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A Profusion of Dead Animals:

Autocritique in Seventeenth-Century Flemish Gamepieces

FRANK PALMERI

ABSTRACT

This essay suggests a way of reading the monumental still lifes of game painted by Frans Snyders and others in the first half of the seventeenth century. Previous scholarship has shown that these works assert the owner's status, either as a nobleman with the privilege to hunt or as a merchant aspiring to nobility with the wealth that enabled him to buy the painting. In either case, the dead animals in the paintings serve as trophies, killed and displayed not for use, but as signs of privilege. Nonetheless, Snyders's works show that he was also aware of the arguments against hunting made by More, Erasmus, Montaigne, and others in the sixteenth century. Thus, while Snyders developed the conventions of this distinctive genre, he also distanced himself from the excessive killing it records. Such paintings represent an "autocritique"—a critique of the ideology of the form from within the form itself. In its conclusion, the article contrasts these still lifes of game, characteristic of the predominantly Catholic and aristocratic south, with smaller breakfast scenes, a form which developed later in reaction to the game still lifes and was characteristic of the largely Protestant northern Netherlands.



How are we to read the monumental still lifes of game painted first and most influentially by Frans Snyders, such as *Still Life with Dead Game* (1630–40) (fig. 1)—which measures more than five feet high and eight feet wide? This painting places at its center the open abdominal cavity of a boar depicted at the stage where the recognizable form of the animal coexists with the cuts of meat it is becoming. Next to the boar lies a white swan with one huge wing outspread, its neck bent into an inverted question mark, under which lies a contorted dead hare. On top of the boar lies an intensely colored peacock with a long, eye-patterned tail, and under the boar a deer carcass with its shoulders

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Fig. 1: Snyders, *Still Life with Dead Game*. Collection of the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, the State Art Museum, Florida State University.

on the ground and its rump in the air facing the viewer. The contorted poses of the deer and hare may indicate the effect of an unnatural or excessive use of force that has rendered these living beings things.

A second painting by Snyders of even larger size, *Still Life with Hounds and Their Young* (1635–40) (fig. 2), although in a lighter palette, celebrates the violence of a boar hunt in the distant background. A cook and her beckoning companion stand to the side of a heap of dead animals, tumbled in the same configuration as in the previously discussed painting, on and around a table, under which a hound barks to protect her puppies. In *The Larder* (1630–40) (fig. 3), a third work by Snyders of the same imposing dimensions (more than nine feet wide by almost six feet high), a serving woman holds a platter of pheasants, a pile of oysters sits on a low table, and filets of salmon hang from a rack in the center. Again a white swan lies supine with its wing spread in the middle of the table. In this case, haunches of beef are piled above and behind the bird. A gutted deer hangs by one leg from a long overhead support, its head parallel with that of the swan. Two rabbits hang by their rear legs next to the deer. Fish are piled in a tureen placed under a lobster, which in turn rests on a small platter next to the swan. Fruit, grapes, and vegetables are piled in a basket on the table and on the floor. Some of these fruits and vegetables, such as grapes and pears, being imported and rela-



Fig. 2: Snijders, *Still Life with Hounds and their Young, a Male, and a Female Cook*. bpk, Berlin/Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister/Photo: Hans-Peter Klut/Art Resource, New York.



Fig. 3: Snijders, *The Pantry*. Musées Royaux des Beaux Arts, Brussels/Photo: Sala/Art Resource, New York.

tively rare, would have signified the high status of the patron, and the lobster and the pheasants would have been delicacies. In this painting, Snyder expands his range of reference to include once-animate creatures of the air, earth, and water. Here also, some non-game animal remains appear—the haunch of beef and the seafood.¹ The haunch of beef demystifies the hunt, by showing that meat can be obtained in more quotidian ways. Although the humans who killed the animals are absent from the paintings, the presence of living human figures (painted by a collaborator) moderates the violence, by naturalizing the extraordinary piles of large, beautiful, dead animal bodies.

This essay seeks to investigate this characteristic seventeenth-century Flemish genre of monumental still lifes of animals killed in the hunt. The genre flourished for a century, from the 1610s to the 1710s, in the work of Snyder (1579–1657), his student Jan Fyt (1611–66), and Jan Weenix (1642–1719) (son and student of the Dutch painter Jan-Baptiste Weenix). Each of these three still-life painters was about thirty years younger and a generation later than his predecessor. In their large gamepieces, these artists usually worked with a collaborator who painted the human figures. Although we do not always know the identity of the figure painter, Snyder collaborated with Rubens on the earliest gamepieces; later, he worked mostly with his brother-in-law Cornelis de Vos.

Some will maintain that all works in this genre unambiguously and unproblematically celebrate the accumulation of beautiful large dead game animals in line with the presumed attitude of the patrons who commissioned or bought the paintings. From this perspective, the paintings are to be appreciated and judged solely on the basis of criteria internal to the craft of painting: by their accurate rendering of numerous and widely different animal species, and by the technique involved in capturing different textures and colors of fur, feathers, and scales. Others understand the dead animals in a metaphorical sense.² I will suggest, by contrast, that some paintings in this genre challenge the celebration of the patron and nobleman's dominion over the animal part of creation, and imply an autocritique of the form or a distance from the ethos of the hunt, especially trophy hunting.³

Simon Schama has written insightfully in *The Embarrassment of Riches* on the general cultural unease with wealth, luxury, and excess in the Dutch Golden Age of the seventeenth century. I seek to extend and to a certain extent modify his thesis here. I will be analyzing paintings produced primarily in the South Netherlands—Flemish, Catholic, aristocratic, and absolutist—rather than, as Schama does, in the Northern provinces—Dutch, Protestant, bour-

geois, and republican. The issues the paintings raise, I argue, concern not the morality of accumulating riches through commerce and of conspicuously consuming material goods—Schama’s “unease with riches”—but the morality of killing, and displaying representations of, large numbers of spectacularly beautiful animal bodies.

