STILL LIFE WITH A HAM AND A ROEMER

This scene shows the remnants of an interrupted feast. Part of the large ham on the table has been eaten, and its bare bone hangs over the edge of the plate. A smaller plate with slices of ham sits on the table's edge. A lemon has also been carefully cut, with its top removed and its curly peel draping down. A knife, still in its holder, lies nearby, and an empty silver dish has tipped over. Several drinking glasses remain half full, and a small spoon sticks out of the brown mustard pot. At the right, shiny brown hazelnuts have been scattered on the table.

In this still-life painting, Dutch artist Willem Claesz. Heda (hay-DAH) carefully arranged the objects to capture our attention. Notice the variety of textures: the bumpy lemon rind, the smooth glass, and the gentle folds of the tablecloth. Heda excelled in painting reflections of light on shiny surfaces. Look closely and you'll even notice window panes reflected in the drinking glass, called a roemer, near the center. Neutral gray and brown hues dominate the picture so that the bright yellow lemon, dark pink ham, and white highlights stand out.

People who lived in seventeenth-century Holland (also called the Netherlands) would have recognized this as a luxurious feast. They also would have known that mustard and lemons were expensive imported items made possible by recent global trade. Finally, contemporary viewers would have understood the special meaning of the bleached tablecloth, which was a famous product from Heda's hometown of Haarlem.

Philadelphia Museum of Art: John G. Johnson Collection, 1917, cat. 644