



Joris van Son (Antwerp 1623-1667)

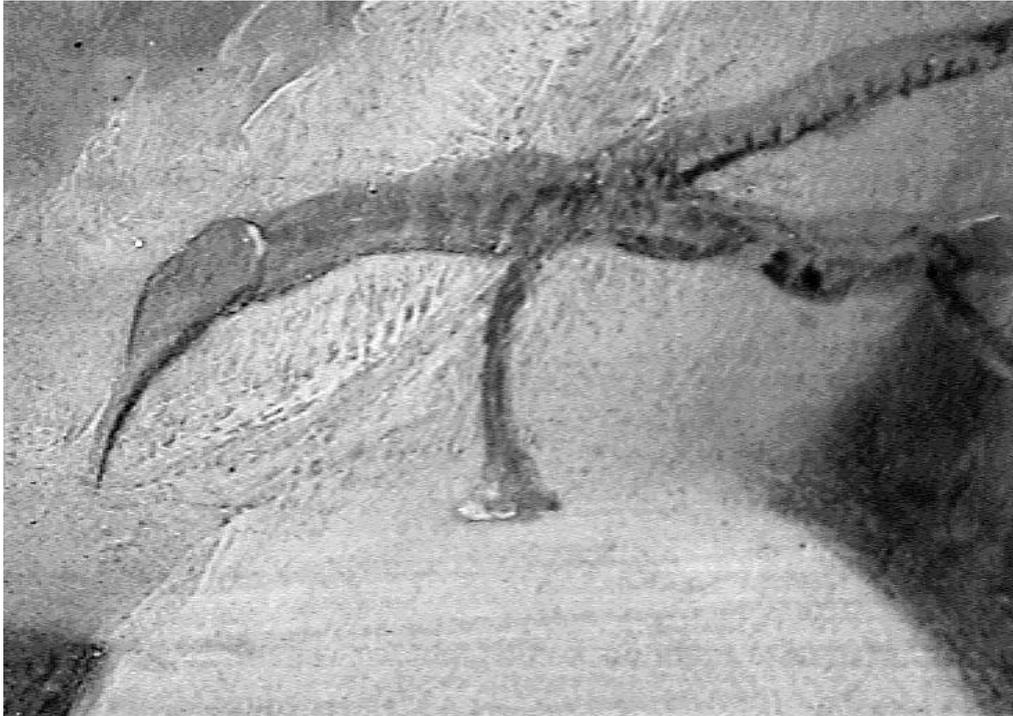
Still Life with Fruit and Boiled Crayfish

Oil on oak, 27.3 x 40.0

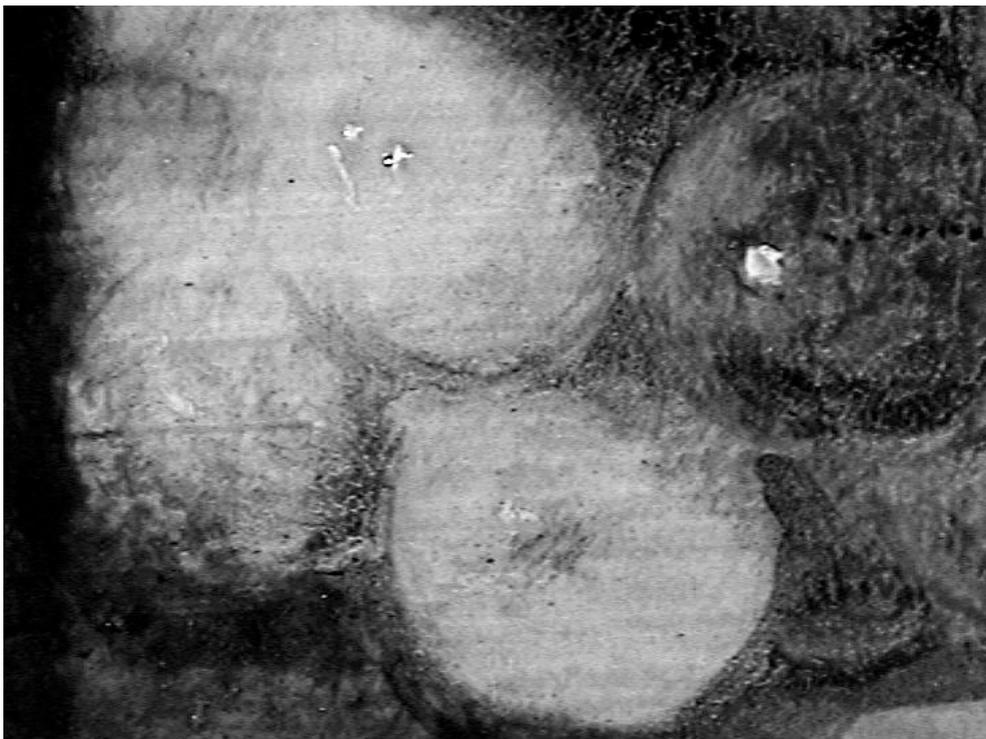
Signed (lower right, on table edge): *J. V. S.*

