



OYSTER SYMBOLISM IN THE ART OF PAINTING*

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ABSTRACT

Oysters are generally known with their legendary power as an aphrodisiac. In ancient Greek, oysters were so common that no banquet was complete without a spread of oysters and other seafood. In Roman gastronomy, oysters were a luxury dish. Romans washed oysters in vinegar and kept in jars sealed with pitch. The feminine symbolism of their shell imposes iconographic meaning to oysters. The presence of oysters in paintings generally intensifies the eroticism, physical love and chastity in the atmosphere. Their erotic affect appears in Italian, French, English and especially Dutch genre paintings of the 17th and 18th centuries. This study examines oysters within its figurative context in genre and still life paintings. In this study, starting with an introductory history of the oysters, and their use in ancient civilizations, oysters are examined through the paintings of Sandro Botticelli's 'The Birth of Venus', Hendrik van Balen II's 'The Feast of the Gods', Peter Paul Rubens and Jan Brueghel the Elder's 'The Feast of Achelouïs', Frans Francken II's 'Supper at the House of Burgomaster Rockox', Jan Steen's 'A Girl Eating Oysters', and Pieter Claesz's 'Still Life with Turkey Pie'. This study indicates that oysters in the analyzed paintings appear as a symbol of multiple meanings such as pleasure, sin, sex, gluttony, lust and monetary passion.

Keywords: Oysters, Aphrodisiac, Gastronomy, Art of Painting, Symbolism

1. INTRODUCTION

Oysters have been part of human nutrition since the Neolithic Age. Mediterraneans have been foraging oyster as a valuable source of food. Mankind also used oysters for sacred purposes due to the precious pearl inside and its shape resembling the woman genitalia, since both are linked to women's fertility (Ateş, 2001; Kuru, 2008). In the ancient era, the Greeks and Romans consumed oysters with great joy. As a symbol of luxury and refined taste that an ancient civilization could demand, a system of breeding oysters was devised by Romans as Varro tells us. Many of the oyster beds that were started by Romans still exist today. Romans considered oysters and also other kinds of shellfish to be great delicacies. Romans who are known with their obsession to eat, used oyster and sea urchin in private feasts to show their appreciation for fine tastes even though they were more modest in their selection of daily food. This contradictory situation is said to be an excuse for Romans to cover their gluttony and vulgarity in their daily habits (Kiple and Ornelas, 1999: 1218).

From ancient times into the twentieth century many food items (e.g. potatoes, artichokes, pistachios, sage etc.) had been considered as aphrodisiacs. According to the first edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1771) aphrodisiacs were 'medicines to increase the quantity of seed', then in 1990 the term was restricted to 'a substance which excites sexual desire'. Whether it is about improving fertility or stimulating the sex drive, the term is always about sexuality and physical love. In ancient times, aphrodisiacs were generally regarded as medical remedies to increase sexual stimulant. Many of the aphrodisiacs in history lost their reputation quite early, but oysters have persisted to be associated with sexuality and eroticism. Its reputation for such properties is generally attributed to their physical resemblance to the female pudenda. Its ability to boost many eggs per spawning and to change sex during a reproductive season strengthens its reputation as a symbol of female qualities. In the second century A.D., a Roman author Juvenal, in one of his satires about the unrestrained behavior of contemporary women reasoned a woman's loss of sexual control to alcohol intoxication and eating of giant oysters in midnight. On the other hand, oysters appeared infrequently among the aphrodisiacs in medical texts. Mainly their aphrodisiacal properties have been better reflected in literature. For example, in a

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comedy staged in 1611, by the London playwright George Chapman, a ‘lover’ in preparation for seduction is to be strengthened with a banquet of oyster-pies, potatoes, skirt roots, eringoes. In the twentieth century, the pioneer British sexologist Havelock Ellis (1859-1939), established a link between ancient era’s medical principle that an aphrodisiac must foremost be nutritious. He speculated that oysters and other shellfish have impact on the sexual appetite due to their nutritious and stimulating qualities. Ellis also claimed that “because of the slimy and moist texture of oyster it doesn’t require much energy to digest and that more energy could be saved for other activities including sexual activity” (Kiple and Ornelas, 1999:1528).

Oyster has taken considerable amount of place in visual arts as a delicacy and strong aphrodisiac over centuries. It represents the sexual sub context mostly in brothel scenes, luxurious feasts and erotic meetings. It sometimes implies a prostitute, sometimes the dangers of female beauty, sometimes human reproduction, sometimes the sexual nature of a relationship between a man and a woman and other times it may imply the earthly pleasures (Carr-Gomm, 2014:240). This article aims to analyze the symbolic meaning of the oyster in different artistic eras and for that purpose it briefly mentions the physical structure and then oysters through world history. In the forthcoming sections, it will investigate the symbolism of oyster over the selected artworks.

2. THE MORPHOLOGICAL STRUCTURE OF OYSTER AND ITS REPRODUCTION

Although, there are many species of oysters, among them only six or seven are used for commercial purposes. Three species of oysters have been or are cultivated in Europe: *Crassostrea angulata*, *C. gigas* and *Ostrea edulis*. Some scientists think that *C. angulata* (Portuguese) and *C. gigas* (Japanese or Pacific) belong to the same species due to their cupped top shelves in shape. The shells look a bit longer, randomly shaped and curvy. These two similar oyster species are to be found in Portugal, Japan and Pacific. For this reason, this type is called Portuguese oyster. Authors proposed that the reason for this resemblance is the journey of the Portuguese oysters to Japan in 16th century to be sticking to the bottom of the Portuguese trade ships. The other type of oyster, *Ostrea edulis* (the flat oyster) has a rounded or oval shell, cemented on the lower valve (deep of left-hand), which is more curved and convex that holds the vital organs of the mollusk. Its upper valve (right-hand) is flat, lives on firm ground in shallow coastal waters down to a depth of 20 m. The length of an adult *Ostrea edulis* is around 10-12 cm. It often occurs in large beds on muddy-sand, muddy-gravel and rocks (Heral and Deslous-Paoli, 1991: 154; Lapègue et al., 2006: 68).



