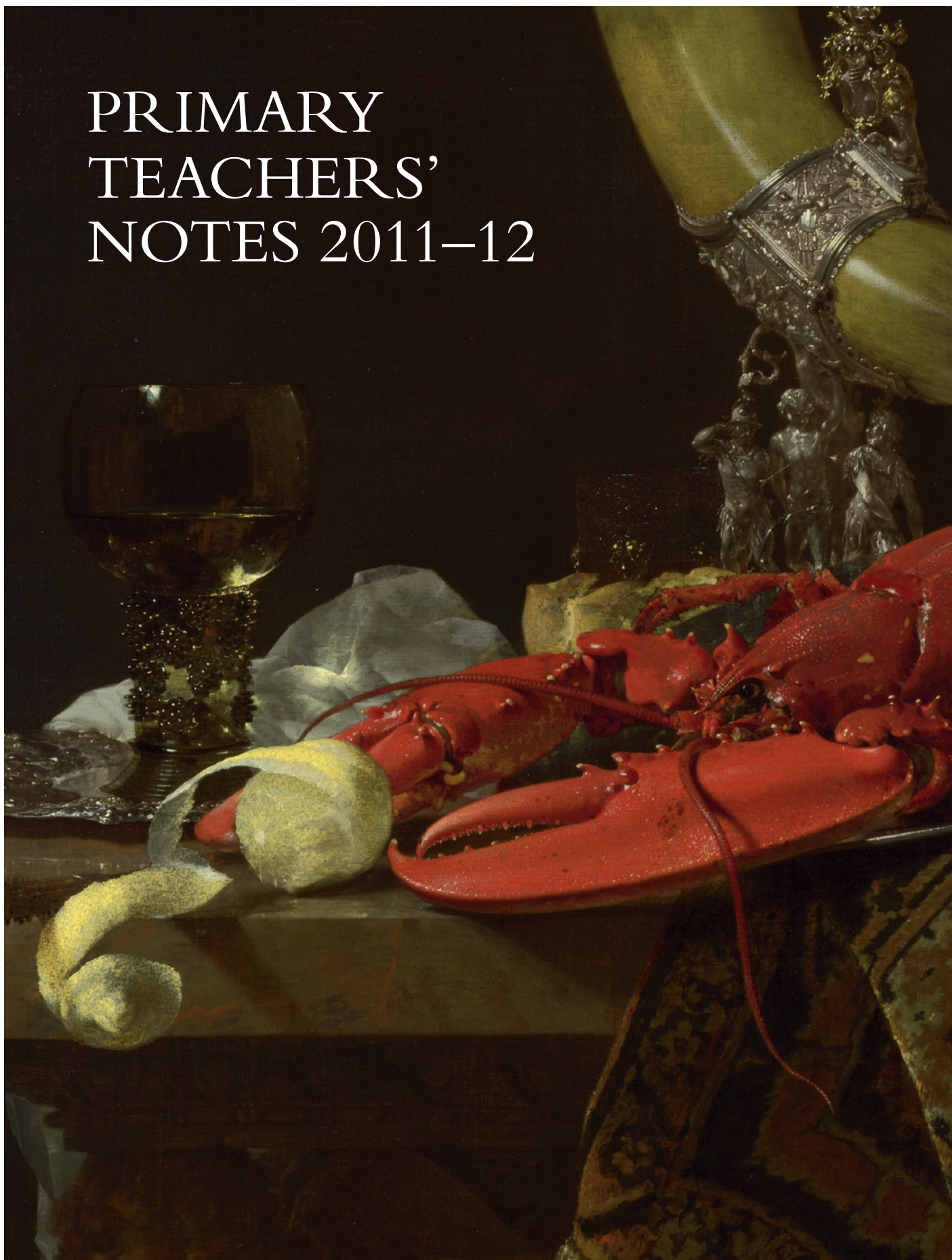


PRIMARY
TEACHERS'
NOTES 2011–12



STILL LIFE WITH THE DRINKING-HORN OF THE SAINT SEBASTIAN ARCHERS' GUILD, LOBSTER AND GLASSES, ABOUT 1653

WILLEM KALF
(1619–1693)