NM 635

Technical Notes: The painting's support is an oak panel ($\pm 0.4 - 0.5$ cm thick) consisting of a single radial board with a horizontal grain. Bevelling occurs along three edges on the verso (not along the top). The panel has a slight convex warp across the wood grain. Saw marks are visible on the verso. Dendrochronological examination and analysis have determined a felling date for the tree between circa 1645 and 1655. The wood originates from the Baltic region. Under the assumption of a median of 15 sapwood rings and a minimum of two years for seasoning of the wood, the most plausible date for use of the panel would be 1653 or later. Although the painting may have been slightly trimmed along the top edge (the illusionistically painted motif of a nail hammered into the back wall at the top left has been partially cut off), the present dimensions approximate those of Jan Davidsz. de Heem's original composition, now in a private collection (oil on wood, 27.5 x 39.0 cm), of which this painting is a copy (see below).



The preparatory layers consist of a thin, brush-applied white chalk ground, followed by a light brown *imprimatura* that extends to the edges. The *imprimatura* remains visible in places, for example, through the thinly applied paint layers of the dark grey background and in the grapes. Infrared reflectography examination partially revealed the presence of a dark underdrawing, a rapidly executed, concise sketch done free-hand in a dry medium, probably black chalk, delineating the contours of the forms, sometimes with multiple, fine, parallel lines, for example, the grapes on the left, the interior of the halved peach, the branch of the plums, the edge of the pewter plate, the edge of the table, and the crayfish in the right foreground.



Paint is applied thinly in opaque and semi-transparent layers, with moderate impastos in the lights (on the grapes, the crayfish, the edge of the pewter plate), thickly applied, viscuous paint in the peaches, and translucent dark red glaze used in the shaded parts of the plums, the crayfish shells, and the purple grapes on the left. The highlights range from brittle white lines, such as those along the lower edge of the pewter plate and the contours of the individual grape leaves, to impasted white dots or squiggles applied to the grapes and the prickly shell of the crayfish. To create the characteristic 'dew' on the red grapes on the left and the blue plums, a matte layer of viscuous pale blue paint is lightly scumbled over a uniform opaque red brown underpaint, leaving the underpaint partially visible, after which a dark red glaze is applied inside the contours. In the white grapes on the right, the same pale blue paint is scumbled over a light yellow green layer, and in the blue grapes on the left, it is applied over a dark blue underpaint. There are a number of small *pentimenti* in the painting process, some visible to the naked eye: the curled tail and both claws of the crayfish in the foreground were initially painted slightly larger; the claw of the second crayfish, 'in the back,' was initially slightly larger, extending further to the right.

The painting is generally in very good condition. A slightly discoloured layer of old varnish is present. Abrasion is moderate overall. Retouching covers abrasion and losses of the paint and ground layers along the left and bottom edges. Scattered small retouches occur, mainly concentrated in the background. The painting underwent conservation treatment in 1939, 1957, and 1979.

In this modest still life, a wooden table, partially covered with dark blue drapery, holds an arrangement of peaches and a branch of blue plums on a pewter plate, with bunches of green, red and blue grapes with vine and leaves attached, and two boiled crayfish. At the back, the leaves and elegantly spiraling tendrils of the grapevine form an arch over the display of fruit.



The present picture, which bears an authentic signature by Joris van Son, is a faithful copy after a signed original by the Dutch still life painter Jan Davidsz. de Heem (1606-1683/84), which was on the British art market in 2002.¹ De Heem's original is, in turn, a close autograph variant of one of his own compositions now in Edinburgh, which is signed and dated 1650.² Both paintings by De Heem probably date to approximately the same year. The

copy by Van Son can be dated, on the basis of dendrochronological analysis, to the early to mid-1650s (see **Technical Notes**). After spending nearly a decade in Leiden, the Utrecht-born De Heem had moved to Antwerp by 1635, becoming a member of the local guild of St. Luke in early 1636. While there is no documentary evidence to suggest that Van Son knew De Heem personally, it is perhaps most likely, in view of his strong dependence on De Heem's work, that he spent some time as a pupil or assistant in the older master's Antwerp studio, perhaps during the early 1640s. In that period De Heem gradually turned away from the oversized sumptuous *pronkstilleven*, and began producing small-scale, comparatively more modest fruit pieces with glasses, oysters or other foodstuffs, that would sell quite easily on the art market.³ These small-scale still lifes, such as the one copied by Van Son, are simpler in terms of both composition and colouring, yet the rendering is highly refined.