Ostrea edulis’s bivalved shells are joined together through a strong ligament and are sealed by an adductor muscle. This muscle’s flexible nature allows the top shell to open or close. When the creature is dead, the two valves stay open. Every time the oyster opens and closes its valves, it takes in a certain volume of water from which it extracts the nutritional content. They filter phytoplankton and other organic materials from the seawater. By this way, an oyster can process four to 20 liters of seawater in an hour. They sense the slightest vibration in sea or any physical activity and close their shells very tightly. Inside the mollusk, there are organs which function as heart, stomach, liver, kidneys and anus (Toussaint-Samat, 1992: 404).

Oyster’s sexuality and reproduction ways are away from being ordinary. This sea creature changes its sexual character throughout its lifespan. Oyster is a protandric hermaphrodite creature which can be male at times, female at others and can even be both male and female at the same time when required. They function as males early in the spawning season and later change to females before changing to males again. The months which doesn’t include letter ‘R’ in English (May, June, July and August), are the oyster’s reproduction period and in this period they are not eaten (Belge, 2013: 231, Lapègue et al., 2006: 68; Toussaint-Samat, 1992: 404). In their reproductive period, one female oyster can lay between 20 to 100 billions of eggs. The possibility of this immense amount of eggs to meet a male’s sperm is so low that only a few dozens can be fertilized and can grow to adulthood. Both father and mother oyster carry the fertilized eggs for 10 days until the eggs reach the larval stage. At that moment, the parents fulfill their parental duties. The 10-day-old larvae is then released to the sea. The larval oysters have two weeks freedom in which to find some place to fix and settle. During this

time period, they swim, and if they are lucky enough, they avoid the marine predators, cold sea currents, violent storms or oil pollution and they have a chance to grow up (Toussaint-Samat, 1992: 405).

3. THE GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION AND PRODUCTION OF OYSTER

The native European flat oyster, *Ostrea edulis*, occurs naturally from Norway to Morocco in the North-Eastern Atlantic and in the whole Mediterranean Basin. It sticks to the solid ground that does not move. It lives in water basins with high saturation of salt and has a very low tolerance against muddy waters. (Lapègue et al., 2006: 68). Before diseases, which comprised the range of the flat species particularly on the Atlantic coast, *Ostrea edulis*, was abundant in several European countries: from Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, France, Great Britain and Ireland in the north; and to the south Atlantic coasts of France, Italy, Yugoslavia and Greece (Heral and Deslous-Paoli, 1991: 154).

Until the 17th century, shallow bays and estuaries around the coasts of Europe had been abounded with oysters that could be picked by hand in many places at low water. The abundance of oysters resulted in a prosperous oyster fishery (Heral and Deslous-Paoli, 1991: 161). During 18th and 19th centuries, fishing effort led to over-exploitation, failing recruitment, and destruction of European natural beds, which were also affected by extremely cold winters. Shortage in oysters forced managers to develop cultural practices aimed at sustaining a repletion and reseeded program. Regulations were made to limit the fishing season and advanced culture methods were developed. These programs and regulations resulted with the increase in oyster production. However, their exploitation by the fishermen continued and two diseases caused by two parasitic epizooties in 20th century (during 1960's) caused a drastic decline of nearly 30,000 tones. Consequently, Europe shifted first to the rearing of the Portuguese cupped oyster (*C.angulata*) and then to the Pacific cupped oyster (*C.gigas*) (Lapègue et al., 2006: 69-70).

4. THE HISTORY OF OYSTER

Oysters were historically consumed fresh and raw and eaten on the half shell. Long before the Romans and Greeks, mankind favored oysters. Oysters provided basic protein in the diet of peoples who lived on sea coasts and beside lakes. Humans first gathered this shellfish, from the shores of Gaul in particular. Then they started hunting and fishing these water creatures. Even though they were not big sources of food such as a salmon or a halibut out of the sea, they were easily accessible for people that they could feed their families simply by taking a walk on the beach. Today, extraordinary mounds formed by excessive quantities of empty shells are found all over the world and many of those date back to Upper Paleolithic. In the Scandinavian countries and all down the west coast of the America, the beaches are littered with heaps of shells. (Belge, 2013: 230-31; Kipple, 2010: 26; Toussaint-Samat, 1992: 384).

From the Upper Paleolithic onwards, oysters and other shellfish have been used in trade all over the world. The contents of those shellfish were used as nourishment. The empty shells were also used. They were the first coinage, the first jewels, the first implements and the first cooking vessels used by man. Around the Mediterranean basin, one of the first decorative motifs used on ceramics was made by pressing a small shell on damp clay. The Greeks who are the inventors of both democracy and philosophy, used oyster shells for political purposes. They sometimes used oyster shells as means of voting. They took a flat oyster shell, *an ostrakon*, and wrote on it the names of persons considered undesirable and suitable to exile. (Toussaint-Samat, 1992: 385-86).

Oysters and other shellfish were not eaten by the Egyptians and the Jews unless they had only just been caught since the relatively hot climate made it dangerous to eat. The Hebrews classed them among unclean foods. Both in the archaic and the classical period in Greece, Greeks ate and enjoyed oysters and other varieties of seafood. They liked crawfish, oysters, shrimps and prawns and sea urchins (Toussaint-Samat, 1992: 386).