In my view, the proliferation of animal carcasses in Snyder’s monumental canvases, such as those discussed above, calls for a more complex reaction than mere celebration of the painter’s skill or of the power of nobles who kill in large numbers animals for whom they have no use other than as trophies. Rather, in many instances, the dead animals represent dead animals, *tout court*. Even if swans and peacocks were still on occasion eaten by royalty or nobles in some countries—and it is not clear that they were—the killing of such magnificent birds carries connotations of excess, the assertion of privilege not available to any below these ranks.

Some critics maintain that many of these and related paintings convey a strong erotic significance. Especially if a woman is offering to sell a man a chicken, or a man is offering to buy a fowl, there may be a play on the Dutch *vogel* and *vogelen*, the first of which means both “bird” and “penis,” and the second vulgarly “to have sex” (Koslow, *Frans Snyders* 88; Härting 217).⁴ However, this layer of meaning is more likely to be present in the earlier market scenes of Pieter Aertsen and Joachim Bueckelaer, from which the larder and game paintings of Snyder developed, than in Snyder’s paintings themselves.⁵ In particular, paintings of heaps of game with only one human figure or none are unlikely to possess such erotic implications. There may be an erotic meaning in *Still Life with Hounds and Their Young*, where the young woman offers her companion a piece of fruit, considering the same gesture in a very similar painting, Snyder’s *Merchant of Game* (1614).⁶

The historical and social contexts in which the game still lifes flourished can yield clues to their significance. The appearance of the gamepiece—first in Snyder’s and Rubens’s *Falconer with Fig-Seller* (or *The Fig*) (1609), and shortly thereafter in the same artists’ *Recognition of Philepoemon* (1609–10)—coincides with the beginning of the Twelve Years Truce (1609–21), a hiatus in the Netherlands’ eighty-year war for independence, which brought economic growth to Flanders and the southern Netherlands.⁷ In this context, the monumental game still lifes can be seen as celebrating the fruitfulness of the land (and demonstrating the accomplishment of Flemish artists), thus justifying the policies of Archdukes Albert and Isabella in Brussels that were meant to encourage economic and cultural production.⁸

In order to understand the continued demand for the large gamepieces, it is important to recognize that the archdukes, like their contemporary James I of England, sold titles of nobility to wealthy merchants and other members of the high bourgeoisie (Härting 215). While Snyders had noble and even royal patrons—including the archdukes; Philip IV of Spain, for whom he executed at least seventy-eight animal paintings; the Austrian Habsburgs; and the Marquis of Leganés, who possessed fifty-eight of Snyders's paintings at the artist's death—many of his paintings were commissioned by or sold to wealthy bourgeois and the recently ennobled.⁹ After new hunting regulations were adopted under the archdukes in 1613, only those who possessed hereditary hunting rights, or who could prove they owned their land, were able to hunt legally. Without such an entitlement, one could not own hunting hounds, catch swans, or move about in forests carrying a gun (for large game) or snares (for small birds), except in the Brabant, where some commoners, for example the butchers' guild, had the right to hunt (Härting 215).

In the first instance, therefore, the gamepieces that emerged in the 1610s provided visual testimony of the right of the owner to hunt on his own lands, celebrating his power and the bounty of his domains. Even a wealthy merchant who had not purchased a title of nobility or a forested country estate could make the same statement through purchasing and exhibiting a large still life of game; the painting served as a sign of the owner's wealth and warrant of his right to hunt—even if he did not actually have that right.¹⁰ In either case, the meaning of the painting remains the same: an assertion of the power and wealth of the owner through his exclusive prerogative to kill animals.¹¹ Here we come to the heart of the matter: can a form that arises to assert social superiority through representing products of the hunt also harbor a critique of that ideology?

Although Snyders's still lifes of game are almost all set in interiors, and often bear titles such as *Pantry* or *Kitchen Scene*, they are not primarily representations of animal meat meant to be eaten, but of animal bodies that the owner is supposed to have killed or could have killed. Regarding the animals in Snyders's paintings, three food historians have shown that although some of the most conspicuous species—peacocks, which figure in two-fifths of his still lifes; swans, which appear centrally in a third; and herons, in almost a quarter—may have been served at the tables of the great in medieval times, they were no longer consumed in most of Europe in the seventeenth century—not in the South Netherlands, where Snyders was painting and where most of his wealthy bourgeois patrons lived, nor in Spain and the German states, where many of

his noble clients lived (Goddeeris, De Smet, and Roggeman 1437).¹² Gulls, grebes, and moorhens, which were commonly eaten at the time, do not appear in Snyder's paintings because they were not expensive, and could not be used to signal the privilege of the wealthy.

The game still lifes are idealizing or ideal-typical compositions (to use Max Weber's term), representing and juxtaposing the most aesthetically beautiful species.¹³ Snyder's still lifes of game do not represent the results of any particular day's hunting, but include large and small ground game and birds that would have been hunted by diverse means in different locations at various times of the year (Härting 217–18; Sullivan 56).¹⁴ The game, rarely disemboweled, is piled in heaps in which it would have decayed quickly. Snyder depicts each species with extreme accuracy, but the composition as a whole, including the positions of many of the large animals, does not accurately represent the way these animals' carcasses would have been kept in a larder or kitchen.

As trophy paintings, these canvases depict game that is not for use, but for show. Trophy game is killed in order that a record or memento of the dead animal can be made, in such forms as a taxidermied head or antlers mounted on a wall.¹⁵ A limited number of species of fowl and game appear in the same or very similar postures in painting after painting by Snyder—most visually striking, the white swan, peacock, deer, and hares.¹⁶ In these paintings of trophy animals, the painting itself becomes the trophy, the sign of the owner's authority to kill.

