



Jan Davidsz. de Heem 1606-1684
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Jan Davidsz. de Heem 1606-1684 - Summary

This study explores the life and work of Jan Davidsz. de Heem, and examines it within the context of still-life painting in the Netherlands, particularly from the period 1626 to 1684, during which de Heem was active. In those years, certainly from c.1640 to c.1675, Jan Davidsz. de Heem was one of the leading painters of still lifes. Apart from the unmistakably high quality of his work, the fact that de Heem worked alternately in the Northern and Southern Netherlands contributed substantially to the spreading of his renown. A thorough analysis of his oeuvre makes it clear that throughout his career, Jan Davidsz. de Heem, in addition to maintaining a high standard of quality for his work, was continuously looking for changes, innovations, and improvements, in contrast with many of his contemporaries who, once they had found their own manner, kept on repeating themselves. Also, he must constantly have kept a keen eye on the market for his works.

The first two chapters deal with Jan Davidsz. de Heem's effigies and with his biography. A small painting in the Rijksmuseum was always regarded as a self-portrait by the artist, but through comparison with de Heem's drawn portrait by Jan Lievens, a portrait by Adriaen Brouwer, and self-portraits in some early works, I have determined that it is not of and not by de Heem. Much of the artist's biography had been published in earlier literature, but by revisiting the various documents and through contextual issues, it was possible to refine various data to some degree. Importantly, the artist's probable burial date, 10th February 1684, could be traced. As a whole, the biography remains somewhat patchy, however, due to a lack of further documents. Nevertheless, it was possible to establish with more certainty that de Heem left Leiden around mid-1631 and that he settled in Antwerp not long before early 1636. In the meantime, judging from his personal relationships and stylistic issues, he appears to have spent time in or around Amsterdam. Unfortunately no baptismal registration for his daughter Torentiana, born most probably in 1635, could be found. De Heem's return to Utrecht, generally believed to have occurred sometime after 1660, can now safely be dated to c.1658. It has become clear that Jan Davidsz. de Heem was not very particular about his religious (and political) affiliations. Although he was born into a protestant family that had fled the Southern Netherlands for religious reasons, he blended into the Roman Catholic community in Antwerp, apparently without any reservations, after his move there in the mid-1630s. After his return to Utrecht, however, he worked, at least in part, for a protestant and Orangist patronage. Just as easily, he picked up Roman Catholic themes again after his return to Antwerp in 1672. In the last chapter, the concluding observations, the available (but rare) documents concerning early owners and prices are concisely discussed. They confirm that de Heem's paintings were generally held in high esteem and occasionally fetched very high prices, ranking him among the most expensive masters of his time.

The main chapters of this study discuss Jan Davidsz. de Heem's oeuvre, which I have chosen to describe in detail and in chronological order, analysing his paintings individually and in relation to each other. This has proven to offer many new insights into de Heem's development as a painter. Up to 1655, de Heem dated a relatively high number of his paintings, which constitute a firm framework into which undated works could be inserted rather seamlessly. After 1655, de Heem dated only one extant painting, in 1675, therefore, no such framework exists for that period. However, as a result of de Heem's creativity and his urge to develop his skills and approach continuously throughout his career, a distinct development could be detected in his work also for those decades.

From the chronological presentation of the paintings it becomes clear that in de Heem's early years, after his move from Utrecht to Leiden in 1625, he is searching for his own style and idiom. Initially, the emulations of the work of his probable teacher, Balthasar van der Ast, play a substantial role. Free and random citations from paintings by van der Ast from the first half of the 1620s betray de Heem's presence in that artist's studio for at least part of those years. Other sources of inspiration can be recognized in those early paintings as well, however. In 1628, he moves on from still lifes of fruit to still lifes of books, occasionally with a vanitas aspect, he also experiments with interiors with a single figure, appears to be one of the first artists to paint a barn interior still life, and reacts early to Haarlem 'monochrome banketjes'. From (late) 1629 onwards, de Heem develops a more personal style and idiom, resulting in increasingly monumental still lifes. A stylistic connection with the work of Jan Jansz. den Uyl, who was active in Amsterdam, can be observed.