The Greeks and Romans were remarkably fond of oysters and ate them at the beginning of a banquet. For this reason, Athenian epicures called oysters 'the gastronomic prelude to the supper'. They were often served raw and then opened by a skilled slave on the table, in presence of the guests, whose experienced eyes greedily sought the light purple net which, according to them, surrounds the fattest and best (Soyer, 1977: 243).

Romans' great passion was for oysters. Pliny quotes an experienced connoisseur and a real expert on oysters called Mucianus who could distinguish and compare the flavors of ten different kinds of oysters of different provenance for sale in the Forum market. Pliny also mentions the oysters of Médoc. He attributed the fame of Lucrine Lake oysters to the proconsul Sergius Orata. Very soon after the conquest of Gaul in 51 BC, oyster farming became one of the country's major resources. Natural oyster beds all along the Gaulish coast provided excellent specimens. After four centuries of Romanization, oyster farming reached a remarkable degree of

perfection and technical expertise. The poet Ausonius, provides much information on Gaulish oysters and their aquaculture. He divides Gaul geographically according to the quality of oysters while Ceasar divides Gaul into three nations. According to his whimsical and alternate geographical segmentation oysters of Médoc are the best, next are the Provence and third are the oysters of Armorica. He describes the taste of Médoc oysters as ‘...full fat and snowy white, and with their sweet juice most delicately mingle some flavor of the sea touched with a fine taste of salt.’ (Delemen, 2003: 54; Dalby, 2003: 246; Toussaint-Samat, 1992: 387-88).

Juvenal says that oysters were a rich man’s dish and wealth was demonstrated by the consumption in big amount: a hundred. Oysters are hard to open but easy to eat, Epicharmus rightly says. According to Galen, they had the softest flesh of any shellfish. But some (e.g. Seneca) believed that they were indigestible. The oyster was the only common shellfish that was customarily opened by the eater and eaten raw. In ancient world, Anthimus said that oysters were advisable only when they were good and fresh, otherwise they were no better than poison. Romans were able to preserve oysters -presumably in brine, in barrels or earthenware jars- to avoid spoiling during journeys. The cookbook Apicius, a collection of Roman cookery recipes dating back to 4th or early 5th century, mentions a way of packing fresh oysters to send over a shorter distance. The cookbook gives instructions for ‘making last’ by washing them and the container in vinegar (Dalby, 2003: 246).

In ancient Rome, men of exquisite delicacy and matured taste, caused oysters to be served at every repast. The oysters were very expensive. At this epoch a borriche (a sort of basket) of oysters was worth of one hundred sesterces while five liters of olive oil or two loaves of bread costed only one sesterce. Though it is easy to conclude that poor never tasted them unless they lived by the coasts. At Rome oysters were served with a seasoning of pepper and alisander, mixed with egg yolks, vinegar, gram, oil, wine and a little honey. They were preserved in a vase smeared with pitch, washed with vinegar and hermetically closed. When eaten raw they had fine quality and were easy to digest. They were sought to open appetite due to the salty sea water in them. However when they were cooked, they became hard, more tough and consequently indigestible (Soyer, 1977: 242-44).

After its peak period in the fourth century which was the time of Roman occupation, oyster farming started to decrease with the barbarian invasions. The gastronomic history of oysters remained silent for more than 1000 years. Oyster did not re-appear till the 17th century on the tables of distinguished personages. But the natural beds kept on providing oysters to coast-dwelling people. In large inland cities oysters and other shellfish were difficult and expensive to bring to market fresh. Though pickled oysters were not to be despised. In Middle Ages oysters were still being pickled (Toussaint-Samat, 1992: 396). Oysters seem to have invaded Paris in the seventeenth century. At the time of Louis XIV there said to have been at least 2000 oyster sellers in Paris. The most prized oysters were still those of Médoc. The verses or green oysters of Marennes were also known. Henri IV, in his day, got indigestion from eating oysters. Marshal Junot used to eat 300 oysters, never fewer, every morning to keep himself fit. It is worth to note here that he died because of insanity (Toussaint-Samat, 1992: 396).

After thoughtless plundering of oyster beds and a series of destructive storms in 18th century, oyster production finished from 100 million to only 830,000. In 1852 new re-seeding methods were applied and became successful at the beginning. But after a few years it failed because of bad weather, epizootic disease, inexperience and the haste of novice oyster farmers. The European flat oyster, *Ostrea edulis*, had less tolerance and was very susceptible to parasites. Thus, the production dropped drastically. Consequently, Portuguese oyster, *C. gigas*, which had been imported accidentally from India to Europe in the 15th century by Portuguese merchant vessels, were more robust against parasites. These oysters proved highly resistant to the virus and have acclimatized very well in Europe (Toussaint-Samat, 1992: 397).

Today, China is by far the largest oyster producer worldwide, with 80% of total world production, followed by Korea, Japan, the USA and the EU. The French market is the largest market for oysters in the EU (Eurostat, March 2013).

5. OYSTER IN PAINTING

As a part of humankind’s diet for decades, oyster is often depicted in art of painting. The fact that the oyster and seashell familia living in the sea, their resemblance to the female genitalia and oyster’s precious pearl content inspired the humanity to assign it different meanings (Kuru, 2008: 113). One of these meanings is that the oyster carries the intense divine powers of the water, moon and the femininity. Furthermore, the resemblance of the pearl which develops in oyster to the fetus calls for the oyster to be a symbol of fertility. In

Sumerian, Babylonian, Egyptian, Chinese, Tibetan and Hindu civilizations, the oyster has been a symbol of fertility, femininity, prosperity, reincarnation and protection from evil eye (Kuru, 2008: 113).

