

## Matters of Taste: Pieter Aertsen's Market Scenes, Eating Habits, and Pictorial Rhetoric in the Sixteenth Century

THE MARKET scenes and kitchen pieces by Pieter Aertsen (1508–75) occupy an important place in the history of both Netherlandish art and of still life. They are among the first large-scale paintings to devote attention to the object as subject—to food as the main theme of the picture. In his market scene in Berlin (Gemaldegalerie, Berlin-Dahlem; fig. 1; pl. I), vegetables and fruits are piled before our eyes, each food competing for our attention. Although in this respect such pictures have much in common with still-life paintings, this genre did not exist as such in the middle of the sixteenth century. Fruit had figured prominently in many paintings of an earlier date, for instance in devotional images like Quinten Massys's *Madonna and Child* (Musée du Louvre, Paris; fig. 2). The depiction of fruit, and in other paintings sustenance such as bread, butter, and wine, often has the quality of a still life, especially if objects are displayed on a table in front of Mary and her child, but these motifs are only accessory to the religious figures and lack any visual dominance.

When Aertsen's market scenes and kitchen pieces first emerged about 1550, they must have shocked the audience by their appearance as well as by their sheer size. His *Meat Stall* (Universitets Konstsamling, Uppsala; fig. 3), for example, measures more than one meter high and one and one-half meters wide. Moreover, we can observe in the display of the inanimate objects a discomforting and even aggressive quality. This impression is due to the ruthless realism with which the meat, vegetables, and fruits are depicted and to the compositional device of piling them in the immediate foreground, in a close-up of market wares and cooking ingredients. By these means, the beholder is addressed as the intended buyer and consumer of the offerings and is invited to "fall for" their attractions. The marketable and consumable quality of these foods—consumable in both

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A version of this paper was presented at the Annual Conference of the College Art Association, Washington, D C, February 1991, in the session "The Object as Subject"

a real and an aesthetic sense—is an essential feature of their character. It is, therefore, legitimate to ask to what extent these pictorial offerings relate to what people actually ate and to explore the function of the appeal to the beholder's appetite. While pursuing these matters in some detail, I will concentrate on Aertsen's market scenes in which vegetables and fruits dominate, comparing his visual offerings with historical data on food consumption. I will leave his "meat pieces," such as the one in Uppsala (fig. 3), aside because the available data on the consumption of meat are as yet less specific. In the second part of this article, I will approach the question of the marketable and consumable quality of the offered foods from the point of view of pictorial rhetoric.

There are several sources offering data about food consumption in the Netherlands during the sixteenth century. First, there are cookbooks and herbals, which give a fair impression of the kinds of foods available to upper-class people living in towns. These books are of importance, because they were written for the classes of people for whom Aertsen produced his paintings. Let us take a look at the well-known herbal by Rembert Dodoens, published in Antwerp in 1554. Among the vegetables Dodoens mentions are cabbages; spinach, sorrel, endive, chicory, lettuce, leeks, chives, and purslane; turnips, beets, onions, garlic, radishes, carrots, and parsnips; beans and peas; pumpkins, melons, and cucumbers; artichokes, and cauliflower.<sup>1</sup> According to Ludovico Guicciardini's *Descrittione . . . di tutti i paesi bassi* (Description of the low countries), of 1567, the Netherlands also produced a wide variety of fruit. He lists pears, apples, plums, red and black cherries, mulberries, apricots, walnuts, hazelnuts, medlars, chestnuts, and grapes.<sup>2</sup> Dodoens also mentions peaches, raspberries, blackberries, gooseberries, strawberries, and currants.<sup>3</sup> To these we might add what Guicciardini calls "noble fruits" that were imported from Spain and Portugal into the Low Countries in large quantities. Among them were almonds, olives, figs, oranges, limes, lemons, and pomegranates.<sup>4</sup>

The impression these enumerations give is one of abundance and variety. But did people really eat all this produce? If we rely on cookbooks, such as the *Notabel Boecxken van Cokeryen*, which appeared about 1510 in Brussels, people (that is, the well-to-do) ate mainly meat, poultry, fish, eggs, and corn. Vegetables and fruits are hardly mentioned.<sup>5</sup> Some historians explain this absence by referring to traditional dietetics, according to which fruits and vegetables were unwholesome if eaten uncooked or in large quantity.<sup>6</sup> In fact, it is known that in times of pestilence

fruits were kept off the market; plums were thought to be especially dangerous. Doctors also discouraged the consumption of melons, since several popes and emperors were said to have died from them.<sup>7</sup>

