The Wedding Feast
Frans Snyders’s *Larder with a Maidservant*

A veritable picture window into seventeenth-century Netherlandish culture, Frans Snyders’s enormous painting celebrates prosperity and hospitality with a view of a table loaded with the bounty of hunt and harvest. *Larder with a Maidservant*, ca. 1630–40 (Mead Art Museum, Amherst College), at slightly over four feet high by six feet wide, is one of Snyders’s largest panel paintings. On this monumental scale, each of the meticulously rendered elements of fruit, vegetable, game, and lobster appear life-size. Stacked in overlapping arrangement, prodigious viands confront the viewer aggressively from the immediate foreground and high vantage point. The lush textures and great quantity of freshly killed deer, swan, peacock, lobster, and small game birds casually heaped on the draped table awe and astonish the viewer, who anticipates the luxurious banquet to come. A specialty of the renowned Antwerp painter Frans Snyders (1579–1657), the larder still life reflects the aspirations of his wealthy patrons and, more generally, the economic recovery of the region.

Frans Snyders’s parents, Jan and Maria, ran a prominent inn and also a wedding banquet facility in Antwerp. Although they were restaurateurs and wine merchants, the family also had connections to painters. At fourteen, Frans was apprenticed to Pieter Brueghel the Younger and later worked with his younger brother, Jan Brueghel, who practiced still-life and animal painting. By 1618, Snyders was married, and he prospered with aristocratic patrons such as the Archduke Albert and his wife Isabella. He also enjoyed acclaim as a painter of game from his contemporary and collaborator, Peter Paul Rubens. During the 1620s Snyders received commissions for animal still-life and hunting paintings for the ceremonial chambers and hunting lodges of English, French, and Spanish nobles. By the end of his prolific career, his scenes of the domestic larder, markets, and banquets decorated the town hall, guildhalls, and other institutions of Antwerp, and his still-life paintings lent status to the homes of aristocrats, merchants, and the upper bourgeoisie.

The genre of seventeenth-century still-life painting was flexible and inclusive, comprising animate and inanimate subjects and also fruit, fish, fowl, and domestic and wild animals. In Snyders’s works, the occasional human subject provided a narrative or social context, whether setting out wares in the marketplace, preparing food in the kitchen, or feasting at a banquet. Yet, as in *Larder with a Maidservant*, people were subordinated to the ostentatious display of...

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The diversity of animals and produce reflects the varied bounty of the Netherlands and the rich diet of its opulent foodstuffs. Each item is exquisitely rendered to emphasize the variety, quality, purity, and succulence of radiant produce, prime game and fowl, and glistening shellfish. The sumptuous table arrangement contrasts the textures of fur, feathers, and bristles with the smooth skins of ripe fruit and vegetables. The animals drape the surface in limp, languid posture as if still warm from the kill. The pristine produce sparkles, its surfaces damp with the dew of the fields and orchards. The immaculate game and produce, uncorrupted by decay, repose in the brief transition between living and dead.

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inhabitants, both in the country and in the city. The boar, deer, pheasant, peacock, partridge, and woodcock define the quarry of the hunt, the prerogative of the nobility since the Middle Ages. Snyders situates them front and center here, as in many of his paintings, to appeal to the class pretensions of his patrons, whether actually nobles or the nouveau-riche merchants, bankers, and government officials who could now afford rural estates. The painting’s grandeur as well as its subjects refer to the lifestyle of the aristocracy, who could catch or cultivate a vast array of foods on their own lands. A sumptuous gathering, it was the bounty of the seigneurie, whether part of the sporting hunt or collected as rents from the tenants. The painting depicts both the actuality of a luxurious spread as well as the noble ideal of being able to provide the Virgilian “unpurchased meal” as the largesse of Nature available on one’s own domain. Also, such abundance and freshness not only suggested the old money of the landed gentry, but also disdain for the town marketplace of harvested produce purchased by the new money of urban entrepreneurs. Snyders’s genius lay in his magnificently vivid depiction of animals, vegetables, and fruits as well as in his ability to address the social fantasies of his patrons.