© The National Gallery, London

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Willem Kalf was born in Rotterdam in 1619. Little is known of his early life and training, but by the age of 22 he was working in Paris, where he specialised in painting humble interiors. After five years he returned to Holland where he married Cornelia Pluvier, a talented calligrapher, glass engraver, poet and musician. They settled in Amsterdam in 1653, and probably the same year he made this painting. He began to specialise in *pronkstilleven* or ostentatious still lifes for which he is famous. Kalf stopped painting by the age of 50, but he continued as an art dealer until his death in 1693.

Arnold Houbraken, an early biographer, described Kalf as a friendly, helpful man who liked to sit all night long in a tavern with a glass of wine entertaining fellow drinkers with his excellent stories.

ABOUT THE PAINTING

The glowing orange-red lobster dominates the painting, with its extraordinary shape and eye that fixes you at the centre of the composition. This is contrasted with the yellow-white of the lemon, artfully peeled to reveal both the pith and the fruit. A knife, the principal table implement of the time, lies beside it jutting out over the edge of the table. Curving upwards is a buffalo horn expensively mounted in silver.

Four glasses catch the light against the dark background of the painting. The wine glass on the expensive silver platter on the left was reasonably common for the time while that on the right is ornately lidded. A tumbler-shaped beer glass is visible in the centre, above what is possibly a loaf of bread, while a tall and slender flute to the right of the horn only reveals itself through red reflected light.

The pewter plate beneath the lobster is tilted up on a patterned carpet regarded as far too valuable to be laid on the floor. This and the white napkin draw our attention to the marble table, which is supported by a sculpted figure of Cupid, the god of love. Finally, just catching the light in the bottom left is the side of a chair.

The drinking-horn of the Saint Sebastian Archers' Guild

This drinking-horn, made in 1565, still exists and is on show at the Amsterdam Museum in Amsterdam. It belonged to the Saint Sebastian Archers who were the likely patrons of the painting. On special occasions the officers would gather to feast and the horn would be filled with wine and ceremoniously passed among them.

Guilds were local organisations of craftsmen, primarily of traditional skills, such as painting, armoury, and even shoemaking. The Saint Sebastian Archers, although referred to as a guild, were strictly speaking one of the militia companies that formed part of the civic guard, which proudly defended Amsterdam during times of conflict.

Saint Sebastian was the patron saint of the Archers Guild. He is said to have been a Roman soldier in the 3rd century during the time of Diocletian, an emperor who persecuted Christians. Sebastian declared his Christian faith and so was shot full of arrows. He can be seen flanked by soldiers in the stem of the drinking-horn, along with the arms of the city.

HOLLAND AT THAT TIME

The Netherlands had endured a long war with Spain from the 1560s, which resulted in the Northern Provinces, including Holland, becoming independent and largely Protestant, while the South (Belgium) remained under the control of the Spanish Habsburgs. This was only finally resolved with the Treaty of Münster in 1648, just five years before this painting was made.

At this time Amsterdam was flourishing and one of the largest cities in Europe. It was also Europe's dominant commercial seaport and a financial centre. This produced a wealthy and discerning middle class who could be patrons of art either as individuals or as members of civic organisations such as the Saint Sebastian Archers.

Goods of all kinds, including the costly and exotic, were available to those who could afford them since Amsterdam was a centre for international trade. The Dutch East India Company traded over a wide area and imported Middle-Eastern carpets such as the one in Kalf's painting, which was probably from Persia. Venetian glass was still considered the best, and the lidded glass on the right of the painting is certainly in a Venetian style, while the marble for the table may also have come from Italy. Lemons could be grown in hothouses, but were more likely to be imports from warmer climes. Fish of all kinds were plentiful, but the lobster must have been more expensive than most.