Historians of horticulture have studied the common consumption of vegetables and fruits in the sixteenth century using archival material on food transportation and market regulations.<sup>8</sup> According to these sources, only a modest variety—turnips, cabbage, carrots, parsnips, onions, garlic, leeks, and parsley—dominated the supply of vegetables on the markets. This had been so for centuries, and during the sixteenth century only lettuce was added to this basic repertoire of common vegetables. Some historians therefore suppose that vegetables other than those used for *potage* (a common porridge made from cabbage, turnips, carrots, parsnips, onions, garlic, beans, and peas) were not widely consumed.<sup>9</sup>

According to sources on marketed fruits, mainly apples, pears, and nuts were widely offered in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Cherries, medlars, plums, peaches, chestnuts, and grapes were also cultivated for sale, though less widely.<sup>10</sup> This does not imply, however, that these and other sorts of fruit were not cultivated for private use. Some townspeople in the sixteenth century still owned a parcel of land on which they grew their own crops, as had been done in previous centuries. Archives rarely provide insight into the specific kinds of fruits grown privately, but we know that peaches and mulberries were among them. Strawberries were cultivated for the market in some places but then were a luxury food; berries that grew wild were gathered by the less privileged.<sup>11</sup> This is what the written sources tell us about availability, but recently another kind of source has emerged, one that informs us what people actually consumed.

Recently archaeologists, especially in Germany and the Netherlands, have started to analyze food remains, such as seeds, from excavated cesspools, latrines, and layers with remains of horticultural and kitchen leavings. This paleo-ethnobotanical, or phyto-archaeological, research makes possible a more specific idea of the eating habits of people living in Netherlandish towns during the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Up to now, there have been very few findings from the Southern Netherlands, including Antwerp, which would especially interest us since here Aertsen produced his first market scenes and kitchen pieces. But from the North, including Amsterdam, where Aertsen worked from about 1557, we do have relevant data on vegetable and fruit consumption.

From a survey of seeds and other plant remains made by the Dutch archaeologist Van Haaster,<sup>12</sup> it is clear that many of the plants mentioned

by Dodoens were already consumed in the Netherlands in the fifteenth century. There are also remains of plants Dodoens omitted but which have been identified botanically. Van Haaster gives the following survey of vegetables consumed in the Netherlands in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries: beets, peas, cucumbers, lentils, parsnips, carrots, purslane, turnips, celery, lettuce, broad beans, garden cress, orache, chicory, and white mustard.<sup>13</sup> Missing from this list are cabbages, pumpkins, melons, and gourds—all of which figure prominently in Aertsen's paintings. This discrepancy need not surprise us, however, because some of these vegetables, such as cabbages, were consumed before they produced seeds; thus the cesspits lack evidence. As for pumpkins, melons, and gourds, their absence from Van Haaster's list may indicate their relative rareness in the diet. The samples taken by the archaeologist Paap from several cesspits in Amsterdam yield little information on the consumption of vegetables in the sixteenth century specifically. Paap's general survey, however, ranging from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries, suggests that melons and pumpkins were indeed not consumed in Amsterdam before the end of the sixteenth century.<sup>14</sup> These findings are corroborated by a recent analysis of late medieval cesspits in 's-Hertogenbosch, a Brabantine town bordering on the Southern Netherlands.<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, Guicciardini mentions that "sometimes, according to season, we have more than reasonable pumpkins, or melons," which seems to indicate that these vegetables were eaten but were not always available or of good quality.<sup>16</sup> *Der scaepherders kalengier* (The shepherd's demand), of 1513, mentions pumpkins and melons (*cauwoerden* and *meloenen*) among the food that shepherds and peasants (*scaepherders*) ate in summer, which implies that these vegetables were quite common among ordinary people.<sup>17</sup>

According to Van Haaster's list, the variety of fruit consumed in the Netherlands in the late Middle Ages was greater than one would expect on the basis of only literary sources. In addition to the varieties mentioned there, archaeologists have found the remains of grapes, medlars, walnuts, and sweet cherries, as well as a wide range of wild fruit, such as hazelnuts, elderberries, bilberries, brambles, and juniper berries.<sup>18</sup> Analyses of fruit remains from cesspits of the sixteenth century in Amsterdam and Kampen provide similar findings.<sup>19</sup> How are we to judge the selection of vegetables and fruits in Aertsen's paintings when we take these literary and archaeological data as a point of departure?