However, even if these larger-than-life paintings by Snyder are viewed as trophy pieces, they can still offer a critique of the practices and defenses of hunting in the seventeenth century. A widely accepted moderate position at the time provided grounds for condemning wasteful killings by monarchs and high nobles by holding that hunting was defensible only if it was for use and not excessive. For example, Henry VIII presided over a single day's hunt in which more than 240 deer were killed with bows, and the following day the same number were killed using greyhounds; one observer wondered whether there was a parallel between these killings and the executions of the lords in northern England at the same time. James I came under increasingly open criticism for neglecting his duties because of his obsessive pursuit of hunting. In 1549, 1569, and 1641–44 in England, riots and rebellions took the form of widespread slaughter of deer by commoners; the rebels in such cases used the "language" of the excessive hunt to carry out a violent reversal, appropriating the prerogative of the aristocrats (Manning 17). Outside such times of popular rebellion,

groups of poachers, often led by local gentry, were known to make “havoc” with the deer in an aristocrat’s forest; from its earlier meaning, “to spoil and pillage the enemy,” “havoc” had come to designate the acts of “poachers who wantonly killed more deer than they could possibly carry away, leaving many carcasses behind to spoil” (Manning 48). Such large-scale, organized poaching directed against aristocratic game preserves by commoners and gentry indicates that, in the first half of the seventeenth century in England, “popular resentment of aristocratic hunting privileges and the continued existence of numerous game parks was widespread” (Manning 209). Exclusive and excessive hunting was widely considered an offense, and it was increasingly punished extra-legally and in kind. In addition, in the early seventeenth century, a growing number of thoughtful aristocrats and gentlemen came to regard hunting as a waste of time.¹⁷

Naturally, Europeans were far from uniform in their attitudes toward hunting during this period. Some nobles enthusiastically pursued the hunt and through it asserted their superior social standing. Many writers felt that hunting was acceptable, but only in moderation and to obtain food or clothing. Others went further to assert an unease with hunting altogether: already in 1580, Michel de Montaigne wrote in his essay “On Cruelty” that when an “innocent” and defenseless stag at the end of a chase turns to his pursuers and tearfully pleads for his life, the scene has always seemed to him a “very unpleasant spectacle” (316). In the midst of the French wars of religion, a time that witnessed a decades-long eruption of barbarous atrocities, massacres, and torture, Montaigne states, “Savages do not shock me as much by roasting and eating the bodies of the dead as do those who torment them and persecute them living” (314). But Montaigne does not confine his concern to the human victims of unnecessary violence; he repeatedly extends his sympathy to animals who are hunted: “I cruelly hate cruelty, both by nature and by judgment, as the extreme of all vices . . . to such a point [that] . . . I cannot bear to hear the screams of a hare in the teeth of my dogs, although the chase is a violent pleasure” (313). Montaigne contends that in chasing and tearing apart or otherwise taking the life from the bodies of inoffensive and defenseless animals, humans participate in the worst vice, as much as they do in torturing and dismembering their fellow humans.¹⁸

Earlier in the century, in 1516, Thomas More had written of the Utopians who prohibited the butchering of animals inside cities, and who confined the trade of butchery to slaves, or bondsmen, because they did not want their citizens, once accustomed to killing, to lose their capacity for mercy, the finest human feeling (*Uto-*

pia 78).¹⁹ For the same reason, they prohibited their citizens from hunting: “if you are attracted by the hope of slaughter and the expectation of a creature being mangled under your eyes, it ought rather to inspire pity when you behold a weak, fugitive, timid, and innocent little hare torn to pieces by a strong, fierce, and cruel dog” (*Utopia* 97–98). If we doubt the seriousness of More’s condemnation of hunting here because his traveler’s name, Hythlodæus, means “speaker of nonsense” in Greek, we can find the same critique expressed in equally forceful terms in other genres. For example, in one of More’s Latin epigrams, a rabbit complains as he is being torn apart by hounds that the hunter “smiles” as he looks on (*Latin Epigrams* 27). “Insensate breed,” the rabbit cries, “more savage than any beast, to find cruel amusement in bitter slaughter” (*Latin Epigrams* 149).²⁰

There is strong evidence that Snyders was aware of the positions of Montaigne and More on hunting. Snyders collaborated with Rubens on numerous paintings, including the first of his distinctive gamepieces, *The Fig*, and Rubens was a friend and admirer of the Netherlandish philosopher Justus Lipsius, who was his brother’s teacher and a correspondent of Montaigne (Morford 147, 161). Lipsius was most impressed with Montaigne’s Stoic perspective in the first edition of the *Essays* (1580), and in return Montaigne found many passages he could use in Lipsius’s compilation of ancient writings on politics, the *Politicorum* (1589) (Villey 177–83).²¹ Rubens included his self-portrait in two group paintings that also included Lipsius: *A Group of Friends in Mantua* (1602–04), and the more important *Four Philosophers* (1611–12) (Koslow, *Frans Snyders* 257). Lipsius seems to have shared to some degree Montaigne’s view of animals: he wrote epitaphs for his dogs, especially his “gem” Saphyrus (Sapphire), a small dog known as a Vicelli spaniel.²² Lipsius chose a portrait of himself holding Saphyrus as the basis for the illustration on the title page of his edition of Seneca—the first image of himself used in one of his publications. In addition, he wrote a Latin letter to his pupils, describing his daily life with his three dogs. Although this may be regarded as a model for his students to follow in composing essays, and the epitaphs may be seriocomic, Lipsius does seem to have consistently associated animals, particularly dogs, with learning. Thus, the large dog in Rubens’s *Four Philosophers* may represent not only Lipsius’s dog Mopsus, but also the scholar—clever, vigilant, strong, and faithful.²³ Such an interpretation of this canine figure would be consistent with Lipsius’s notion that scholars are like watchful dogs—inquiring into deep matters as they stay awake night and day.

In addition, Snyders owned pendant portraits of Erasmus and More,²⁴ and was almost certainly aware of the Utopian position on hunting, given that it



Fig. 4: Snyders, *Pythagoras Advocating Vegetarianism*. Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, 2015.

was a distinctive subject of his own art. Like More and Montaigne, Erasmus also wrote against the hunt. In one of his longest *Adages* (1515), a beetle searches for an eagle and punishes him because the eagle hunted and tore apart a harmless hare who sought refuge in the beetle's home (154–55).