WHAT IS STILL LIFE?

A still life is an artwork that depicts a group of inanimate objects which may be either natural or man-made. Still-life artists tend to be concerned with colour and composition, and often the symbolism of the objects portrayed.

Still-life paintings have their origins in Egyptian and Greco-Roman cultures. The earliest still-life elements in the National Gallery's paintings are symbolic objects incorporated into religious works, for example, *The Arnolfini Portrait* (1434) by the Northern European artist Jan van Eyck.

Kalf's generation

Painted altarpieces were not permitted in the churches of 17th-century Holland because most worshippers followed a strict form of Protestantism founded by John Calvin. Dutch audiences were well versed in the Bible, however, and through books of emblems, in which words and phrases were given visual representation, were adept at interpreting symbolic images. By Kalf's time artists included a wide range of objects in still lifes, including musical instruments, luxurious fabrics, glass and metalware, as well as food and drink. Different types of still-life paintings emerged.

Vanitas paintings might include a skull and other references to the passing of time and the transience of pleasure, reminding the viewer of the vanity of human ambition and the need to lead a good and sober life. An example would be the National Gallery's *Vanitas Still Life* (1648) by Jan Jansz. Treck.

Pronkstilleven, of which Kalf's painting is an example, celebrate life's pleasures and luxuries so would seem to be the opposite of a *vanitas*. However, it is also quite possible that Dutch audiences would have interpreted the painting symbolically. While wine could be associated with pleasure and conviviality, when juxtaposed with bread it evokes the celebration of communion or the Eucharist for a Christian viewer. Christ's sacrifice is echoed in the suffering of Saint Sebastian, and on a more prosaic level, that of the lobster.

Legacy

With Kalf's generation this type of still life gradually disappeared with mainly game and flower pieces persisting into the 18th century. Academies of art were established across Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries, and they were concerned with heroic subjects. Still life was regarded as a low-status genre. However, it was revived by avant-garde artists of the later 19th century, such as Paul Cézanne and Vincent van Gogh, who were both well aware of earlier Dutch masters. Their work had a profound effect on the pioneers of the early 20th century, and still life has retained a major position since, through Cubism and Pop Art. Artists of our own time, such as Damien Hirst and Sam Taylor-Wood, have continued to reinvigorate the genre.

OPPOSITES

Kalf's still lifes often play with the idea of opposites both thematically and visually. The bitterness of the lemon contrasts with the sweet wine. If the drinking-horn is seen as a cornucopia or horn of plenty, pagan pleasure and the Christian sacrifice is illustrated in the silver mount. Furthermore, the winged child, Cupid, whose arrows cause their victims to fall in love is in sharp contrast to the pain inflicted by the archery of the Roman soldiers.

Kalf also makes visual contrasts in the painted surface. For example, some sections are broadly brushed while others are detailed; blurred and sharply defined areas are juxtaposed; while everywhere there are the opposites of dark and bright, matt and shiny, hard and soft.

EFFORTLESS ILLUSION?

Kalf displays his pleasure and skill in the manipulation of colour, light and painted surfaces. This is not a kitchen scene nor a meal laid on a tablecloth: these objects are artfully arranged to make a beautiful painting.

Verticals are contrasted with the solid horizontal of the table, while the composition is enlivened by the diagonals of the bottom of the horn and the lobster, and the spiralling lemon peel. The knife handle protruding towards us and the silver platter beyond the edge of the table on the left help to give a sense of space and depth. The dark background allows Kalf to explore the play of light falling from upper left. If we look carefully at the roemer or drinking glass on the left, it seems to be reflecting the window, which must be the source of light, and we get tantalising hints of the rest of the room.

Colours are carefully arranged. The red of the lobster draws out the warmth of the carpet and the veining of the marble table. It is reflected not only in the platter beneath the lobster but in the silver rim of the horn right at the top of the picture.