Before interpreting Aertsen's works, let us first take a short look at two paintings, contemporaneous with Aertsen's, by his nephew and follower,

Joachim Beuckelaer (1533–73). Historians and archaeologists have cited Beuckelaer's market scenes, exemplified by the paintings in the Gemaldegalerie in Kassel and the Museum voor Schone Kunsten in Ghent (figs. 4 and 5), as visual proof of the rich variety of vegetables and fruits for sale at Netherlandish markets in the sixteenth century. They treat these pictures as "realistic" scenes—though crops from different seasons are often grouped in one painting—which reveal something of the eating habits of the painter's contemporaries. If we compare the produce in Beuckelaer's paintings with the findings of archaeologists, we can indeed establish a fairly high degree of correspondence between the painted assortment and the range of food actually consumed. Apparently the paintings present a kind of visual catalogue of the riches of the fields, not unlike a collection of curiosities, in effect a *Wunderkammer*, in which variety vies with abundance.

In comparison, the assortment in Aertsen's pictures is much more limited. The *Preparation for the Market* in the Museum Boymans-van Beuningen in Rotterdam (fig. 6), for example, shows various kinds of cabbage, carrots, turnips, parsnips, lettuce, and pumpkins, as well as medlars, white and blue grapes, plums, and melons. Aertsen's *Vegetable and Fruit Market* in the Hallwylska Museum in Stockholm (fig. 7) shows even fewer vegetables: only cabbages, lettuce, carrots, parsnips, pumpkins, and cucumbers. The fruit here includes melons, white and blue grapes, apples, cherries, brambles, and several kinds of nuts—walnuts, almonds, and hazelnuts. One also sees a few pieces of white bread. The *Vegetable and Fruit Market* in Berlin (fig. 1) shows the same vegetables as the Stockholm painting plus leeks, turnips, and, extraordinarily, a cauliflower. Again, the fruit is represented by only a limited variety. Among the wares of the vendor, one also notices a few waffles, pieces of white bread, butter, and a herring.

Of course, these paintings give an impression of variety and abundance, but that impression was achieved more through compositional strategy than through botanical variation. In fact, Aertsen meticulously copied one and the same image of two heads of lettuce, two pumpkins, two melons, three intertwined parsnips, and two bunches of grapes in a whole series of paintings, including those in Berlin, Rotterdam, and Stockholm (figs. 1, 6, and 7).<sup>20</sup> This makes us aware that Aertsen's paintings are artificial compositions that are only somewhat directly based on his visual perception of real market offerings. His paintings do not portray actual markets or marketplaces, whether in rural or in urban areas; they show fictitious locations, which are, however, reminiscent of real market scenes. It is, therefore, impossible to deduce from them the variety, the

arrangement, or the frequency of actually marketed vegetables and fruits. His paintings can serve only as visual proof for the existence of the individual species in the sixteenth century.

Comparison with literary sources and archaeological findings does allow, however, for a general conclusion about the assortment of vegetables and fruits in Aertsen's pictures. The offerings in his paintings are clearly not representative of the full range of produce available to and consumed by townspeople in Aertsen's time. There are occasionally luxury foods, such as lemons and white bread, or expensive novelties, such as cauliflower (fig. 1), but the bulk of the vegetables belong to the most commonplace species. They do not, however, cover the whole range of these ordinary sorts since, for example, some of the basic ingredients for *potage*—onions, garlic, beans, and peas—are absent in most of his paintings.<sup>21</sup>

A similar conclusion can be drawn regarding the assortment of fruits that Aertsen depicts. Apples, plums, cherries, nuts, and grapes, which Guicciardini says were grown in the Southern Netherlands, represent only a small portion of the fruits that were consumed and are ordinary species. The overall impression of the vegetables and fruits in Aertsen's market scenes is that they belong to the basic and plain comestibles of his day. Their assortment relates more to the diet of the common man than to the menu of the rich.<sup>22</sup> Aertsen's paintings do not, however, give a fully accurate depiction of the foods that either the common man or the rich man usually selected for consumption.

