitan still-life painter, specialized in compositions of flowers and food (particularly seafood and fruit), which were depicted in a vigorous and exuberant style. The naturalism and sharp lighting of this canvas exemplifies Ruoppolo's style and shows the influence of Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571–1610), whose works shaped the Italian schools' development of still-life painting earlier in the century. Ruoppolo spent his entire life in Naples and was succeeded by a substantial school of followers. Although his dramatic still lifes differed from the sober Flemish paintings like van Es', Ruoppolo had the opportunity to study such work, as one of his patrons displayed Flemish still lifes in his gallery. Additionally, van Es may have seen examples of Italian still lifes offered on the Antwerp art market, but it is conjectural whether they influenced his work.



**Claes Bergojis** (active before 1651-d. 1668) worked in Amsterdam and successfully competed in the growing market for still-life paintings during the seventeenth century. *Still Life* (1650s–60s) is an example of a banketjes, or banquet piece, a development and extension of the breakfast pieces like van Es' *Still Life*. Banquet works portray a dining table filled with luxury items, such as the lobster, velvet tablecloth, and Chinese porcelain dishes seen here, demonstrating the economic prosperity of the Dutch Republic at the time. Bergojis' choice of items also shows his technical skill; like van Es, he depicts the peel and the interior of lemon in addition to carefully rendering a glass of white wine. His tight brushwork and attention to detail distinguishes his work from that of his contemporaries. This still life, like some breakfast pieces, may carry the moralizing message of vanitas; while exquisite, the earthly pleasures here are fleeting in the face of inevitable death.



**Severin Roesen** (c.1815–c.1872) was a leading exponent of still-life painting in America in the nineteenth century. Trained in the techniques of enamel and porcelain painting in his native Germany, he immigrated to the United States in 1848 and settled in New York City. Celebrated for his still lifes, he flourished after moving to Williamsport, Pennsylvania, in 1857, where he received numerous commissions from wealthy local patrons. *Fruit Still Life with Compote of Strawberries* (ca. 1865–1870) reflects Roesen's adoption of characteristically "American" style elements, such as classical balance, intense realism, and simplicity of composition and form. He fused these into still lifes influenced by European traditions, including that of the German Dusseldorf Academy as well as seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dutch still-life painting. The objects in his works are brightly colored and illuminated. He often reused compositional devices, frequently depicting his fruit and flower arrangements on a marble table top as seen here. Overflowing with fruits and flowers, his canvases were well-suited to nineteenth-century American taste; in their celebration of nature's bounty, they embody the popular ideal of America as the world's "New Eden."

**William Michael Harnett** (1848–1892) was the premier practitioner of American trompe l'oeil ("fool-the-eye") painting during the nineteenth century. In these compositions, objects are depicted extraordinarily realistically, resulting in an optical illusion that the items exist in three dimensions. Although these paintings found favor with the general public in Harnett's time, the art establishment viewed them as mere "trickery" devoid of real artistry and suitable only for fairs and saloons. However, Harnett's works are not simply depictions of material reality because, like seventeenth-century Netherlandish artists, he felt he had to do more than just present everyday still-life elements in a clever manner. While his compositions contain traditional symbols of worldly transience, including snuffed-out candles, old books, and skulls, they also function as portraits. In *Le Figaro* (1880), the French newspaper and pipe tobacco, abandoned as if in mid-smoke, indicate a man of intellectual and worldly pursuits. The carefully-arranged "clutter," the paper tantalizingly out of reach, and smoldering tobacco seems as if someone has just left. Although his depiction of man-made materials was scorned by the art establishment, the bric-a-brac and personal possessions that fill his works reflect a nineteenth-century obsession with wealth and accumulation. They draw the viewer into their miniature space, which is imbued with human presence.

A talented writer and musician, **Maurice de Vlaminck** (1876–1958) first achieved success as a painter alongside Henri Matisse (1869–1954) as a member of the Fauves. Although each Fauvist's style was unique, they shared an interest in exaggerated form and bright, unnatural color. In 1907, however, Vlaminck abandoned this style, feeling its orientation was becoming too decorative. He turned to the paintings of Paul Cézanne (1839–1906) and the Cubists for ideas to capture the shifting perceptions of objects and volumetric structure. In *Still Life* (1910), he combined the muted, warm, and cool colors and solid forms of Cézanne with the Cubist technique of breaking up space and altering textures and shapes while maintaining an object's recognizable character. His use of rhythmic fractured planes and a restricted palette, along with broad brushwork, energize this modest yet expressive composition.

Images (left to right): Giovanni Battista Ruoppolo (Italian, 1629–1693), *Still Life,* c. 1650–60s, oil on canvas, 19 1/4 x 23 1/4 in. (48.9 x 59.1 cm), Bequest of Charles Whedon Rain in honor of Mr. and Mrs. Burt Whedon, 1986.21; Claes Bergoijs (Dutch, active before 1651–d. 1668), *Still Life,* 1650s-60s, oil on canvas, 35 x 28 in. (88.9 x 71.1 cm), Gift of Mr. A. C. van Ekris, 1980.68; Severin Roesen (American, born Germany, c.1815–1872), *Fruit Still Life with Compote of Strawberries,* c. 1865–70, oil on canvas, 16 x 20 in. (40.64 x 50.8 cm), Museum purchase with funds from the Gilbert M. and Martha H. Hitchcock Foundation, 2002.10; William Michael Harnett (American, born Ireland, 1848–1892), *Le Figaro,* 1880, oil on canvas, 6 7/8 x 5 7/8 in. (17.5 x 14.9 cm), Museum purchase, 1961.89; Maurice de Vlaminck (French, 1876–1958), *Still Life,* 1910, oil on canvas, 25 x 31 in. (63.5 x 78.7 cm), Partial gift of the Gilbert C. Swanson Foundation and museum purchase, 1989.7



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**JACOB FOPSEN VAN ES**
Flemish, c. 1596–1666

**STILL LIFE**
1630, oil on wood panel, 29 3/4 x 42 in.