For the modern viewer, the horrific spectacle of life-size, dead, furry and feathered creatures mitigates the admirable display of opulence. Indeed, the juxtaposition of fresh produce, crowned by glistening fruit at the apex of the food pyramid, with the prostrate dead animals, guarded by salivating hounds, appeals to the modern preference for a vegetarian diet. Perhaps Snyders was familiar with the seventeenth-century revival of vegetarianism to promote long life and a higher moral nature, since eating flesh had long been associated with human savagery. If so, he may have become aware of the vegetarian movement while collaborating with Rubens on *Pythagoras*, ca. 1618–20 (London, Buckingham Palace, The Royal Collection of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II), a work inspired by Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* that depicts the philosopher extolling the vegetarian diet while surrounded by piles of fruits and vegetables. Whether

or not Snyders had a personal knowledge of vegetarian practice or its promotion in contemporary medical treatises, he invests his slain animals with dignity and pathos. The swan reclines in death with its outstretched wing and bent neck, while the peacock lies draped across the table with its magnificent tail compacted. Both are aristocratic birds, valued for their living grace and beauty; Snyders portrays them in postures generally intended to elicit compassion for fallen classical heroes or Christian martyrs. In their resemblance to humans, these dead animals evoke a sympathy that argues for abstention from flesh-eating that is here equated with cannibalism.

Snyders had formulated the larder still-life painting sometime around 1615 and thereafter enjoyed great success with this genre through the 1620s, due, in part, to the recombination of staple elements. Indeed, a comparison of several pictures, as well as the related presentation drawings made for patron review, suggests that he relied on a corpus of study drawings and also repeated motifs or even entire arrangements from earlier pictures. While *Larder with a Maidservant* is among his more complex compositions, the standard features of swan, deer, peacock, lobster, asparagus, and artichoke became popular not only as emblems of prosperity, but also of fecundity. The swan and peacock had long carnal associations with classical goddesses and nymphs. The produce resembles male or female genitals or was considered to be aphrodisiac. The still life, moreover, exudes a sensuality that exceeds the sensory aspects of touch, smell, and taste. The maidservant, proffering the gaping head of a boar, contributes to the voluptuous appeal of the painting. She has been inserted into the composition in place of a bearded page in the presentation drawing (Larder with a Page, ca. 1630–40, London, British Museum), no doubt at the request of the patron. Unlike most of Snyders’s subsidiary figures, she addresses the viewer with solemn, unwavering gaze. In the prototype kitchen still-life paintings of the late sixteenth century, the kitchen maids embodied lust and symbolized the carnal appeal of material wealth as represented by the foods. The erotic associations, however, were balanced with a moral invective to the viewer to resist excess and indulgence. Snyders’s well-dressed maidservant personifies decorum and propriety, and as such defines the ideal caretaker of the well-stocked aristocratic household. As the female servant who acquires, prepares, and serves the meal, she stands in for the noble hosts of the banquet. Like the elegant foodstuffs she accompanies, her garments and demeanor indicate the hiborn status of her employers. Her physical beauty, engendering desire, provides a human counterpart to the sumptuous provisions of this prosperous household. The boar’s head, usually borne as a hunting trophy by a page, becomes in her hands a symbol of virility. Her attractiveness and implicit sensuality thus denote the basis of a successful marriage. The leashed and sniffing hunting dogs at the bottom of the picture reflect the divergent human impulses toward sensory (and sensual) temptation and the need for restraint. Taken together, the maidservant and the hounds define the domestication of physical passion that leads to a fruitful marital union.

Although no information survives to indicate the patron or occasion for this painting, *Larder with a Maidservant* promotes the mundane business as well as the idealized aspirations of an aristocratic marriage while commemorating the sumptuous hospitality of the wedding banquet.