It is with the help of more strictly art-historical methods, such as iconographic and stylistic analysis, that we can refine our general impression of the foods in Aertsen's market scenes. There is an indication that the vegetables and fruits in his paintings should be viewed in connection with the peasantry that grew them. Aertsen's market vendors and their wares are iconographically related to a series of landscapes painted in Antwerp between about 1530 and 1560 by Herri met de Bles, Jan van Amstel, and Beuckelaer, as well as Aertsen himself, in which peasants are going to market with their crops.<sup>23</sup> One such painting, a *Landscape with Christ Carrying the Cross*, by Aertsen (formerly Kaiser Friedrich Museum, Berlin; figs. 8 and 9), can represent the group. The wares carried by the peasants are like those that comprise the bulk of the offerings in Aertsen's market scenes and kitchen pieces: carrots, turnips, parsnips, and cabbages. Occasionally one also sees peasants carrying small trays with strawberries and other fruit. As I have argued elsewhere, these folk belong to a stock repertoire of figures who exemplify preoccupation with earthly

goods and worldly affairs, as against the biblical protagonist of the scene, who represents man striving for the heavenly good of eternal life.<sup>24</sup> In this iconographic tradition of early Flemish landscape painting, the peasants' crops are literally and figuratively earthly goods; their connection with the material side of life is underscored by their depiction as marketable wares. The association of worldliness and rusticity is also evident in the vegetables and fruit offered for sale by Aertsen's vendors, who are the direct iconographic descendants of the peasants in this landscape tradition.

This association is sometimes emphasized in Aertsen's vegetable and fruit markets, where peasants are engaged in various forms of worldly behavior: not only the selling of the crops as such but also the "vending" to the public of the libidinous qualities inherent in the market wares, and in the vendors themselves. It is important to realize that the sixteenth-century herbalist Dodoens and other dieticians of the day attributed an aphrodisiac effect to many of the foods displayed in Aertsen's pictures.<sup>25</sup> This notion of aphrodisiacs has nothing to do with Panofsky's "disguised symbolism," which has served as a semantic principle for the interpretation of the vegetables and fruits in Aertsen's and Beuckelaer's paintings as erotic symbols. Art historians who recently have come to reject this concept and doubt the symbolic dimension of realistic representations of food and other objects in late medieval and Renaissance art forget that the attribution of physical effects to the consumption of food had a practical dimension. People in twentieth-century Western society may not have faith in the aphrodisiac, but in the sixteenth century such effects were thought to be very real. This opinion, rooted and vested in the respectability of a venerable tradition of medicinal knowledge, was still very much alive in the sixteenth century, not only among men of letters but probably also among the peasants and other ordinary, illiterate people who grew the crops and ate them.

In Aertsen's and Beuckelaer's paintings the aphrodisiac connotation of the vegetables and fruit is directly linked with peasantry and the "selling" of bodily pleasures that accompanies the vending of the foods. The literature and visual arts of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries abound in mockeries of peasants proverbially associated with uncontrolled libidinous behavior.<sup>26</sup> Both Aertsen's and Beuckelaer's pictures have these connotations, as several iconographic investigations have shown.<sup>27</sup> Many paintings play with the connection that people saw between eating and drinking, sexual lust and liberty, and peasant, or boorish, behavior. Aertsen's *Kitchen Scene* in Antwerp (Museum Mayer van den Bergh; fig.

10), for example, shows an old peasant drinking wine and a kitchen maid who, while preparing the food, has grabbed his “prick,” whereas a group of male and female peasants in the background uninhibitedly make similar libidinous gestures. Beuckelaer’s *Market Scene* in Antwerp (Rockox-huis, Kredietbank; fig. 11) and his *Fish Market* in Strasbourg (Musée de la Ville de Strasbourg; fig. 12) are other clear examples of the association of sexual interest, peasant behavior, and the selling and implied consumption of food. There is nothing disguised in the erotic puns in these pictures. In the *Market Scene with Ecce Homo* in the Uffizi in Florence (fig. 13), Beuckelaer even goes so far as to show a vendor who touches the lap of his female companion to express that not only her vegetables but also the “fruits” of her body are for sale.<sup>28</sup> Usually Aertsen is only a little more covert in such allusions than Beuckelaer, although the kissing peasant couple in the background of the *Vegetable and Fruit Market* in Berlin (fig. 1) makes explicit the erotic context of the selling—and eating—of vegetables and fruit. The cucumber balancing on top of a pair of turnips in a strange erect position in the left foreground of the Hallwylska *Market Scene* (fig. 7) might be seen as a visual pun similar to the “dagger-prick” in Aertsen’s *Antwerp Kitchen Scene* (fig. 10), or the finger put through the slice of salmon in Beuckelaer’s *Fish Market* (fig. 12). In any case, one can conclude that the aphrodisiac connotations of the food offerings in Aertsen’s paintings are closely connected with the libidinous behavior of the vendors themselves and seem to express the basic affinity between rustics and the wares they sell.