Even apart from such evidence, several of Snyders's paintings indicate his sympathy with arguments against the hunt. After producing his first still lifes of game in the early 1610s, Snyders collaborated with Rubens on a very large painting (more than eight feet by ten feet), *Pythagoras Advocating Vegetarianism* (1618–20) (fig. 4), for which Rubens painted the figures of the philosopher accompanied by nymphs and satyrs picking fruit, while Snyders painted the piles of colorful and luscious fruits and vegetables that take the place of the bodies of dead animals in the gamepieces. The philosopher appears to be pointing out to his students the plenitude, beauty, and healthfulness of plant foods whose use does not involve the shedding of blood. As educated men, Snyders and Rubens must have been aware of the Pythagorean philosophy presented, for example, in the final book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where the philosopher explains the interconnectedness of all life and provides reasons for abstaining from meat (Koslow, *Frans Snyders* 42–43).



Fig. 5: Snyders, *The Butcher's Shop*. A. Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow/Photo: HIP/Art Resource, New York.

A much later painting, *The Butcher's Shop* (1640–50) (fig. 5), exemplifies Snyders's continuing concern with the issues raised by More's *Utopia*. In this case, a butcher holding a knife between his teeth carefully skins the carcass of a lamb suspended by a hook, while animals in various states of preparation for cooking fill most of the canvas.²⁵ This butcher does not appear hardened or cruel as he carefully peels back the skin with both hands. However, the way he holds the knife in his mouth repeats the way that torturers and executioners had been depicted by previous Netherlandish artists.²⁶ In a close analogue to Snyders's butcher, the torturer who flays St. Bartholomew is often depicted holding a knife in his teeth. The skinning knife is an attribute of St. Bartholomew, who is also the patron saint of butchers and leather workers; the saint blesses those who skin animals, as he himself was flayed. Such equivalences between the saint and the animals could raise doubts about the propriety of skinning animals and eating meat.

One further example of a painting by Snyders suggests a questioning rather than a celebration of the unnecessary killing of game. The sole human in *Hunter in a Larder* (1614–17) contemplates on his left a bountiful cluster of grapes in a pile of other fruit near the back of a table, as he turns away from a gutted hare whom he holds suspended from a pole over his right shoulder. On

the front of the table, the products of the hunt lay piled in heaps, as is typical in Snyders, most prominently the familiar white swan, peacock, and young deer. The hunter's troubled countenance as he considers the glowing fruit suggests that he faces an ethical choice between a fruit-based and a meat-based diet.²⁷

A meat-free diet was associated with millenarian expectations and radical politics. Tristram Stuart traces the careers and opinions of several early seventeenth-century figures, including Thomas Bushell, John Robins, and Roger Crab, whose ideas resurfaced among the communitarian Levellers and Diggers during the English Revolution (3–38). Some interpreters of Genesis considered it obvious, since the animals are not given to man for meat until after the Flood, that humans in an earlier time had been plant-eating and probably only water-drinking. John Calvin agreed that eating meat was a reminder of our sinfulness, but he believed it was necessary and salutary to meditate on that theme even while eating meat, or especially while eating meat.²⁸

Although the dominant view in Europe in the early seventeenth century allowed for meat-eating and hunting in moderation, Snyders's still lifes are anything but moderate in their mode of presentation. Rather, like satire, their method of representation of one position (the aristocratic ideology of the hunt) is so extreme that it implies that the opposite extreme (a vegetarian regimen) may be worth considering. The three paintings we have just considered—*Pythagoras*, *The Butcher's Shop*, and *Hunter in a Larder*—confirm that in canvases from early to late in his career Snyders was implicitly raising questions and distancing himself from the apparently unambiguous conventional affirmation in the large still-life genre of those with the power to kill beautiful animals and the wealth to pay for trophy paintings.²⁹ In an indication of the longevity and intensification of this contestatory undercurrent, in the last two decades of his long career, Snyders's still lifes become significantly smaller, and, beginning in the late 1640s, they depict mostly fruit and almost no game (Koslow, *Frans Snyders 177, 179*).

I would not argue that this autocritical voice in Snyders's paintings always or even most of the time extends to an indictment of hunting or meat-eating (although a few canvases do broach these possibilities), but at the least it calls into question hunting and killing that are not for food, slaughter that is only for pleasure and display. This alternate voice calls to account trophy hunting, in which the dead animal serves only as a sign of status and privilege. The more spectacular the animal—the larger the antlers, the more gorgeous the plumage of the swan or the peacock—the more successfully it marks the power of the hunter to deal death to beautiful animal life. In a contemporary context, Ra-

chel Poliquin argues that the taxidermied head of a black-eyed young fawn “simultaneously signifies and critiques its existence as a souvenir of deadly desiring” (154).³⁰

Just such a double-voiced autocritique is at work in Snyder’s large game-pieces, which at once celebrate the power and wealth of the patron and call into question the practice of killing to make a spectacle of a proliferation of deaths. The same double-voicedness characterizes George Gascoigne’s *Noble Arte of Venerie or Hunting* (1575), a loose translation of a French hunting manual. The bulk of the work consists of celebratory accounts in prose of how to hunt a dozen animals, among them the wild boar, wild goat, badger, and bear. The instructions note what time of year and time of day to hunt the animal, how to track and chase each of them, what strategies the animal uses to evade the hunt, and how to overcome these difficulties. Throughout these chapters, Gascoigne celebrates the hunt, praising the skills, strength, bravery, and persistence of both hunters and hounds. However, at the conclusion of four of his chapters—those concerning the hart (by far the longest in the book), hare, fox, and otter—Gascoigne allows the animal in his own voice and in verse to complain of being hunted by man (the original French manual included only the complaint of the hart). In his poem of “wofull words,” the crying stag questions the hunter (and the author), echoing More: “Canst thou in death take suche delight? / Breedes pleasure so in paynes? / Oh cruell, be content, to take my worth in tears” (137).³¹ Instead of taking his life, the hart urges the man to take his tears, his horns (which are renewed each year), and his hair, all of which have medicinal powers for humans and can treat conditions from brain fevers to trouble in labor. But if he persists in his hunt, the deer prays that the hunter will see Diana in her bath, and be hunted in his turn by his own dogs, like Actaeon.