Despite the extraordinary illusionism, Kalf may not have had all the objects before him at once, certainly not throughout the whole painting process. Some objects reappear in several paintings but are subtly altered, and some even come from engravings by earlier artists.

USING THE PICTURE ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

TAKE ONE PICTURE

The National Gallery promotes the use of a single painting for cross-curricular teaching and learning through the Take One Picture scheme, its flagship programme for primary schools. The scheme champions engagement and exploration of a National Gallery painting as inspiration for enrichment of learning through the making of meaningful connections both inside and outside the classroom. Further information on the scheme can be found at www.takeonepicture.org.uk.

STARTING POINTS

Before looking at the painting

- Pass around objects from the painting in a canvas bag so that children can feel and describe them. Ask other children to guess the objects from the descriptions.
- Tell stories (real or imagined) inspired by the objects.

Strategies to support looking

- Ask children to look at the painting for a minute and then recall the objects and their positions in the painting.
- Have a look... have a closer look... what might no one else have noticed?
- Imagine the weight of the horn, the texture of the carpet, the taste of the lemon...
- What do you notice about the colour/light/arrangement/shapes in the painting?

Open questions to initiate dialogue

- How can we connect some of the objects in the painting? Which object might be the odd one out? Why?
- Where do you think the artist might want us to look? Why?
- What else might be in the room?
- What does luxury mean to you? Explore children's responses and the reasons for them.

LINES OF ENQUIRY

Lines of enquiry begin with themes in the painting and extend to make meaningful connections with broad learning experiences. Projects that enrich learning will emerge as you explore the different contexts and possibilities that the painting creates for you and your pupils.

Some examples:

- **Journeys, exports and crafts**
Compare the past and present. Explore how objects in the painting would have travelled to Amsterdam for the artist to paint. How would these objects be transported today? Investigate how the production of wine, carpets, silverware and glassware of Kalf's day compares to today's methods.

- **Stories**
Imagine the stories that lie behind this painting. Think about the stories of the people who made, sold and transported the objects in the painting. Learn about Saint Sebastian and the tales of Cupid/Eros. What stories might Kalf have told in the inns of Amsterdam?
- **Community and tradition**
Explore the histories of the different guilds. What roles, professions, buildings and names have survived? Investigate local guilds, trades and crafts. How do their traditions reflect their history and identity?
- **Variety and change**
How do cuisine, taste and traditions around food vary? How and why have diets and sources of food and materials changed with time? How have utensils and vessels changed over time? Think about the variety of attitudes and responses to luxury and necessity now and in the past.

WEB LINKS

www.nationalgallery.org.uk

The National Gallery website includes a search facility to allow you to explore still life, specific artists, Saint Sebastian, Cupid, etc.

www.middle-ages.org.uk/medieval-london-guilds.htm

To investigate the origins of guilds in the UK.

www.wsd.org.uk/guilds.htm

Links to local present-day guilds by region.

www.vam.ac.uk/contentapi/search/?q=carpets

The Victoria and Albert Museum's collection of international rugs.

RESOURCES

A digital image of the painting is available at www.takeonepicture.org.uk. This can be used in the classroom on an interactive whiteboard or by individuals on PCs. It has a zoom facility that enables the viewer to see details in the painting that are sometimes difficult to see. A printed reproduction of the painting can be purchased from National Gallery shops, by mail order at mailorder@nationalgallery.co.uk or by telephone on 020 7747 5958. A copy will be given to teachers attending the Gallery's Continuing Professional Development courses 2011/12, which introduce the Take One Picture approach. Details of these courses, and availability, can be found at www.takeonepicture.org/cpd/schedule.html or by telephoning 020 7747 2844.

A new DVD, bringing together over 10 years' experience of the Take One Picture scheme, is also available from Gallery shops, by mail order at mailorder@nationalgallery.co.uk or by telephone on 020 7747 5958.