The formal presentation of the offerings in Aertsen’s market scenes also has a rustic quality. This is primarily due to the rough, sometimes scarred surface of individual vegetables, especially the pumpkins and melons (fig. 14), the irregularity, not to say capriciousness, of their forms, and their sometimes oversized dimensions. The composition of the produce within the market scenes—that is, the way in which the food has been arranged by the vendors—is not only assertive but also rather disorderly and poorly balanced.

We must take care, however, not to impose a modern aesthetic upon these images. The creation of compositional patterns that give the image a weight and balance that we associate with High Renaissance art might not have been the first concern of Renaissance artists.<sup>29</sup> “To compose” (*componere*) was primarily understood as literally putting together individual “building blocks” into a whole. These building blocks could consist of every kind of subject and object that exists in the natural world. Art theorists of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, including Alberti, who



was known to Netherlandish artists,<sup>30</sup> enumerate such individual motifs, ranging from different types of human figures to animals, buildings, and landscape elements. They combine these lists with the requirements of naturalism, richness, and variety (*verecundia*, *copia*, and *varietas*) in representation, thought to be central to a satisfactory composition.<sup>31</sup>

Aertsen's market scenes with vegetables and fruits comply with these three qualities or requirements, but when we look at other qualities that theoreticians like Alberti advocated, Aertsen's compositions show the opposite of what is recommended. Alberti says, "But I should wish this richness to be ornate [*ornata*] with a degree of variety, and also serious [*gravis*] and restrained [*moderator*] with dignity [*dignitas*] and naturalism. I certainly condemn those painters who, because they wish to seem abundant [*copiosi*] or because they wish nothing left empty, on that account pursue no composition [*compositio*]. But indeed they scatter everything around in a confused and dissolute [*dissolutus*] way."<sup>32</sup> When we look at Aertsen's *Vegetable and Fruit Market in Berlin* (fig. 1), we see that the image is realistic, or naturalistic, in the depiction of individual vegetables and fruit (as well as other motifs) and shows—within a limited section of the whole range of market foods—varied and abundant offerings. There is, however, no restraint, sobriety, or dignity that keeps this abundance and variety in balance. Aertsen's composition shows exactly the mistakes against which Alberti warns. In the foreground especially, there is no space whatsoever; the vegetables and fruits seem to have been scattered, lacking any order, and lie on top of one another as if they have toppled over, even partly burying the body of the vendor. Aertsen's *Preparation for the Market* (fig. 6) shows exactly the same phenomenon. But at the same time we can observe in this picture that *componere* was indeed a concern of Aertsen's. In the center a peasant holds a huge cabbage on his knee and sits on a bag, which is placed on a wheelbarrow lying on its side (fig. 14). The wheelbarrow has in turn been carefully placed on a small stone on the ground. The whole structure appears carefully thought out and is in itself an imaginative, though somewhat odd, composition showing a certain variety and abundance in invention. This artful structure of balanced building blocks strikingly contrasts with the chaotic display of food around it.

I would like to offer two interpretations of this phenomenon, each from a different, but related, point of view. The first is that we think of the arrangement of the vegetables and fruits and the wheelbarrow seat as resulting from the actions of the peasants themselves. From this point of view, the makeshift seat and the arrangement of the vegetables and fruit

are truly rustic compositions, totally lacking in the concept of *componere*. Thus here it is the vendors who have made the mess and come up with an odd construction. The painter has just followed peasant decorum, showing boorish behavior and crops in a rustic composition.