The hare, in “moane and mournful notes,” argues, unlike the hart, that the parts of his body cannot benefit man at all; even the little flesh he carries is dry and hard to eat (178). All that man can gain from hunting him is “some sporte perhaps: yet Grevous is the glee / Which endes in Bloud, that lesson learn of me” (178). Similarly, the fox complains that the two-legged foxes commit more deceitful thefts than the four-legged foxes whom they accuse of such offenses (197–98). Finally, the otter repeatedly and sarcastically charges “master Man” with excesses in eating and drinking in which the other animals do not indulge, men showing themselves to be the true beasts (362–63). Thus, although the work’s hundreds of pages of prose instructions, anecdotes, and lore celebrate hunters as skillful practitioners of a noble art, the dozen pages of verse



Fig. 6: Fyt, *Diana with her Hunting Dogs*. bpk, Berlin/Staatliche Museen, Berlin, Gemäldegalerie/Photo: Hans-Peter Klut/Art Resource, New York.

complaints by the three most common objects of the hunt (and a sarcastic, moralizing otter) portray hunters as cruel, bloody, self-satisfied hypocrites, morally worse than the animals they course and kill.

It is not only Snyder's game paintings that give expression to these two perspectives; his pupil Jan Fyt also painted gamepieces that incorporate an autocritique of the genre. Like Snyder's *Still Life with Dead Game*, Fyt's *Diana with Her Hunting Dogs* (1640) (fig. 6) presents a virtual encyclopedia of dead beautiful animals, including many species of small birds, a heron, a duck, a goose, a white swan, a peacock, a deer in a contorted pose, and a hare hanging by one leg in the center of the composition—all testimony to the prowess of Diana the hunter and her dogs, two of whom still bark at the suspended hare. Another half dozen dogs fawn on the goddess in a flowing robe, as she handles her bow delicately and smiles sweetly at the viewer. The goddess who embodies hunting here exercises her power to hunt and kill: the animals die in order to be trophies of her power.

While Fyt's work participates in a genre of paintings that depicts Diana after the hunt, his use of the genre stands apart. For example, in Hendrik van Balen the Elder's *Diana and Her Nymphs Spied upon by Satyrs* (1620) (fig. 7), the visual interest lies not so much in an excessive accumulation of animal carcasses, as it does in the visual availability of the undraped bodies of the virginal



Fig. 7: van Balen, *Diana and her Nymphs Spied upon by Satyrs*. bpk, Berlin/Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister/Photo: Hans-Peter Klut/Art Resource, New York.

goddess and her companions. Their bodies occupy the center of the canvas, where they are spied upon by both the satyrs and the viewers. In their disordered, twisting, and contorted poses, the bodies of the nymphs and the game present comparable objects of observation. The game in the foreground and the narrative of Diana and her hunt only provide pretexts for portraying the unclad female bodies, each caught in a different pose and exhibiting different parts of her anatomy. In other treatments of this subject, such as Peter Paul Rubens's and Jan Brueghel the Elder's *Diana and Her Nymphs Surprised by Satyrs* (1624), the unclad bodies of the sleeping goddess and nymphs also constitute primary objects of attention, observed by satyrs in the background as well as by the viewer. The main line of this genre replaced the display of animal bodies with a display of naked female bodies. In a related painting, Jan Brueghel the Younger's *Diana and Her Nymphs after the Hunt* (1630–39), four deer lie on their sides in a field, and the body of another is draped over a tree limb above Diana and the nymphs. The contorted position of the deer closest to the nymphs echoes their poses, but with an opposed significance: the animals are freezing in rigor mortis, not relaxing from a fatiguing sport.

A canvas by Hendrik van Balen and Jan Brueghel, *Diana at the Hunt* (c. 1620), comes closest to producing the effect of Fyt's painting. Diana's body is not displayed in van Balen's and Brueghel's painting, but she sits meditatively, the paw of one of her dogs on her thigh, while two donkeys led by nymphs carry deer carcasses out of the forest. One stag and a pair of does lie on their sides in the foreground among other game—a small boar, several small birds. Despite the similar extent of the killing, however, the painting includes no pyramidal heap of game. Fyt's is the only painting in this genre that uses such a composition in Snyder's mode, including a white swan and a peacock; it is the only one in which Diana engages with the spectator and in which she is unaccompanied by her nymphs. As a pile of animal bodies defines a conventional gamepiece on the left half of the painting, Diana the hunter, clothed except for the display of one breast, smiles at the viewer on the right half, holding her fatal bow delicately between two fingers. Fyt combines the two genres to make a new meaning; he shows that the display of beautiful dead animals results from hunting, whether by humans or a goddess. The fawning dogs around her indicate her power and the power of the aristocratic hunters who resemble her.

Smaller gamepieces that began to be painted in the 1640s displaced the large-format gamepieces by Fyt and Snyder in the course of the second half of the seventeenth century. The smaller gamepieces depicting far fewer animals do not give expression to the ambivalence of the early pieces. Nor do the smaller paintings include human figures; instead, they frequently represent the absent hunter/owner metonymically, through accoutrements of the hunt, which, like the small groups of animals, are presented in a smoothly finished, aestheticizing, and formulaic way. For example, Jan Weenix's *Dead Peacock and Game* (1707) allows viewers to appreciate the skillful representation of the spectacular tail of the peacock, which almost has a being of its own as it lies athwart the body of a rabbit. The painter draws attention to his technique in portraying the intensely blue head of the peacock, the glistening bunches of grapes, and the soft but heavy head of the hare. All are set in a country-house landscape with classicizing features that affirms the right of the owner of the estate and the painting to possess these beings (and their representation in death).³² Similarly, in Weenix's *Dead Game with Springer Spaniel* (1710–15) (fig. 8), a springer spaniel in a park-like landscape gazes proudly at a swan, pheasant, partridge, and hare that hang from the flintlock fowling piece that may have taken their lives. They serve as trophies testifying to the efficacy of the gun and the prerogative of the hunter, the unseen owner of all that is in the painting.



