Jan Weenix

Master of the Dutch game piece.

by Brooke Chilvers

FALCONER'S BAG, BY JAN WEENIX. COURTESY OF THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, ROGERS FUND, 1950 (50.55).

It must have been a 17th-century Dutch still life that triggered my addiction to art. The technical virtuosity of their optically playful imitations of tables of fruit, burnished pewter, and shimmering Venetian glassware would have floored me. So would have any of Jan Weenix's (1640–1719) hunting still lifes—*Falconer's Bag*, for example, which hangs boldly at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. Their surprising mixed bags of fallen herons and hares, theatrically laid out in the bewitching landscape of a chateau park, might explain my special attachment to "game pieces," which most art lovers ignore or disparage for depicting dead animals.

In ranking the hierarchy of subjects worthy for painting, even the first Dutch art theorist, Rembrandt's own student, declared historical or mythological figures in archeological settings number one, followed in order by pastoral romances, boisterous tavern scenes, landscapes, and then portraits. Still lifes—because they portrayed "soulless" objects like flowers and fishes—finished last.

Yet still lifes fulfill Horace's dictum that art must be both instructive and entertaining, and the Italian Renaissance principle that the primary purpose of painting is to imitate nature. But popularity won out over theories, and starting in the 1640s some 70 Flemish and Dutch artists produced game pieces; alas, only a dozen are still well known today.

Although the Dutch word *stilleven* came into use in the same period, the genre's roots date back to Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) and Lucas Cranach, (1472–1553), and farther still to the mosaics of ancient Rome. Precisely painted still lifes usually portray an ennobled reality—or a distorted one—and some critics eagerly point out whenever seasonal flowers couldn't possibly have filled the same vase. But realism is a relative term, for allegorical Dutch realism (e.g., using skulls to convey the transitory nature of life) has little to do with today's non-contemplative photorealism.

It's important to remember that what we think of as the Netherlands, or Low Countries, actually comprised two distinct cultures. There was the Flemish south, including Antwerp, Haarlem, and Utrecht, which was captured and claimed in 1585 by the Catholic Spanish-Austrian Habsburgs, causing many Protestant artists to flee north and leaving behind a market driven by church commissions for altars and saints. The more Protestant Dutch or North Republic was characterized by its wealth-creating capitalism, which meant that business, not religion, heavily influenced art. Still lifes also expressed the Dutch desire to catalog everything in its colonies, from Brazil to Surinam.

The celebration of material prosperity and exaggerated abundance as depicted in Flemish and Dutch still lifes of market scenes and laid tables marked the end of the devastation and famine of Europe's last religious conflict, the Thirty Years' War, in 1648. This neatly coincides with Jan Weenix's birth in 1640 and with artists' increasing social status as they become independent masters and court artists for nobility abroad rather than simple members, along with potters, engravers, and booksellers, of the St. Luke's Guild, which tightly controlled quality and production. His artist father, Jan Baptiste Weenix (1621–1663), earned enough money from his game pieces and Italianate landscapes to purchase a gentleman's country manor.

Although Jan Weenix was a northerner (and game pieces were actually more popular in the south), he didn't hesitate to follow in the footsteps of Flemish hunting still life painters like Frans Snyder (1579–1657) and Jan Fyt (1611–1661) with his own very large and extravagant paintings.

Hunting rights then were restricted to nobles, knights, high officers of the state, and high clergy, who hotly pursued red stags, wild boars, roe deer, black grouse, herons, swans, spoonbills, cormorants, and pheasants, to name a few. Yet far more game pieces were sold than there ever were hunters.

So who purchased Weenix's monumental fantasies of swans and hares suspended from classical fountains or cherub-studded pedestals? They weren't commissions commemorating a specific hunt, or morality tales on blood sports, or demonstrations of putting food from the field onto the plate, as in works of partridges on rough tables in the company of cabbages. Weenix's idealized specimens had no exit holes or blood, were displayed to show off their natural beauty among fine hunting weapons and expensive accessories, and were meant to represent the wealth of the owner. Game pieces were

status symbols for the bourgeois painting-purchasing class to hang in their country estates, because even the minor gentry were allowed to hunt only small game, such as ducks and rabbits. To rich burghers, hunting still lifes provided a prestigious image of an aristocratic sport; they were substitutes for reality (like most still lifes) that helped them imitate the manners of French court life in Versailles, which was all the rage.

Weenix often started a painting with the background and worked his way to the foreground. He used romantic landscapes that he furnished with hills, forests, and castles, creating an almost impossible depth of field. He often shifted the mid-ground off-center to the right and filled it with garden statuary or an imposing classical urn to create a strong vertical line emphasized in the foreground with elegantly hung game. With light nearly always entering still lifes from the left, this is the most illuminated area of the canvas. Here he fully exploited how light affects colors and textures and selected his game species accordingly, little considering what an actual bag might be. To the earthy tones of ducks and pheasants he added vividly colored finches, tropical flowers, or hunting gear laid on bright-hued velvet.

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Like his father, he replaced the still life's characteristic horizontal kitchen table with stone slabs or ledges set parallel to the horizon. These help unify and balance the composition, which he softens using luxurious vegetation or fruits. With a dangling wing or leg he completes his triangle, adding depth by sending the viewer's eye beyond it into the distance. He unifies the visual elements and intensifies the drama with chiaroscuro, contrasting the shaded backgrounds with the light-struck brilliant whites of an underbelly or breast caught in the soft blush of late afternoon. He creates movement with flying birds or jumping hunting dogs, and rhythm with the circular curve of a bird's open wing or the naturally flowing contours of a rabbit's body.

The fashion for brushwork and the handling of oil paints during this era was to render all traces of the artist's handiwork indiscernible by using fine, delicate strokes. *Net* ("neat") and *gladde* ("smooth") works commanded higher prices, and their jeweled surfaces remain part of their appeal.

Perhaps the apotheosis of Jan Weenix's 130 known game pieces is the series of twelve masterly 11-by-18-foot panels of hunting scenes he did for the Elector Palatinate's castle, Bernsberg, near Düsseldorf, Germany. As with other works, they were designed to be hung at eye level—that is, with the horizontal slabs even with the viewer's hips so that the scene appeared to be unfolding outside a window. When Goethe saw them more than 50 years later, he proclaimed that the texture of the hair, feathers, and antlers equaled—no, surpassed—nature itself.

At the end of Weenix's life, still lifes were being replaced with even more pretentious images of richly attired ladies and gentlemen in elegant Dutch interiors; still lifes became mere "foot soldiers in the army of art."

Today's typical art viewers turn their heads in distaste from game pieces, unable to overcome the idea that hunters shot cranes, egrets, herons, ibis, and bittern for the table—and would today if they could. What a lousy excuse for overlooking this family of fine art that periodically reappears, as they did in France 200 years later with Chardin and Delacroix. ■

Brooke recently learned from A. D. Livingston that her neighbor's earsplitting peacocks are basically tasty barnyard birds, easily raised and tamed. "We could use a change from turkey for Thanksgiving," he said.