



Jan Jansz. den Uyl's Banquet Piece

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Jan Jansz. den Uyl (1595/96 - 1640),
Banquet Piece, c1635, Dutch. Oil on panel.
79.9 x 94cm.

Amidst a glut of painters in a market-driven occupation, he was well-to-do. His work was sought after and it commanded respectable prices. His Flemish contemporary, Peter Paul Rubens, owned three of his works. Today, we hardly know him. For 300 years after his death he remained in obscurity, until, in the mid-20th century, he was "discovered." Yet, except for a handful of museums, his work is not readily accessible; the literature is almost nonexistent, confined to the occasional passing mention. His name is Jan Jansz. den Uyl (1595/96-1640), and he was born in Amsterdam in the waning years of the 16th century. He also died in Amsterdam, at the relatively young age of 45. Although he painted a few landscapes and occasionally animals, his oeuvre consists mainly of monochrome *banketjestukken*, or "banquet pieces." His pictures are easily recognized, for, in almost every work, he included an owl (in Dutch, *uyl*).

The monochrome banquet piece is a subcategory of the still life; it was invented by the Dutch in the 1620s and remained popular through the 1630s. (Although a prominent feature is the subdued color—mainly greens, browns, grays—monochrome refers not to color, but to tone, which is confined to a relatively narrow range.) A genre that began as simple breakfast pieces—a humble display of staples such as cheese, ham, and the ubiquitous pickled herring, all on a wooden table—escalated in the hands of Jan Jansz. den Uyl and a few others into works such as the ornate *Banquet Piece*. Painted around 1635, when the country was teetering on the brink of economic disaster as the result of unrestrained speculation in tulip futures, and threatened by recurring epidemics of bubonic plague, *Vanitas Banquet Piece* is part vanitas, part moral, part allegory, part narrative, even part optics lesson. Primarily, though, it is a virtuoso display of a culture of excess—albeit a subdued, monochrome, excess.

den Uyl runs through the usual exercise of comparing and contrasting textures: gold, silver, pewter, glass, linen, wood, liquid, lemon peel, oyster shells, beeswax, a joint. He lavishes the attention of his eye and his brush on each object as though it alone mattered and then he arranges them in a composition that is as spare as it is baroque: from the jumble of objects the shape of a pyramid emerges; the fluted glass in the background gives the composition a classical touch, its placement approximating the Golden Mean. For all that, however, a sense of disequilibrium also suggests itself: in the center foreground a plate and a downward spiraling lemon peel defy all known laws of gravity. Such a device was often used in vanitas paintings, a reminder to viewers not to become too complacent. The guttered candle is another vanitas symbol, a reminder that time is running—or has run—out.

The painting, however, is primarily a feast for the eye: reflections, refractions, and, it seems, even reflections of reflections. Were one sharp-eyed enough, it might be possible to discern a reflection of the artist, and perhaps a companion, somewhere in the painting—perhaps in the large, overturned pitcher at the left or perhaps even in the eminencies of the tall, lidded vessel. But den Uyl does not slight the other senses: hearing is pictured in the music of the lute, taste in the mouth-puckering lemon peel, smell in the redolence of a just-extinguished candle, touch in the various textures, from linen to oysters and ale. Finally, an intriguing tale, perhaps one concerning the absent feasters, lies in the abandoned lute, the even more hastily abandoned table with its cloth in disarray and its vessels overturned. They suggest an urgent, even precipitous departure, of the feasters. In the symbolism of Dutch art, the overturned pitcher, the empty oyster shells, the extinguished candle are eloquent telltales.

The owl? It has been transformed into the finial of the lidded gold vessel. At the apex of the pyramid, it observes the entire scene. Inconspicuous, it is the linchpin of the composition.

Courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh (<http://www.ncartmuseum.org>); purchased with funds from the State of North Carolina.