Fig. 8: Weenix, *Dead Game with Springer Spaniel*. © The Wallace Collection.

An extreme version of this kind of aestheticizing of the hunt and its results can be found in the still lifes of Willem van Aelst (1627–83), who was born in Delft and lived most of his life in Amsterdam. In *Dead Birds and Hunting Gear* (1664), an example of late-century *fijnschilderijen* (“fine paintings”), the beautiful blue velvet of the hunting bag (with its fur trim), the texture of the chamois belt, and the shining stock of the fowling piece receive the same level of attention by painter and viewer as the delicately feathered small birds that the gun is supposed to have brought down. Both the hunting gear and the victims of the hunt serve as objects of aesthetic contemplation. No blood stains the gear, and there is no indication of the numbers of beings that this gear can kill. Because Weenix and van Aelst do not represent excessive animal deaths, and do not stress the materiality of the dead animals, their paintings generally do not contest the conventions of the genre in which they work. However, in two notable exceptions, *Still Life with a Velvet Bag on a Marble Ledge* (c. 1665) (fig. 9) and *Still Life with Dead Game* (1661), van Aelst depicts his usual hunting gear, including the luxuriant blue velvet hunting bag, along with a hare and a few small birds, but adds a disquieting note. Carved in bas-relief in the pedestal under the marble ledge in these paintings, one can make out a scene of Diana surprised in her bath by Actaeon—splashing the hunter with water, the goddess initiates his transformation into a stag. As in Gascoigne’s poem voiced by the stag, the transformation



Fig. 9: van Aelst, *Hunt Still Life with a Velvet Bag on a Marble Ledge*. Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, Houston.

of Actaeon places a harsh light on the deadly consequences of the hunt for the hunted animals, whether small birds, hares, or a stag with human consciousness and a name. In these cases, van Aelst uses the form to attain an autocritical perspective.

It may be objected that the displays of dead animals in the paintings by Snyders, Fyt, and Weenix were accepted at face value in the seventeenth century and should be read in the same way today—that not to do so is to impose a modern sensibility about animals onto an earlier mentality that accepted hunting as a source of plenty worthy of celebration, and that showed no evidence of concerns about the ethics of killing of rare and splendid animals. I would agree that the patrons who commissioned or purchased these paintings most likely experienced no such concerns and were proud to display these works of art in their palatial residences or hunting lodges. Among Fyt's patrons were the archduke governor of the Spanish Netherlands; late in his career, Weenix was court painter to the Elector Palatine, Johann Wilhelm. It is hard to see these patrons being attuned to subtle critiques of the very activity that the huge canvases depict and seem to celebrate. Even in Amsterdam, Snyders's paintings commanded a high price, the third highest of any, according to a computer analysis of scores of inventories (Montias 367).

The painters of the large gamepieces either shared these attitudes or were willing to paint as though they did; they were complicit in the conventions of the genre, especially Snyders who largely codified the form. On the other hand, the painters and others in the society would have been aware that possessing and making a display of such heaps of multiple species of game, including swans and peacocks, would have been beyond the reach of any but the wealthiest landowners, and that such images raised questions about the propriety of indiscriminate slaughter for the purpose of displaying dominion over the animals on one's land.

Related genres of still-life painting that were roughly contemporary with this genre testify to this awareness. The antecedent genre of market pictures by Aertsen and Bueckelaer, for example, features a heaped profusion of food-stuffs, but it does not raise the same questions as the game still lifes, because the fruits and vegetables do not require bloodshed to be rendered food; even the fish, birds, and mammals in the market paintings are manifestly for use and not for exhibition as trophies. The market paintings depict piles of food, but not as the excessive, wasteful possession of a single wealthy landowner. Similarly, the still lifes of vases with wildly variegated flowers, and often moralizing intentions about the transience of life, do not depend for their subject matter on animal deaths, nor do the *banketje* ("little banquet") still lifes, that depict the remains of small meals on silver or pewter platters amid superbly detailed and delicately lit beakers of wine. The most relevant contrast appears in these small-format still lifes of modest meals in which only one or two fish or a neat round of cheese appear in a quiet light. For example, Pieter Claesz's *Still Life with Stoneware Jug, Wine Glass, Herring, and Bread* (1641) (fig. 10) presents each of its objects discretely in a clear, calm light. All the items are meant for consumption, and have their own integrity in an uncluttered, quiet space. This form presents an alternative to the large-format gamepieces with their implicit violence and palpable excess.

In some of Willem Claesz. Heda's still lifes, a small grilled fish lies on a plate beside a small loaf of bread, usually with an ornamental goblet nearby. There is little overlapping and no piling up of body on body in these paintings; instead, the viewer is asked to pay intense attention to each object in a much smaller canvas than the monumental gamepieces. The monochromatic background characteristic of the *banketje* breakfast pieces indicates that this may not be a scene of any particular inhabitant's breakfast table. It is an ideal-type Dutch breakfast scene of the time, just as the monumental game pieces are



Fig. 10: Claesz, *Still Life with Stoneware Jug, Wine Glass, Herring, and Bread*. Photograph © 2016, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

ideal-typical displays, painted trophies of animals' bodies. Both kinds of paintings have been artfully composed as spectacles, but to very different ends. The *banketjes* of Claesz and Heda are instances of an attention to individuality and isolation. They invite meditation on what is necessary for life—although the fine glass-work in the base of the *roemer* is a sign of luxury, as is the fine two-dimensional representation of the scene on canvas. A watch may be a sign of the painting as a *memento mori*, but this traditional line of interpretation, though not to be excluded, seems vestigial. These paintings are to be hung not in a palace or a hunting lodge, but in a house, and are to be viewed and meditated on by individuals as they go about their daily lives. Nevertheless, a certain monumentalizing of the everyday results from the spare objects and economy of representation in the *banketjes*.