Humankind has always been mesmerized by the development of the impeccable shape of the pearl inside the oyster. This miraculous phenomenon is associated with the woman's ability of reproduction. For that matter the pearl was frequently depicted as a divine female form. The pearl inside the shells also symbolizes the divine beauty. According to the legend of the pearl-bearing oyster told by Pliny, Pliny assumed and repeated by Medieval and Renaissance scholars, the oyster was supposed to have been impregnated by dew entering into the shell valves when they opened at certain times of the year. This legend is quite parallel to the biblical exegesis of Virgin Mary's conception with the Holy Spirit. Therefore the shells of the oyster are thought to symbolize the Virgin Mary (Farn, 1986: 8-10; Malaguzzi, 2008: 170).

Another symbolic meaning of oyster comes from the goddess of beauty Aphrodite (Venus). In Theogonia of Hesiodos (166), Aphrodite was born from the foam of the blood dripping from the Sky God Uranus's castrated sexual organ. Hesiod says that the god's testicles fell into the sea and from the foam of the sea Aphrodite was born. The etymological root of 'Aphrodite' comes from the word "aphros" in Greek which means foam. The erotic origin signified by the word "Aphrodite" also lies beneath the word "aphrodisiac". In Greek mythology the goddess of beauty, love and fertility, Aphrodite, was drifted away to the shores of Cyprus in an oyster shell. For that reason, throughout Ancient Era, Medieval Age, Renaissance and Baroque Era, the oyster shell symbolizes the birth of the feminine beauty and Venus's creation (De Girolami Cheney, 1987: 135; De Rynck, 2012: 86). According to this belief, the shells are the shelter that protects love (in other words Aphrodite). The connection between the oyster and love is explained with an alternative way of symbolism: the edible part of the oyster is secured tightly by the shells and the fact that it is so difficult to open the shells of the oyster which symbolizes the power of love. Love is, just like the succulent mollusk inside the oyster, is difficult to reach and thus requires effort. Only the ones who give that effort and patiently overcome the hardship are worthy of finding love (Malaguzzi, 2008: 170).



Figure1: Sandro Botticelli, The Birth of Venus, ca 1485, tempera on panel, Uffizi, Florence

Sandro Botticelli, an artist from Florence, who was inspired by the legend of “Birth of Venus” (Figure 1) from an ancient Greek gospel depicts the birth of Venus (*Aphrodite in Greek*) in one of his most famous works. In 15th century the Italian art focused on restoring the fame of the classical myths of the Greek and Roman mythology with great passion. For Italians who have adored Roman and Greek mythology, these myths were more than quality bed time stories. They used to believe these myths were explaining some deep and intricate explanations of the universe. In this painting which was sponsored by the Medici family, Botticelli depicts Venus’s approach to shore and birth of divine beauty. Venus appears from the sea on an oyster shell which was pushed along by the gods of wind, Zephyr and Aura. When she is in the process of landing, one of the Graces is there to cover her with her cape (Gombrich, 2013: 264).

Oysters were prized for their alleged aphrodisiac powers and sexual content, as one can see in many Dutch paintings, especially in the 17th century. In this era the oyster was in focus of many paintings. Oyster and many other food objects, parallel to this era’s approach to art, were used to give moral messages with their erotic content. Undoubtedly, oyster suits best for an artist to give moral messages and depict scenes from daily life (De Girolami Cheney, 1987: 135). Before going into the representation of oyster in the art of paintings, it is of great necessity to explain the developments in that era and the “*genre art*”.

The economical, political and social changes which took place in 16th and 17th century in the territory of the modern Netherlands had enormous effect on art as well. Before that the art of painting used to portray scenes from Bible and saints' lives to explain the principles of religion through visual ways to the illiterate society. After the Eighty Years War, Netherlands gained its independence from Spain and the territory was separated as Dutch Republic at north where majority were Protestants and Habsburg Netherlands at south where majority were Roman Catholics. The Treaty of Münster gave Dutch important trade advantages. Dutch ships owned and operated by East and West India Companies created an emerging and flourishing economy. Many food and trade items were exchanged. Due to the improved commercial routes and the economical welfare, the country got very prosperous. Meantime, Calvinism became the country’s official religion. Unlike Roman Catholics, Protestants objected to depictions of saints and biblical scenes on their church walls. That meant that Dutch painters were not commissioned to provide devotional art, as they had before the Reformation. As a result, the market for religious art declined dramatically. Due to the increasing prosperity, members of merchant class and aristocracy had money to spend and their consumerism contributed to an abundance of visual art during the Golden Age. Municipal institutions, taverns, inns, shops, offices were ornamented with sculptures and paintings as interior decoration. Painting was no longer primarily the preserve of church or aristocracy or even the very wealthy. A remarkable number of pictures of extraordinary quality were produced during the Dutch Golden Age (Akdeniz Ay, 2016: 94; Barnes and Rose, 2002: 14; Şentürk, 2012: 142-143; Buchholz et.al., 2012: 214-215; Gombrich, 2013; Farhting, 2014: 222-225).

While some well-off merchants commissioned landscapes or marine pictures, some preferred scenes of daily life (known as genre paintings). In addition to landscape and genre painting, some patrons favored still-life pictures in which elaborate arrangements of food and drink items were displayed. Food and drink were one of the greatest sources of the new Dutch art market. Excessive still-life images of food and drink, portraits of people with fruits and drinking utensils and images of people surrounded by food and drink in taverns, markets, kitchens and festive occasions were highly prized for many reasons: to impress visitors of the wealth mercantile and aristocracy, to possess high social status of the nobility, to imply the owner’s knowledge about the sumptuous raw and cooked foods. The pictures also served as “moral messages” and “warnings” against luxury, family structures, disconformity and many other sinful activities (Akdeniz Ay, 2016: 94; Barnes and Rose, 2002: 14; Şentürk, 2012: 142-143; Buchholz et.al., 2012: 214-215; Gombrich, 2013; Farhting, 2014: 222-225).

