

GENEROSITY OF SPIRIT- 3



Willem Kalf, Still Life with a Chinese Porcelain Jar, 1669, Indianapolis Museum of Art

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If we were trying to locate the origins of the global economy we may look towards the Dutch Republic. This arose from the confederation of Low Countries states that broke away from Spanish rule in 1581. Within a couple of generations they were to dominate world trade, conquering a vast colonial empire and operating the largest fleet of merchantmen of any nation. The County of Holland was to become the wealthiest and most urbanized region in the world. Their faith was Reformed, slanted towards Calvinism, opposed and sometimes hostile to Catholicism. In this new environment the language of art was transformed.

Let's begin by looking at the content of the image created by Willem Kalf and then consider some translation work. Represented with startling skill we find a seemingly careless arrangement of extraordinary objects (what the modern day auctioneer would call *objets d'art*): a Chinese porcelain ginger jar, a wine glass of finest Venetian work, a glass roemer on an elaborate silver-gilt stand (a fantastical object peculiar to the Netherlands, called a *bekerschroef*), a Dutch silver platter on which we find a half-peeled lemon, a peach with a leafy sprig and a hardstone mounted knife, perhaps of Indian origin. Right at the edge of the tray we find a pocket watch, the cover flipped open. All the pieces are decorously set on a marble shelf draped by a fine Persian rug. The whole is cross-lit, which warms the tone and helps to unify the whole. It is a painting of astonishing 'reality' – full of texture, with the hint of smell and taste (think of that Mediterranean citrus and the ginger spice).

So, are we simply looking at the artist's brilliant recrafting of the finest crafts? Is this a painting that marks the complacent acquisition of the very rich – a far reaching gathering-in of the finest fruits of others labour – or something else entirely?

To answer these questions we must return to the painting and look beyond the beguiling technical realism to see that the heavy marble top is supported only by a single, slender column; the rug is clumsily rucked, leaving the objects insecurely placed; the silver tray overhangs precariously. The expensive imported fruit is going rotten. In short, the whole arrangement is in jeopardy. Everything presented before us is at risk or wasted. This is a picture of misplaced wealth.

We are being confronted with a serious question: what does all this luxury really amount to? How do we treat earthly riches which so are fleeting and precarious? Are they of the same worth as eternal salvation? This still life may not be overtly 'religious' - but it does call to mind scripture:

"Just then a man came up to Jesus and asked, 'Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?' ...

Jesus answered, 'If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.'

When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth." (Matthew 19:16; 20-21)

The silence of this still life is broken by the sound of a ticking watch, the inevitable passing of time. Centuries later the unanswered question speaks through the quietness. What about you? In what have you invested? Acquisitiveness and generosity are incompatible. This is a painting to challenge us in our prayerful waiting, not to calm us with its quietness, but to disturb and agitate.