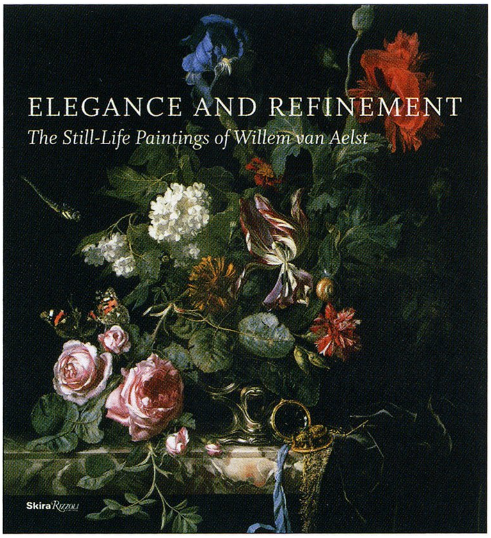
Elegance and Refinement: The Still-Life Painting of Willem van Aelst. Essays by Tanya Paul, James Clifton, Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr. and Julie Berger Hochstrasser, with Melanie Gifford, Anikó Bezur, Andrea Guidi di Bagno and Lisha Deming Glinsman. New York: Skira Rizzoli, in association with the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 2012. 183 pp. Illustrated.

Review by Gail Leggio



This opulently illustrated catalogue accompanies the first solo exhibition devoted to van Aelst, an internationally successful artist of the Dutch Golden Age. There are twenty-eight technically dazzling paintings in "Elegance and Refinement: The Still-Life Painting of Willem van Aelst," on view at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (March 11–May 28, 2012), and the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (June 24–October 28, 2012). Like Vermeer, van Aelst was born in Delft. Unlike Vermeer, who brought a limpid spirituality to scenes of bourgeois life, van Aelst was a florid painter who catered to the expensive tastes of patrons in Paris, at the Medici court in Florence and in Amsterdam. When he settled in Amsterdam, he began signing his first name "Guillelmo" and often included in his still lifes the gold medal he had received at the Tuscan court. The catalogue authors do a good job of filling in the historical background, placing van Aelst (1627–83) in the context of art traffic between Northern Europe and Italy.

Italian patrons prized Northern painters for their verisimilitude. The Medici Grand Duke Cosimo III awarded a commission to a Dutch artist, James Clifton notes, because of his, in the words of the Duke's secretary, "extremely finished small figures and the most exquisite imitation of reality." An artist like van Aelst could document the botanical interests of the ruling family, as well as the lavish paraphernalia of court life. Van Aelst painted a number of pendant still lifes for Cardinal Giovan Carlo de Medici. *Still Life with Flowers on a Marble Ledge* and *Still Life with Melon* (both 1652) display specimens from the Medici gardens. The texture of the petals in the colorful bouquet is palpable, and the showy flavors are given a luxurious showcase with the red, veined marble of the tabletop and the intense blue of a velvet drape. Van Aelst extended his quest for richness to his pigments, using the ultramarine derived from lapis lazuli. An elaborate gold watch and chain—an early and, to modern eyes, cumbersome avatar of the pocket watch—carries an implicit message about the artist's skill at defying time, to which actual blooms must inevitably succumb. The painting with the melon strikes me as more formally pleasing. A pleasantly rumpled white cloth half-covers the blue velvet; a tall glass vessel, perfectly clear, shimmers against the black backdrop; curling grape leaves and vine tendrils are gracefully silhouetted. Most of all, the bulbous melon, cut open to reveal flesh and seeds, brings a welcome note of earthiness.