Oyster meal had become the focus of many genre paintings of the 17th Dutch genre paintings. Oyster was frequently the principal -not the only- food depicted as eaten, serving as a vehicle for moral comment and just as often a token for erotic intent. The new Dutch genre paintings in 17th century were usually not religious in nature due to previously mentioned reasons. Depictions of stories from mythology was very popular as well as other genre scenes (e.g. people in their everyday surroundings). The Ancient Greek and Roman mythologies were one of the richest sources of inspiration for many painters. If the sources of the oyster meal lie in the seventeenth-century Dutch mythological art, then the subject was generally “Feast of Gods”. This theme was employed by many Flemish painters: Hendrik van Balen the Elder, Cornelis van Haarlem and Frans Floris. ‘Feasts of Gods’ may take any of the feast scenes in classical mythology: *The Wedding of Thetis and Peleus*, *The Marriage of Cupid and Psyche*, *The Feast of Theseus and Acheloiis*, *The Wedding of Bacchus and Ariadne*, *Bacchanal etc.* A Feast of the gods scene provided artists with an opportunity to portray an array of nude

figures in a variety of poses around a sumptuous table. In these pieces the Olympian gods are generally depicted as they are banqueting, merry making and oysters are always clearly visible (De Girolami Cheney, 1987: 135).

In "*The Wedding of Thetis and Peleus*" by Hendrik van Balen the Elder, a very familiar wedding scene was depicted: Thetis, who was raised by Hera, was an object of affection of Zeus and Poseidon. However, when they realized that the child who was to be born from Thetis would be stronger than its father, they gave up on their affection and decided to marry her to a mortal man. Thetis had not agreed to marry a mortal yet but she ended up unwillingly marrying one. The wedding took place in the table of gods in Olympus. Eris, the goddess of jealousy, who was not invited to the wedding to avoid any troubles, got angry when she found out. She appeared at the wedding uninvited and threw a golden apple on the table chanting "for the most beautiful". A competition was taken between the three goddesses (Hera, Athena and Aphrodite) to possess the apple. Aphrodite promised Helen to Paris, the referee of the competition, in return of her judgement favoring herself and thus became the winner of the competition. The relationship of Paris and Helen would be the reason of the longest war in history, War of Troy (Erhat, 2007: 286).



Figure 2: Hendrik van Balen the Elder, *The Feast of The Gods* early 17th century, oil on canvas, Angers, Musee des Beaux-Arts.

Van Balen has portrayed the Olympian deities in a landscape with musicians playing while others drink, eat and make merry. Here the Olympian gods are a little bit difficult to identify because the figures are less idealized and their unique symbols for identification are barely used. Hermes, wearing a winged hat on the center of the table reaches for an oyster from a plate as a sign for his abundant love affair with the naked nymph sitting on his right. The principal god on the table might be Jupiter (Zeus) or Neptune (Poseidon) as he holds a nautilus which was a typical ceremonial cup of that time and the person who holds it becomes the main figure among others (Malaguzzi, 2008: 36).



Detail from Figure 2

Here, the gods are represented while enjoying all kinds of bodily pleasures at a wedding celebration. These bodily pleasures have been represented through extremely lavish food and drink, nudity, eroticism and music. In the painting the gods are seated in a very little physical distance with one another at a richly laden table. Beautiful nymphs serving the deities and the muses playing music for the guests intensifies the sexual atmosphere of the scene. The oysters and artichokes on the silver platter on the table emphasizes the erotic atmosphere due to their aphrodisiac qualities. The lobster located right next to the platter is another luxurious commodity of pleasure of that time. It reminds us that the marriage of two marine deities

is being celebrated. The melon standing right next to the lobster is another exotic commodity, which can be seen only on the wealthy dining scenes after the emergence of colonization. Melons were renowned in antiquity for their sweetness. In this case there is a symbolic reference to the sweetness of the conjugal union. Right behind the melon the cake, lit by candles, underscores the nuptial nature of the scene. Sweet dishes like this cake are traditionally associated with the rituals that celebrate joyful occasions in life. In art, cakes generally represent the relationship between couples or their marriage. One very significant example is Leandro Bassano's "*Cana Wedding*". In that wedding scene, in which we can see Mary and Jesus as guests, the cake that stands on the table on the left side of the painting (Detail from Figure 3) symbolizes the happy unification of the couple (Malaguzzi, 2008: 36).



Figure 3: Leandro Bassano (1557-1622), *The Wedding at Cana*, Oil on canvas, Vicenza, Museo Civico Palazzo Chiericati



Detail from Figure 3



Figure4: Peter Paul Rubens and Jan Brueghel the Elder, *The Feast of Acheloüs*, ca.1614-15, oil on canvas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

As said before the Feast of Gods theme became a popular subject in 17th century Dutch painting. About 1614-15 Brueghel collaborated with Rubens on "*The Feast of Acheloüs*" (Figure 4), a banquet of the gods that is considerably larger than earlier Flemish paintings. In this painting, a story is depicted from Ovid's "*Metamorphoses*". Theseus, son of the king of Athens, was returning home after his adventures in Crete and Calydon when he came to the rain-swollen river called Acheloüs. The river god advised Theseus and his traveling companions against crossing and invited them to join him at a table. The guests took their places around the table and the nymphs served them wine and food. Theseus was entertained in 'the river-god's dark dwelling, built of porous pumice and rough tufa: the floor was damp with soft moss, conchs and purple shells paneled the ceiling'. During the banquet Theseus paused for a moment and asked Acheloüs to tell him about the islands in the river, which used to be naiads. Acheloüs corrected him as he said it was not an island that laid ahead, they were five in fact! One day when Acheloüs found out that he was not invited to the feast that takes place in that land he got furious and floods the land for days which divided the land into five islands. They were called Echinada Islands (Ovid, 8: 547-590; Erhat, 2014: 284). During the banquet, Acheloüs also told Theseus the story how he transformed himself into a savage bull to fight the brave Hercules, who eventually laid him low and broke off one of his horns, which the naiads filled with fruit and flowers at the left corner of the painting (Woollett and Van Suchtelen, 2006: 60-62).