The other interpretation can be understood simultaneously. One may hold the artist responsible for what he paints. He might be blamed, then, for the jumble in the foreground and for a lack of proper *compositio* in the display of the market wares. But the careful construction of the wheelbarrow seat in the Rotterdam picture clearly shows that Aertsen could ingeniously apply the rules of art. I am not suggesting that this picture proves that Aertsen knew the theories of Alberti, although this cannot be ruled out. Aertsen was indeed interested in theoretical writings, as his extensive borrowings from illustrations of Sebastiano Serlio's treatise on architecture prove.<sup>33</sup> From this treatise Aertsen may have gained some insight into matters of taste, questions of decorum, and the rules of art. In any case, what his Rotterdam painting demonstrates is the artist's reflective attitude on these matters. In a sense, properly *componere*—that is, to compose according to rustic decorum—is the very theme of the picture.

Now, if this is true, we might ask why Aertsen preferred rustic food and boorish compositions to thematize and display his command of art. An indirect answer may be found in a biographical anecdote by a friend of Aertsen's, the historian Petrus Opmeer, which was written before 1569 but was published posthumously in 1611.<sup>34</sup> Opmeer relates that he once had a discussion with Pieter Aertsen about the Rotterdam painter Johannes Einout, who, "stimulated by the example of the [Praise of] Folly by his fellow citizen D. Erasmus, painted . . . a Christ fastened to the cross, in which the figures of deformed men [painted] in various colors and forms were to be seen. Thus artists might see in it the mistakes of all famous painters: and he seemed to have mocked not only artists but also art itself. Tall Pieter the painter valued this [picture] so highly that he told me it could not be valued in gold but only with the honors of a high office."<sup>35</sup> Although this anecdote is about an otherwise unknown contemporary of Aertsen's, I believe that it can provide a clue to Aertsen's own artistic preferences and ideas. The story suggests that Aertsen knew and valued the idea of making a pictorial counterpart of Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*. If we recognize the basic principle that underlies Erasmus's masterpiece, we may see several points of correspondence with Aertsen's market scenes.

The *Praise of Folly* belongs to a literary genre that was very popular in the sixteenth century. This genre was based on an ancient rhetorical fig-

ure, the so-called paradoxical encomium, an ironic eulogy of unworthy subjects.<sup>36</sup> The principle was to praise base persons and things, such as tyrants, beggars, humble plants, dust, or even illnesses, with every formal means that an orator or writer would normally use to praise the virtues of princes, towns, or useful objects. In this rhetorical tradition, the dignity of form serves to sing the ironic praises of humble and unworthy subjects in order to rouse the admiration of the audience for the technical skills of the orator or writer. At the same time, this device could be used, as it often was in the sixteenth century, to entice the audience to applaud not only the technical virtuosity of the speaker or writer but also the humble object of the praise. In this way the audience could be induced to empathize with persons and things it would normally shun. This is exactly the technique Erasmus uses to entangle his readers in the folly he praises and to make them aware of their own failings.<sup>37</sup>

I believe that Aertsen's market scenes with vegetables and fruits can be seen as eulogies of humble objects in their own right. This suggestion is not new: already in 1966 the literary historian Rosalie Colie drew a broad comparison between the emergence of the genre of still-life painting and the popularity of the paradoxical encomium as a literary genre in the sixteenth century.<sup>38</sup> Colie stated that both genres make trivial matters the subject of individual artistic creations and employ what she calls self-reference. That is, they emphasize the technical virtuosity of the writer/painter and the attractiveness of humble matters in order to have these qualities admired for their own sake. Colie's suggestion is especially enlightening in the case of Aertsen's paintings. They, too, seem to follow the principle of elevating humble folk and objects to the status of the main subject of the picture. The flaunting and thematizing of Aertsen's compositional abilities exactly fit Colie's qualification of self-reference. Even irony, a potential of self-reference, which had been exploited to an unprecedented degree in the greatest of all paradoxical encomia, the *Praise of Folly*, is inherent in Aertsen's market scenes: it is precisely the faults and the boorish quality of the composition that serve to display Aertsen's command of decorum and the rules of art.

By suggesting that the beholder is the buyer and consumer of the displayed foods, Aertsen's paintings, like Erasmus's writing, play a trick on the audience. As the viewer roams the picture with his eyes, admiring the artist's mastery in the realistic rendering of rustic crops, he is, in a certain sense, taken in by the peasants and their offerings. If the beholder feasts his eyes upon the vegetables and fruits that are offered to him, he exposes himself to the aphrodisiac effect inherent in their visual consumption. Through the very act of admiring the painted crops, the beholder

unwittingly creates a parallel between his own *pictorial* lust and the bodily interests of the peasant vendors; it is left to the beholder to ponder the implications of this parallel, as it is to the audience of Erasmus's *Folly* to reflect on their own foibles.