De Heem's original is quite typical of his more modest still lifes of the 1640s and '50s. It is a virtuoso display of his ability to capture material texture in paint, from the mouth-watering, realistically depicted fruit and crustaceans to the skilfully painted reflective surface of the pewter plate. The fruits are at the peak of ripeness, one of the peaches broken open to reveal succulent flesh, a favourite motif; the crayfish are temptingly presented, ready for immediate consumption. The bright light focused upon the still life objects placed before a dark wall, lends the picture a peculiar mood of intimacy. The effects of light are rendered with extraordinary precision, most conspicuously in the image of the (studio) window reflected in the polished plums. Apart from the soft handling of outlines, quite different from De Heem's sharp and tight contours, Van Son's copy reveals little of his personal style. He skilfully mimics De Heem's fluent, meltingly soft brushwork, which combines areas of relatively thinly applied paint with areas of saturated paint and impastos, enhancing the sensual appeal of the depicted foods. Van Son adopted several of the technical innovations used by De Heem [see **Technical Notes**], though without being able to achieve De Heem's level of perfection.⁴ To obtain the 'roundness' of the various fruit and crustaceans, he applied uniform layers of saturated underpaint as a basic hue, followed by a lighter-coloured viscous paint applied

locally and scumbled over the dry underpaint, left partially visible. For instance, in the blue plums the characteristic matte layer of ‘dew’ was rendered by applying a pale blue paint lightly scumbled over an opaque red brown underpaint, followed by a deep red glaze. While the fruit and crustaceans seem depicted with great accuracy and detail, in places where the objects recede into the shadow, being partially overlapped by their illuminated counterparts, the artist often suggested shapes with just a few touches of colour, a stylistic device to create a spatial illusion widely used by artists later in the 17th century. De Heem’s characteristic use of thin, brittle white lines for certain highlights is recognizable in Van Son’s copy, as is the handling of the thick grape leaves with wavy margins and strongly pronounced veins, a signature element of De Heem’s original. However, in Van Son’s painting a warm sfumato binds together the more colourful, strongly lit still life elements in the foreground, the orange red crayfish, the dark blue plums, the pink and yellow tones of the peaches, which harmonize with the grey pewter plate, blue tablecloth and dark grey background.

Other still lifes of this type, equally restrained in the composition and colouring, can be found in Van Son’s oeuvre during the later 1650s, for example, two signed paintings of 1656, which were on the British art market in 1981⁵ and 1991,⁶ and a *Still Life with Fruit and Oysters* of 1659 in an Austrian private collection, which contains a similar pewter plate as NM 635.⁷ Absent any specific allusions to vanitas and Christian ideals, the primary objective of this still life composition must be an acknowledgment of the abundant and richly varied gifts of nature.

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Nationalmuseum, Stockholm

1. Oil on wood, 27.5 x 39 cm; sale, London, Sotheby’s, 12 December 2002, lot 25; photo on file at the RKD, The Hague.
2. Oil on wood, 33.7 x 41.6 cm, with a 3.5 cm wide strip added on the left, National Gallery of Scotland, inv.no.1505, see E. Greindl, *Les peintres flamands de nature morte au XVII^e siècle*, Sterrebeek 1983, p.360 no.48; a copy made after the panel was extended was sold at Christie’s, Amsterdam, 18 November 1993, lot 123, photo on file at the RKD, The Hague.
3. The first dated example is the *Still Life with Shrimp, Oysters, and Fruit*, signed and dated 1642, oil on wood, 46.5 x 58.5 cm, Salzburg, Residenzgalerie; see Greindl 1983, p.362 no.116; and *A fruitful past – A survey of fruit still lifes of the Northern and Southern Netherlands from Brueghel to Van Gogh* (exh.cat., P. de Boer, Amsterdam & Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig), Braunschweig, 1983, no.34, repr. (S. Segal)
4. See *Still-Life Paintings from the Netherlands 1550-1720*, eds. A. Chong & W. Kloek (exh.cat, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam / Cleveland Museum of Art), Zwolle 1999, no. 6.
5. Oil on canvas, 28.5 x 43.0 cm, signed and dated ‘1656’, sale, London, Sotheby’s, 7 October 1981, lot 97; see photo on file at the RKD, The Hague.
6. Oil on canvas, 29.0 x 42.0 cm, signed and dated ‘1656’, sale, London, Sotheby’s, 11 December 1991, lot 146; see photo on file at the RKD, The Hague.
7. Oil on canvas, 38.5 x 53.0 cm, signed and dated ‘1659’, sale, London, Sotheby’s, 9 December 1981, lot 107; Amsterdam, P. de Boer, 1982; see photo on file at the RKD, and S.

Segal, *Jan Davidsz. de Heem en zijn kring* (exh. cat., Centraal Museum, Utrecht/ Herzog Anton-Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig), The Hague 1991, no.41, illus.