Rubens and Bruegel creates a literally fantastic scene in this painting. The water lilies, sea shells and fishes located on the floor of the cave which can be seen on the right side of the painting emphasize the scene's aquatic surrounding. The figures are seated at the glamorous dining table on which oysters, lobsters, pies, a huge roasted game, plenty of wine and salt are placed. The host of this luxurious event, Achelous is located right in the middle of the painting. He is depicted as telling the story about the islands pointing with his left hand raised towards the island's direction. On the right side of the painting we see the flamboyant wine glasses which are served to the guests (Woollett ve Van Suchtelen, 2006: 60-62).

Oyster meal carried specific meanings in 17th century Dutch painting. It's legendary power as an aphrodisiac made it a good subject and focus of many genre paintings. Frans Francken II, who was one of the foremost proponents of genre painting, depicted an oyster orgy of cavaliers and prostitutes in the Antwerp nine-time burgomaster's, Nicolas Rockox's, house in the 1630's (Figure5). In this painting Rockox's famous art collection and the Antique busts are represented on the walls. (Bendiner, 2004: 138-139).



Figure 5: Frans Francken II, 1630-35, Supper at the House of Burgomaster Rockox, oil on canvas, Alte Pinakothek - Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Germany – Munich.

In the left-front perspective we can see a silver platter full of oysters. The woman on the left is sipping her wine, the male figure right next to her is reaching for the oysters with the fork in his hand. While the woman figure appears to be eating an oyster, the man on the right end is passing his wine glass to the servant for more. Aside from the oysters there is a meat pie with rich filling which is taken as a luxurious commodity for that time. The pot of salt standing right next to the right arm of the man and the lemons close to the oysters gives us the information that oysters are eaten together with salt and lemons. The rich and fresh display of foods, exotic birds, drinking vessels, utensils, servant, framed and hinged panels, busts depicted in the painting express the mayor's abundant resources. The fresh and uncooked state of the oysters suggests the guests' refinement, their social status and also overtones the erotic atmosphere as a food believed to be an aphrodisiac and associated with Venus's birth. The meat pie (most probably made of game) depicted on the table expresses

the wealth of the household that could afford to possess and staff a large oven and other baking technologies required for the production of such advanced foodstuffs. Such pies required time and patience to cook (McFadden, 2014: 43). Furthermore, the raw oyster which can only be seen on the tables of wealthy minority shows the social status of the crowd enjoying luxurious goods. The other figures are depicted as conversing and enjoying the music.



Detail from Figure 5

In contrast with the figures enjoying earthly pleasures (food, drink, chastity etc.) of the visible world, biblical and classical images of the invisible world appear on the walls of the gallery. Rubens' *'Samson and Delilah'* above the fireplace tells us about the dangers of female sexuality. Jan Massy's painting of *'The Money Changer and His Wife'* tells us the prodigality and venality. A painting of St Jerome in painting tells us of penance to come (Bendiner, 2004: 139). Actually, these identifiable paintings were not hanging but kept inside a chest with a lock due to their value at the time of Rockox's administration. It is possible for the major that most of the pieces were never displayed (Hand et.al., 2006: 110). Through painting a general representation of Rockox's collection rather than an actual situation, Frans Francken creates an allegory of the mortal world in the foreground and the divine world in the background. This situation is a natural outcome of Francken II and his era's artistic style. The characteristics of that style is the contrast between the luxurious life style, abundance of the rare commodities, joyful crowds and the religious themes that gives moral messages. As mentioned before, as Dutch gained their independence against the Catholic Spanish reign, many Catholic churches had been looted, vandalized and destroyed. Unlike the Catholics, the Protestants objected to depictions of the saints and biblical scenes as idolatrous and whitewashed their church walls instead, living them largely unadorned. The Protestants removed images of both Old or New Testament figures from the church. This societal change meant that Dutch painters were not commissioned to provide ornamentation, as they had before the Reformation. As a result, the market for religious art declined dramatically. Many Dutch and Flemish painters developed and pioneered new styles of painting. Some chose portraits of patrons, some painted landscapes, etc. Some like Frans Francken II chose to set religious images in the background and more secular and earthly images in the foreground of the painting (Barnes and Rose, 2002: 9)

On the other hand in the 17th century the port cities of Netherlands started getting richer because of the improving sea commerce. Exotic food, drinks, spices, new animal species and equipments started flowing to Holland from all over the world. Now richer-than-ever Dutch bourgeois class showed great demand for the paintings of these exotic goods, as well as the goods themselves (Barnes and Rose, 2002: 10). While the art of painting started channelizing on subjects on other than religion, it was benefiting on the economical developments in the country. The artists were using art to reflect the earthly pleasures of the goods while placing religious scenes in the perspective to make moral implications. The fatal theme and the religious eternal

theme's allegoric expression was reflecting the contrast between life and death, the truth the eye could see and beyond of that visible truth.