We can follow this trail even further and speculate that Aertsen may have been inspired not only by the example of his enigmatic fellow painter Johannes Einout but also by reading the *Praise of Folly* itself. Offering an excuse for writing his book by referring to an ancient and therefore honorable tradition, Erasmus invokes in his preface, among other examples of the genre, the *Moretum*, in Aertsen's time ascribed to Vergil, which describes a peasant's meal.<sup>39</sup> Here, Aertsen may have discovered the idea of devoting a paradoxical eulogy to that subject.

There is no way of knowing whether Aertsen went any deeper into the tradition of this rhetorical figure, but I must point out that the market vendor repeatedly figures in this tradition. Quintilian had already compared the eulogy of the orator to the praises of the market vendor, and Erasmus, too, played with this parallel when he had Folly address her audience: "If only you will be so good as to give me your attention—not the kind you give to godly preachers, but rather the kind you give to pitchmen, low comedians, and jokesters. . . ."<sup>40</sup> In his books on Gargantua and Pantagruel, which also belong to the genre of the paradoxical encomium, the sixteenth-century writer François Rabelais made extensive use of the figure of the market vendor to praise all kinds of base matters, with many scatological and sexual puns, as Mikhail Bakhtin and others have shown.<sup>41</sup>

Rabelais's masterpiece, containing extensive lists of crops and in which eating is a dominant theme, is interesting in our context for still another reason: the reception of Aertsen's market scenes in his own time. As Colie pointed out, Rabelais compared himself to the ancient painter Piraikos, whom Pliny called a *rhyparographus*, a painter of humble things.<sup>42</sup> The humanist Hadrianus Junius applied the same term to Aertsen. Junius, in *Batavia*, published in 1588, gives us virtually the only existing contemporary account of the qualities for which Aertsen's paintings were valued in his time:

We cannot pass over Pieter, nicknamed "the Tall," in silence. In my opinion one can compare him rightly with Piraikos, who is mentioned by Pliny, if he is not to be given preference over [this ancient painter]. Deliberately, as it appears, he set himself to paint humble things, and he has, according to the judgment of all, reached the highest fame in these matters of humbleness. Therefore, it is my opinion that he can be awarded—just as well as

the other [i.e., *Piraios*]*—*the epithet rhyarographer, because of the grace that shines in all his works when he depicts, in a most tasteful way [*elegantissime*], the bodies and costuming of peasant girls, food, vegetables, slaughtered chickens, ducks, cod and other fishes, and all sorts of kitchen utensils. Besides the perfect delight [they offer] also by their endless variety, his paintings will never saturate the eyes [of the beholder].<sup>43</sup>

In this text we find several qualities discussed so far: the deliberate choice of humble motifs, grace engendered by the tasteful depiction of a variety of things, and an allusion to the visual consumption of the offerings by the beholder. Abundance (*copia*) is not mentioned explicitly, but the list of pictorial motifs certainly gives that impression. Overt references to the paradoxical encomium are lacking, but, as Colie suggested, the fact that Rabelais had compared himself to the ancient rhyarographer *Piraios* indeed implies that Aertsen's paintings and literary paradoxical encomia could be considered comparable artistic expressions. We do not know if Aertsen thought of himself as a modern rhyarographer, or whether the audience for which he worked considered him one. Not a single name of a patron or first owner of a market scene or kitchen piece by Aertsen has been documented. There is, however, an indication that the artist and his public alike associated his pictures with the humanist culture that favored the reviving of ancient genres such as the paradoxical encomium: some of his paintings are dated to the month and day of the year with Latin calendar names, suggesting that Aertsen's pictures revive ancient Roman painting.<sup>44</sup>

In conclusion, it is not enough to say that with Pieter Aertsen humble objects such as vegetables and fruits were made the subject of panel paintings for the first time in the history of post-Renaissance Western art. It is important also to acknowledge the complexity of his conceptions in this novel genre. Aertsen created pictorial eulogies of his humble objects, which means that the traditional generic titles, like *Market Scene with Peasants*, fall short. Titles like *The Praise of Crops* (fig. 6), or *The Praise of Pancakes* (fig. 15), would be more appropriate. In essence, technical virtuosity, wit, and command of art—not the objects—are the real subjects of Aertsen's paintings.