The contrast between the massive gamepieces and the small still lifes of game is aligned with a class-based opposition between urban burghers and the nobility, including landed gentry. This contrast can also be aligned, more loosely, with a confessional division and a difference between the South and North Netherlands. The monumental gamepieces express an aristocratic ethos of magnificence, display, and consumption that correlates with a Catholic aesthetic of spectacle and ceremony.³³ On the other hand, the smaller, sparer,

less coloristic *banketjes* represent a more bourgeois, ascetic, and contemplative ethos, with strong affinities to a radical Calvinist emphasis on simplicity, inwardness, and the consecration of daily life through reflection. The intensely observed spare meals of the *banketjes* with one or two small fish and some bread and cheese call for meditation on the materiality of these foods that are necessary for life, and their animal sources. The small meal does not include meat from a hunted animal—no fowl, deer, or hare (some of Heda's *banketjes* include about half a ham which has been thinly sliced). The breakfast still lifes took form as a genre in the 1630s, about twenty-five years or a generation after the development of the monumental gamepiece by Snyders and his collaborators, including Rubens. The monumental gamepiece and the small breakfast still life can be regarded as genre and counter-genre: the latter is aware of, and revises, the former.³⁴

But these terms are not absolute; there can be mixed cases. Jan Weenix was a Protestant who lived in the northern Netherlands, but many of his patrons were Catholic German princes. Especially important was the Elector Palatine, for whom Weenix revived the monumental gamepiece in the first two decades of the eighteenth century. Conversely, Clara Peeters, a Flemish painter, was one of the first to represent a tension between opulence and stillness in domestic still lifes.³⁵

As Schama demonstrates in his analysis of opposed attitudes toward riches and material goods, it is not only possible but common for a person to hold contradictory views on a closely related issue. In fact, excess of one perspective may point to the need for its corrective. The very profusion of animal deaths in Snyders's still lifes may indicate a submerged recognition that such unchecked accumulation of animal bodies is not the only or even perhaps an acceptable way of humans relating to the animals they kill.³⁶ The excess of the animal bodies turns the large gamepiece into also a self-critique. The materiality of the animal bodies speaks for itself, asserting that the beautiful display has been made possible by, and is made up of, dead animal matter.³⁷

Unlike Weenix, Fyt explores the alternative of the small still life of food. In *Mushrooms* (date not known) (fig. 11), the large mushrooms share a dignity with the other vegetables and the small birds behind them. In fact, the fungi take on a kind of ironic vegetal monumentality that renders the small birds in the background less of a spectacle. Fyt also shows his ability to revise the conventions and attitudes of the large-scale genre from the inside in his *Game and Hunting Gear Discovered by a Cat* (1640s). Here the fowling piece does not serve



Fig. 11: Fyt, *Mushrooms*. © KIK/IRPA, Brussels.



Fig. 12: Chardin, *Still Life with Game*. National Gallery of Art, Washington.

as an object of aesthetic celebration: the painter focuses attention on the two small birds on the table and especially the rabbit which is trussed up by one leg, leaving exposed its soft underbelly and genitals. Fyt shows the same concern with the soft fur of the limp and contorted body of a rabbit amid small birds that appears in a more concentrated way in his *Still Life with Hare and Birds* (1640s). By contrast, Jan Weenix's later depiction of a hare and birds works to

confirm the status of the owner of the painting, the park, and the animals it contains.³⁸

By calling attention to the materiality and beauty of the animals deprived of their lives, the works by Snyder and Fyt establish and contest the conventions of the large gamepieces, inviting us to acknowledge the animal suffering that necessarily precedes displays of animal carcasses and meat-eating. The questions raised by the autocritical paintings in this genre anticipate the kinds of questions raised more explicitly later, for example by Jeremy Bentham in the late eighteenth century, concerning the ethics of killing animals and eating meat.³⁹ These paintings indicate the hidden workings of a pre-history of critique—especially of trophy hunting—based on the expressive materiality of the dead animal bodies they represent.

NOTES

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1. Honig argues in *Painting and the Market* that the animal bodies in Snyder’s paintings present themselves as available for purchase and consumption (152–53).

2. Watson argues that the slain animals in these still lifes substitute, almost always in some semi-conscious way, for Christ, as beings who gave up their lives in order that we humans might live (191–225).

3. I borrow the term “autocritique”—a critique of a genre or a movement from inside that form—from Hulliung. I also use the term in this sense in “Autocritique of Fables.”

4. The authority for the treatment of this theme is de Jongh. Honig also discusses some of the erotic meanings in market paintings, especially those with the motif of “Virgil’s revenge” (“Desire and Domestic Economy”).

5. Koslow observes that the market scenes of Aerst and Bueckelaer are “loaded with sexual innuendo, some foods being counted as aphrodisiacs, while others are likened to male and female genitalia” (*Frans Snyders* 88). Härting also points out that the erotic aspect is more prominent in the market and kitchen paintings than in the gamepieces (217).

6. Watson sees this gesture as a sign that the woman is a daughter of Eve, and that the offer of fruit here, as in Genesis, leads to a fallen world, portrayed in the foreground, in

which humans must kill in order to eat (210). The game spread out before the two figures in *Merchant of Game* then also represents the material pleasures that the couple should, but fail to, resist. This kind of moralizing sexual allegory may be present in a few gamepieces, but, even in those canvases, it need not override or exclude other meanings.

7. On *The Fig* as the earliest of the large still lifes with game, see Koslow, *Frans Snyder* 102.

8. Koslow has made a strong case for linking this generic innovation in the second decade of the seventeenth century in Flanders to the archdukes' efforts to establish a new sense of identity and to associate it with prosperity and peace ("Law and Order").

9. On the patrons of Snyder's gamepieces, see Koslow, *Frans Snyder* 28, and Sullivan 34.

10. That Snyder's paintings could be used to provide such legitimation is clear from a contemporary satirical observer who asserted that the large gamepieces were often purchased by "fat greedy bourgeois" who had never participated in a day of hunting in their lives (qtd. in Koslow, *Frans Snyder* 94).