Francken II's painting reflects all the factors aforementioned changes in the understanding of art. In the foreground, the characters who are after earthly pleasures and in the background the religious context reflected by holly scenes aims to remind the modern humans the virtues of the divine life. The art with moral conscience is taken as a criticism to the material world and the fixation on mundane pleasures. In the painting of 'Samson and Delilah' on the wall, Samson, the legendary hero of the Israelites' being captured, and blinded by the Palestinians because of the trap set by Delilah, the woman he was in love with, while he was asleep. Samson's passion for women was more important to him than his vow of godly devotion. This holly story reveals that even a powerful man with supernatural strength could end up with a tragedy as a consequence of his fatal cohorts. The lesson to see in the story is that, the more we allow ourselves by the glamour and allurements of sin (in this case sexual sin), the more we become spiritually blind. Sexual sin may lead to deadly consequences. "The Money Changer and His Wife" one of the most famous paintings of 15th century, is a depiction of a pawnbroker who is counting his money and his wife with a bible on one hand yet she watches her husband instead of focusing on the bible. The woman's fixed look on the pearls and the money which represents the earthly pleasures, has an allegoric resemblance with the characters of Francken II's allegoric composition in the painting.



Figure 6: Young Woman Eating Oysters, Jan Steen, (1658-60), Panel, Mauritshuis, The Hague

Another artist who is renowned for his works reflecting the simple happy daily life of the Dutch people in 17th century is Jan Steen (1626-1679). Jan Steen is the artist who led the art of genre to proficiency. Just like many artists of his time, he wasn't able to make a living solely on art, thus he started a brewery in Delft and opened a tavern at his house. This gave him the opportunity to observe people and see the funny side of them (Gombrich, 2013: 28). Steen's unique humor in his paintings is considered as a comedy of manners. Throughout his life Steen, who was a lifelong Catholic, has made around 700 paintings which included personal portraits, religious and mythological paintings. His favorite subject was the daily-life-scenes of the Dutch people including the bourgeois and he painted generally moralizing scenes of their domestic lives. (Buchholz et.al, 2012: 250). There is a moral message or a symbolic sub context in many of Steen's works. The depicted emotions of his figures like joy, pleasure, mockery and happiness in the paintings show the audience how ordinary people go through those emotions and also how they should not behave.

In "The Woman Eating Oysters" among many food objects on the table the oyster is the most significant. The oysters, which are frequently painted by Flemish artists, have been famous for their aphrodisiac properties since the Ancient Era and they appear as the representation of the sensual desires. Furthermore, oysters were recommended by the physicians of that period to their patients for their strengthening, energizing and stamina boosting properties. Jan Steen's pretty prostitute in the center of this piece while sprinkling salt on the oyster on her left hand, is giving the audience a coquettish smile. She sprinkles salt on the food of love to make her offer even spicier. The way that she is looking at us and the way she smiles is interpreted as an invitation to the

spectator to join her in sampling this tasty seafood with its aphrodisiac effects. The two figures in the background, a male and a female, with their back facing us gives the impression that they are preparing more oysters in the kitchen for us. Or even maybe they are already influenced by the oysters and getting ready for the next stage.



Details from Figure 6

The way the objects on the table are spread out shows us the superior technique of Steen and his beautiful still-life. There is a Delft blue pitcher next to a glass of wine, opened oysters on a silver tray, a torn off piece of bread and a little mound of salt and peppercorns spilling out of a paper cone. The glass of wine and the presence of the bed indicate girl's intention and strengthen the erotic atmosphere reflected by the oysters.

Another oyster included painting is an example of a Dutch still-life dating to 17th century, the Dutch Golden Age. The fishing and trade efforts in Holland resulted with great commercial prosperity in 17th century. Described as 'the best fed population in Europe,' the dutch enjoyed a high standard of eating. Even the poor were supplied with decent amount of food. The vast empire created a large affluent society which could demand for exotic goods and luxuries that were imported from all over the world. In addition to the economic welfare, the Protestant Reformation and the loss of patronage by the Catholic Church, the art market for more secular pieces increased. In order to meet the interests and demand of collectors' and the wealthy bourgeois, artists shifted their focus from biblical and mythological subjects to landscapes, animals and plants. Such still life paintings of the artists both served as a visual learning tool and a record of the inventory. The new species of flowers, fruits, vegetables, animals that are imported from all over the world are depicted in paintings also to provide an affirmation of wealth and abundance of the bourgeoisie. Lastly, in line with the Calvinist doctrine, still life paintings were also taken as opportunities for symbolism and moral lessons. In the midst of abundance the art contained warnings against frivolity and excess. The appetizing oysters with juicy meats, the tasty, sweet fruits that offer great delight in the paintings symbolized welfare. Those images that aimed to seduce the audience, served as a reminder to the viewer that the death is inevitable, the freshness is temporary and everything will eventually die. (Farthing, 2014: 225; Krondl, 2014: 168; Potter, 2010: 178-79).

Food and drink were major subject matter of still life paintings. The content of the food and drink varied very much. Some encompassed simple foodstuffs- a herring, ham, cheese, bread roll, beer or wine-, some luxurious and ostentatious images -expensive fruits, lobsters, oysters, Venetian style glasses and serving pieces made of precious metals. Some contained tobacco pipes, some braziers of burning coals, etc. Fine artists of the period painted these, among them Pieter Claesz, a master of visual feasts (Barnes and Rose, 2002: 12; Potter, 2010:

179). Very little is known about Claesz's life. His work was widely imitated, copied, and reproduced during his lifetime (Potter, 2010: 179).