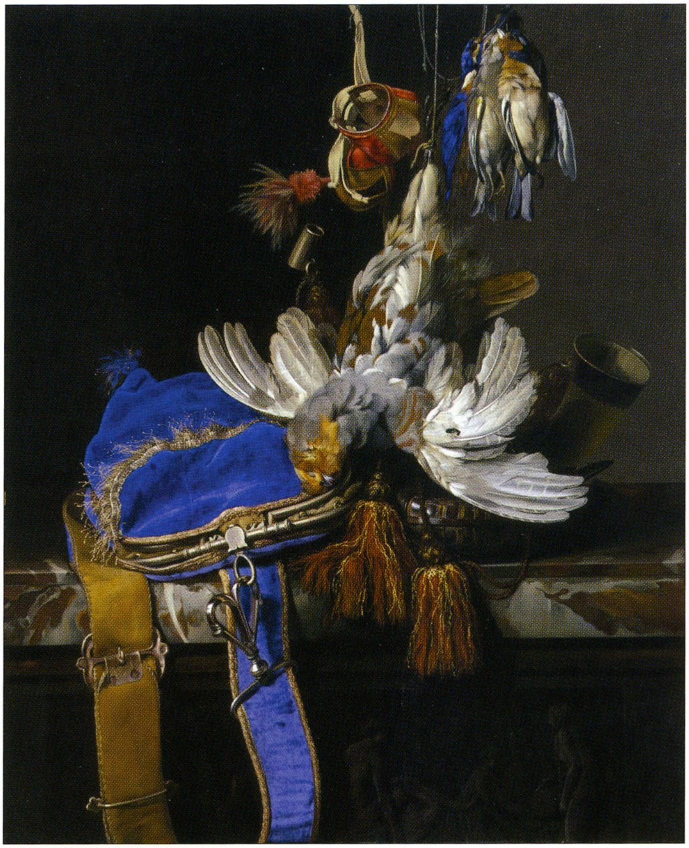
Also painted in 1652, *Still Life with Game* and *Still Life with Ram's Head* are in the humbler tradition of the kitchen still life. Yet the "elegance and refinement" of van Aelst's polished facture make these pictures oddly disturbing, in ways that never shadow the humbler and more reverently astringent still lifes of Velázquez and Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin. Van Aelst seems to luxuriate in the bright feathers and soft fur of *Still Life with Game.* Both the hare, strung up by his feet, and the pheasant, whose head lolls over the table edge, stare with gleaming, dead eyes. In *Still Life with Ram's Head*, the showpiece is a stripped turkey carcass, an unseemly mass of orange-pink bloody tissue. The authors refer to its gem-like quality, a testament to the painter's virtuosity, yet the bizarre glamour of the presentation may make the picture problematic for a modern audience. In all these works, an enveloping darkness works like jeweler's velvet to set off the objects on display. These are—for all their naturalism and mimetic legerdemain—exercises in Baroque theatricality.

Still lifes, especially those featuring flowers and fruit, exemplars of perishable beauty and pleasure, are often associated with the vanitas theme. In the catalogue, Wheelock finds evidence of moralizing in *Still Life With Game* (1661), arguing that the hare, partridge and rooster on display are all associated with lust and that a bas-relief of Diana and Actaeon, dimly seen in the supporting table, reinforces the message. The painter's trompe l'oeil style, he suggests, further "buttresses the idea that sensual reality is transient and an illusion." I am more inclined to read the allusion as a graceful tribute to Diana the Huntress, since hunting was considered an aristocratic privilege. The combination of marble and bas-relief with game recurs in *Hunt Still Life with a Velvet Bag on a Marble Ledge* (c. 1665). The artist is again lavish in his use of the costly ultramarine pigment, notably in the kingfisher feathers. But Wheelock correctly stresses the self-conscious illusionism of the Baroque style. The elaborate flower arrangements of van Aelst's pictures are fictions. Exotic blooms were usually displayed singly for the collector's delectation, and artists often combine species that bloom at different times, without acknowledging the temporal anomalies. Contemporary poets praised van Aelst for surpassing nature. Jan Vos lauds the artist's "hand, full of wit," creating flowers with a "splendor that will never wither." Cornelius de Bie claims van Aelst's brush "fully discovered life/That is both without life and tugs at life." In the Baroque era, the contest between Nature and Art often ended in a triumph for the artist, as in the English poet Richard Crashaw's (1612–49) "Musicks Duell," where a lutanist and a nightingale vie for mastery: "Poore simple voice, rais'd in a Naturall Tone;/She fails, and failing grieves, and grieving dyes./...and leaves her life the Victors prise,/Falling upon his lute...."