Surprisingly, from de Heem's first years in Antwerp few paintings survive, while during those years he must have established his reputation there. By 1640, his success was evident. In that year he

paints the first dated example of his large luxury still lifes, colourful images of tables richly filled with costly objects, exquisite fruit and other luxurious foods, together with musical instruments, books, documents, seashells, and globes. Several such large paintings appear in the first half of the 1640s, but de Heem also steadily produces still lifes of small and medium formats, barely less rich in their appearance. As an appendix, I have included images of all the paintings on scale, through which the variety in sizes becomes clear. Around the mid-1640s, Jan Davidsz. de Heem paints his first floral compositions, but he did not pursue those substantially until more than ten years later. In about 1646, he also paints a small landscape, which clearly relates to the landscape background views in several of his larger still lifes from the period. In 1643, de Heem produced another barn interior, in collaboration with David Teniers II. Other collaborations, most of which had not been established yet, can be pointed out, among others with Thomas Willeboirts Bosschaert, Erasmus Quellinus II, and with Gerard Seghers. With Seghers and three other painters, he worked on a large altarpiece for the Governor of the Spanish Netherlands, Leopold Wilhelm of Habsburg, for whom he executed several more commissions during the latter's sojourn in Flanders (1647-1656). Patrons must also have come through his family connection with the prominent Antwerp harpsichord maker Andreas Ruckers, whose daughter Anna he married in 1644, after the death of his first wife, Aeltgen van Weede. While in Antwerp, he also had connections in the Northern Netherlands, among others with the Amsterdam dealer and collector Marten Kretzer.

The first half of the 1650s was a very productive period for de Heem. This is, for instance, demonstrated by the fact that over 15 still lifes can be assigned to the year 1652, and a similar number to the next year. The numbers decrease for 1654 and 1655. Partly due to a lack of dated works, the production for the following years, the transitional period between Antwerp and Utrecht, is unclear. The artist's output increases again after his settlement in Utrecht in about 1658, particularly with flower paintings, which from then on become an important trademark. Maria van Oosterwijck, painter of floral still lifes, appears to have moved to Utrecht in 1660 specifically to improve her skills under de Heem's guidance. In 1664, Jacob Marrel leaves his pupil Abraham Mignon with de Heem. Mignon became a pupil and emulator, shared the studio and remained there after de Heem's departure for Antwerp in 1672. I have been able to reconstruct a chronology for Jan Davidsz. de Heem's paintings from after 1655 partly on the basis of the relationship with the works of pupils such as van Oosterwijck and Mignon. An interesting figure turned out to be Jacob Rotius, one of the very few de Heem pupils and followers who rather consistently dated his work. The chronology of his paintings coincides surprisingly well with the hypothetical chronology established for de Heem's late work. In general, the paintings of pupils and close followers, from the early 1640s onwards, have turned out to be very relevant for the study of de Heem's own work and of its impact on still-life painting. Many such relationships were pointed out and examined, which provided substantial depth to the understanding and appreciation of de Heem's position in the art world of his time.

Also after his return to Antwerp, Jan Davidsz. de Heem maintained his contacts in the Northern Netherlands, judging from the fact that, among others, his 'Vivat Oraenge' still life, which was undoubtedly painted for a Dutch patron, can be dated to c.1673 on stylistic grounds. De Heem most likely worked until his death at the age of 77 in 1684. While his dated still life from 1675 – painted at about 69 years old – still is a full-fledged masterpiece, his production appears to have decreased, in numbers as well as in quality, after the later 1670s.

To this study several appendixes have been added, the one with the images on scale was already mentioned above. In addition, there is an appendix with an overview of the documents pertaining to Jan Davidsz. de Heem's life, and one with chronologically arranged images of over 80 of his signatures in documents and on paintings. Finally, and most importantly, there is a catalogue of all 270 paintings that I consider to be autograph works by de Heem. In each entry, data on support and measurements are provided, as well as a transcription of the signature, a description of the contents of the image, and as much information as I have been able to gather on provenance, literature references, and exhibitions. Also such data are provided for the one drawing for which an attribution to de Heem can be maintained, and for the few rejected drawings.