Figure 7: Pieter Claesz. Still Life with Turkey Pie, 1627, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

In '*Still Life with Turkey Pie*' (Figure 7) the arrangement of various foods engages the senses and makes it an inviting dynamic banquet table. The orange blossom in the turkey's beak suggests that it is a possible celebration meal of a wedding. The oysters that were thought to be an aphrodisiac, suggest the idea of physical love. They symbolize a love nest for the couples to union. Salt and pepper poured out of a rolled paper cone are necessary for the proper consumption of the oysters, and they are symbols of spicy aspects of married life. The half peeled lemon seem to suggest the predestined sentimental union of the two individuals. Meat pies decorated with turkey feathers was a treat for special occasions, as were imported lemons and olives (Bendiner, 2004: 184; Malaguzzi, 2008: 160). There is even a symbolism of birds in Dutch still life paintings. The Dutch word '*vogel* (bird)' was often synonymous with the phallus, '*voglen* (to bird)' was a euphemism for sexual intercourse. For this reason the birds used in Dutch paintings were mostly associated with lust (Wieseman, 2014: 78).

The turkey that became familiar to the Europeans only after the discovery of America, was symbolizing the welfare of the Dutch tables. Although birds like turkey, swan and peacock were counted as tasty meals by the Dutch, they were purely used as decorative and aesthetic purposes for the rich tables. However, we know that though it is rare, these birds were eaten as delicacies. Mostly the meat of these birds was used as fillings in pies. Other than the meat, exotic spices as cinnamon, clover and ginger were mixed with the bird meat and covered with the dough and baked (Kronl, 2014). The baked pie was then decorated with the torn-off feathers and head of the bird and presented as if it was alive (McFadden, 2014: 43; Bocuse and Pinard, 2009: 26).

There are many signs of wealth on the table: the chinaware, Persian carpet, olives and lemons that are obviously not native to Holland and a wine glass that is made of nautilus shell. The luxurious commodities are not in the painting only to underline the impermanence of material richness. The spiral skin of the lemon, cracked nut and walnut shells represents a journey from the outer and material world to inner and more spiritual world. Likewise, the empty oyster shells imply the temporariness of life and mortality.

6. CONCLUSION

Since classical times, oyster has been considered a delicacy to taste. It was thought that in order to increase one's appetite, oysters should be eaten before lunch or dinner. In his *Natural History*, Pliny speaks of oyster as "the palm and pleasure of the table". An Epicurean suggestion says "*Does your appetite ever seem to fail? Do dishes lose their flavor? Then, try some oysters!*". In ancient medicine, oyster was not just an appetizer before

the meals but also a digestive component that eases the stomach after heavy meals. Also the calcaire content of the oyster shell was used to cure the skin irritations of infants, ulcer and wounds (De Cheney, 1987: 155).

Throughout history, oysters was thought to be an aphrodisiac and associated with sexuality and eroticism. European art has employed oyster frequently as a subject of numerous anecdotes but mainly as a symbol of fertility, pleasure and sex. As the goddess of love and beauty, Aphrodite, sailed to Cyprus on an oyster shell, oysters were associated with Aphrodite and her erotic origin. Oysters became the suggestive of sensuality, female beauty and physical love. Sandro Boticelli in his “The Birth of Venus”, the main theme is Aphrodite (Venus) as she approaches to the shore on an oyster shell. She was pushed along by the gods of winds and her nudity is about to covered by one of the Graces.

Oysters were a popular food item for many painters as a symbol of sexuality and merry making. 17th century Dutch painters employed many ‘Feast of the Gods’ examples that served as a model for merry company. In these paintings, the Olympian Gods are feasting for a specific occasion (“The Wedding of Peleus and Thetis”, “The Marriage of Cupid and Psyke”, “The Feast of Acheloüs”, “The Wedding of Bacchus and Ariadne”, Bacchanal etc.), merry making and oysters are generally visible in the scene. These paintings include mostly naked or half-naked gods, nymphs, satires and mortals gathered in an open space and feasting. Gods are accompanied by music, wine and exotic food and oyster is an essential part of these scenes with scattered shells all over the ground. Oyster covers a relative small portion of the painting among other shellfish (lobster, muscles, shrimp etc.) and luxurious delicacies (artichoke, melon and sweets). Fine artists of the period painted ‘Feast of the Gods’ theme, among them Hendrick van Balen II’s works are some of the prominent. In “Feast of Gods” by Hendrik van Balen II, oysters are used to intensify the erotic atmosphere in the scene. The nude Olympian Gods who are seated around sumptuous banquet tables, are merrymaking with oysters, wine, artichokes, lobster, music, etc.

The symbolism of oysters and their sexual tone in the paintings continued to be employed in genre paintings as well. Oyster was not only used in gods’ tables but also at the dinners of wealthy Dutchmen as depicted by Frans Francken II in his “Dinner at Burgomaster Rockox’s Home”. With the change in the understanding of art, it grows out of religion and begins to reflect scenes from daily life. The commercial prosperity of the period and the demand for exotic goods and luxuries started to dominate the art market. In addition, the Protestant Reformation changed art in a secular way. The scenes of daily life appeared in paintings. Daily scenes of people who are eating, drinking, merry making and flirting in an excessively joyful manner are used as moral lessons to remind the audience the divine world. Through the figures who are after their senses and enjoying earthly pleasures of ephemeral, are warned against frivolity and excess. In this context oysters with their aphrodisiac and appetizing attributes appeared to be a perfect item to symbolize the luxurious and over consumption and the denial of the spiritual realm of humanity. Especially in “genre-art” (Jan Steen’s “The Woman Who is Eating Oyster”) a moral message is aimed to be conveyed over the oyster.

Once covering a relatively small space in the composition of painting, oysters, in time began to gain popularity and installed in the center of the works as primary objects. Especially in still-life paintings, the oysters has become an object that symbolizes physical love, marriage, arousal of senses, wealth and luxury.

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