11. On hunting as a sign of superior social status, see Thomas 106, 160, 183.

12. Of swans and peacocks, Goddeeris, De Smet, and Roggeman write, "Consumption of these prestigious birds was limited to the aristocracy. In most European countries they disappeared from the table and cookbooks by the middle of the seventeenth century. . . . Consumption of these great birds appears to continue in the seventeenth century in the Northern Netherlands and in England" (1437). The authors probably refer here to the agricultural northeastern provinces of the Netherlands such as Groningen and Overijssel, where the nobility remained relatively strong; on the persistence of the nobility in these areas, see also Price 86–87, 98–99.

13. Weber develops the concept of the ideal-type in "Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy" (1904) and "The Meaning of 'Ethical Neutrality' in Sociology and Economics" (1917), both in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*.

14. Sullivan points out that peacocks and other beautiful fowl were not normally hunted (37, 56).

15. Sullivan consistently characterizes the gamepieces as "trophy pieces" (38–40, 55, 63), as does Gregor (14–16).

16. Snyder and other painters of game still lifes may have possessed some taxidermied animals in their studios and painted the same animals on different canvases in different combinations. On this possibility, see Sullivan, who also notes that after Rembrandt's death, inventories recorded that he had seventy land and sea animals, which must have been preserved somehow (64). Some painters worked from pattern drawings of a particular member of the species, varying the position to suit new compositions. See Snyder's study sheet of deer hanging in various postures (Koslow, *Frans Snyder* 63).

17. I am indebted to Manning for details concerning the hunt in England—especially the hunting practices of Henry VIII (24, 48) and James I (5, 202).

18. Fudge points out that at the basis of Montaigne's critique lies his conviction that animals have sentience (*Brutal Reasoning* 121). Montaigne's ideas concerning animals had immense influence on thinkers in the seventeenth century, such as Pierre Charron and William Cavendish, including some who had been attracted to Descartes's thought apart from his views on animals, such as Henry More (*Brutal Reasoning* 154–55). For a direction that this discussion took in the second half of the century, see Yolton, who follows the expansion of the question from thinking animals to thinking matter. Boas traces the influence of Montaigne's arguments for animal rationality and virtue (52–63, 118–57).

19. In fact, English law prohibited butchers from practicing their trade within the city of London (More, *Utopia* 78n).

20. Arbel traces the increasingly compassionate view of animals in the early modern period, and points out that although Thomistic thought criticized unnecessary killing of animals for its hardening effect on humans, Renaissance thinkers did so out of consideration for the suffering of the animals.

21. Montaigne commended Lipsius's work, but also called it "learned and laborious" (108).

22. This breed of dogs was named for Tiziano Vicelli (Titian), who portrayed them in his paintings.

23. Papy discusses evidence of such an association in *Four Philosophers*. I am indebted to Papy for the line of interpretation developed in this paragraph.

24. In a catalogue of the paintings in Snyders's possession, after "a piece by Heda" and "two tronies by Rubens" appears an entry for "Erasmus of Rotterdam Thomas More," valued at 100 guilders; the listing of these portraits together indicates they are pendants (Denucé 189).

25. Raber has analyzed the stages by which the animal body is transformed into meat from left to right in this painting ("Making Meat").

26. For example, see Gerard David's *Execution of Sisamnes* (1498) and Lucas Cranach's *Martyrdom of St. Erasmus* (1506). Koslow notes these analogues to Snyders's use of the motif in his *Butcher* (*Frans Snyders* 170).

27. Koslow also suggests this interpretation in her discussion of *Hunter in a Larder* (*Frans Snyders* 106). I have been unable to obtain permission to reproduce this painting.

28. For this important interpretive strand in Protestant commentary on Genesis, see Fudge, "Saying Nothing."

29. Carroll points out the implication that animals may be violent by nature in some of Snyders's paintings (162–84). These violent animals appear appropriately in Snyders's animal combats, not in the still lifes; different genres necessarily carry different ideological valences.

30. Poliquin argues that the trophy piece raises the question, "What is this animal thing?" (143). In Poliquin's view, the trophy reveals a desire to perpetuate the beauty of the animal (148–49). While she regards antlers as the quintessential trophies of the late nineteenth century (147), I see Snyders's large gamepieces as distinctive trophies of the seventeenth century. For a related analysis of trophy hunting, focused on photographs of dead game, see Rothfels.

31. For a related discussion, see Bergman 66–73.

32. Snyders occasionally includes a view through a window of such a landed estate in his large gamepieces (see Koslow, *Frans Snyders* 157, 161, 178).

33. These monumental paintings can be called sacramental, in the sense that a sacrament can be defined in Catholicism as an outward, visible sign of an inward, invisible grace.

34. Honig reads the contrast between the Dutch and Flemish table still lifes in different terms, understanding the large gamepieces as implicit advertisements of the availability of these animals as commodities on the market, while reading the Dutch pieces as evidence of a more social setting—someone has eaten a few bites of pie; maybe someone else coming by in a while will have a few more ("Making Sense of Things").

35. The high valuation of Snyders in the North and in Protestant England—officially Protestant countries—may not be difficult to explain. In the North, there were wealthy city burghers who sought to associate themselves with the nobility or at least to portray themselves as gentry with a productive country estate. In England, Snyders's patronage

was centered on the court of the very High Anglican, even Anglo-Catholic, Stuarts; Calvinist Parliamentarian tradesmen and professionals were not purchasing Snyder's huge gamepieces.

36. Thomas traces evidence of such alternate perspectives in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Europe (136–89).

37. Here I am echoing Barad's reflections on the way phenomena come to matter through matter. I would argue that the way we come to be aware of the excessiveness of the dead animals in the large still lifes of game bears out her formulation that "knowing is a matter of part of the world making itself intelligible to another part" (829).

38. Almost a century after Fyt, but only a generation after Weenix, Chardin's *Still Life with Game* (1750s) (fig. 12) works in the same way, with the extraordinarily delicate coloring of the dead bird and soft fur of the rabbit standing in tension with their unmoving, dead, material heaviness and the drop of blood at the rabbit's mouth. Bergstrom points out that Chardin shares with the Dutch painters of *banketjes* a "passionate interest in simple objects" (122).

39. In his *Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Bentham argued that "the question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?" (2: 236).

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