This artistic triumphalism underlies the pronkstilleven, or ostentatious still life, which showed off the painter's skill while flattering a patron's wealth and taste. Van Aelst's *Pronk Still Life with Fruit and Game* (1654), nearly six-and-a-half-feet high, is a particularly lavish example. The fruit—leathery-skinned and ruby-seeded pomegranates, plush-napped peaches and pellucid grapes—are upstaged by a gilt ewer and a nautilus cup, on the marble-top table. A deep blue velvet drape spills over onto a chair, drawing our attention to a violin and an ornate flintlock, and then pooling on the floor, where a game bag disgorges a number of downy birds. A swag of red velvet frames the tableau. Cardinal Leopoldo de'Medici must have been pleased with this epic-sized compendium of his—apparently almost exclusively secular—interests.

When van Aelst settled in Amsterdam, he brought the cachet of his courtly affiliation and found a prosperous merchant class eager to leave an artistic record of their success and connoisseurship. In *Flower Still Life with a Watch* (1663), the silver vase, with its curvy, shell-like form, is an example of what the catalogue authors call "a distinctly Dutch phenomenon." The flowers are spectacular, dynamically arranged in a twisting diagonal that energizes the pictorial space. The leaves are a key part of the composition: dusty green, they stand out subtly against the dark background and provide a foil to the pinks, reds, blue and white of the blossoms. And their whiplash arabesques have real tensile strength.

Van Aelst dabbled in another still-life genre, focusing on the forest floor. One practitioner of the form was nicknamed the *snuffelaar*, the ferreter, for his habit of crawling around on the ground in search of subjects. With its focus on wild nature and lack of luxury accoutrements, this genre does not seem particularly suited to van Aelst's manner. But *Forest Floor with Thistle* (1671) is a striking painting. The spiky thistle, with its wicked thorns, extends from the top to the bottom of the picture, sharply silhouetted against a plain black backdrop, suggesting a botanical treatise illustration. With a smoky green-brown palette, the painting is slightly sinister, an impression underscored by the denizens of the sous bois—a mouse, a frog, a snail, a moth and a formidable spider. Van Aelst made a number of small-format works that have a similar vibe, oddly anticipating the darker corners of Victorian fairy painting. *Fruit Still Life with a Mouse* (1674), an intimate closeup, has a spooky charm. The bright-eyed mouse and the lightly blemished, almost-white peaches are framed by curving leaves. A pale moth is so finely detailed that we can read an expression on its face.



Willem van Aelst
Hunt Still Life with a Velvet Bag on a Marble Ledge
c. 1665
SARAH CAMPBLELL BLAFFER FOUNDATION, HOUSTON

The purple grapes capture light, and, for once, the velvet drape is texturally upstaged by the peach skin and mouse fur.

Another small painting, *Group of Flowers* (1675), has a tenderness missing from some of the elaborate set pieces. Van Aelst uses the familiar diagonal compositional axis, but the roses and carnations are casually laid—no opulent vase here—across a marble tabletop. The life cycle of the flower, from bud to full-blown to withering, is presented simultaneously. The devouring caterpillar on the rose leaf, the fly on the petal and the hovering spider all seem to anticipate William Blake's "The Sick Rose" with its "invisible worm" that has "found out thy bed/Of crimson joy" (*Songs of Experience*, 1794). An exhibition of van Aelst's work is long overdue, both because his career illuminates a significant chapter in cultural history and because his undeniable artistry deserves close attention.