## NOTES

1. Dodoens 1554. See also Lindemans 1952, 165–66.

2. Guicciardini 1567, 7.

3. See Lindemans 1952, 203–6.
4. Guicciardini 1567, 7.
5. Van Winter 1982, 178; see also note 22.
6. See Sangers 1952, 37 and 47; Van Winter 1982, 178; and Van Haaster 1992, 105.
7. Vandommele 1986–87, 75.
8. Sangers 1952.
9. See Sangers 1952, 37, 74; Lindemans 1952, 169.
10. Sangers 1952, 41, 62–63, et passim.
11. Vandommele 1986–87, 72–73.
12. Van Haaster 1992.
13. Ibid., 112.
14. Paap 1983 and Paap 1984.
15. Van Haaster 1995 (forthcoming).
16. Guicciardini 1567, 8.
17. See Anonymous 1985, chap. 9.
18. Van Haaster 1992, 112–13.
19. See Paap 1983 and Paap 1984; and Vermeeren 1990.
20. The same elements are found in Aertsen's *Kitchen Maid* (Brussels, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts) and his *Market Scene with Christ and the Adulterous Woman* (Stockholm, Nationalmuseum).
21. Only the *Market Scene with Christ and the Adulterous Woman* in Stockholm has onions and garlic strings.
22. Concerning the eating habits of poor people in the Netherlands around 1500, see Sangers 1952, 26; Lindemans 1952, 169–71; Burema 1953, 72; and Van Winter 1986–87.
23. See Falkenburg 1988.
24. Falkenburg 1990.
25. Aphrodisiacs included cherries, apples, grapes, plums, walnuts, carrots, parsnips, turnips, leeks, onions, garlic, cabbage, and the more uncommon pumpkins, melons, cucumbers, and lettuce. See Grosjean 1974; Wuyts 1986–87; and Vandommele 1986–87, 75–77.
26. See Raupp 1986.
27. Grosjean 1974; Kavalier 1986–87; Wuyts 1986–87.
28. See Kavalier 1986–87.
29. See Stumpel 1989 and Stumpel 1990, 175–228; and Van den Akker 1991.
30. According to Denhaene 1990, 217–21, the painter Lambert Lombard organized an “Academy” in his house, where he taught his pupils the “grammar” and the “rules” of the art of the Ancients and where they discussed texts by Pliny and Vitruvius as well as modern (Italian) writers on art, including Alberti, Gauricus, Pino, Varchi, Dolce, and Vasari. See also Hubaux and Puraye 1949 for the use of the words “grammar” and “rules” by Lombard's biographer, the sixteenth-century humanist writer Lampsonius. Although Aertsen probably did

not belong to this circle, there is evidence that Lombard and Aertsen were in contact: in the British Museum in London is a very classicistic drawing by Lombard, representing Christ and the Samaritan Woman, annotated “voer langhe peire” (for tall Pieter [Aertsen]). See Denhaene 1990, 177, Drawings, A.6, fig. 230.

31. See, for example, Alberti 1972, 78–79.

32. *De pictura*, cap. II, quoted after Baxandall 1971, 136; see 136–39 for Baxandall’s commentary on this passage.

33. Lunsingh Scheurleer 1947. See also note 30. “Rules of masonry, or the five manners of building, that is the Tuscan, Doric, Ionian, Corinthian, and Composite manner” (*Reglen van Metselrjen, of de vyfve manieren van Edificien, te wetene, Thuscana, Dorica, Ionica, Corinthia en Composita*; Antwerp, 1549) is the title of Pieter Coecke van Aelst’s Dutch translation of this treatise.

34. The following is based on and in part revises Falkenburg 1989.

35. Opmeer 1611, 470.

36. See Miller 1956; Malloch 1956; and Colie 1966.

37. See Kaiser 1963; and Watson 1979.

38. Colie 1966, especially 273–99. See also Silver 1984, 134–60, especially 141 and 149ff., where a comparison is being drawn between Quinten Massys’s satirical images and Erasmus’s *Praise of Folly*. Silver speaks of “visual analogues” to Erasmus’s book and mentions the rhetorical figure of the encomium, but he does not conceive of Massys’s pictures as paradoxical encomia in their own right.

39. See Miller 1956, 154; and Anonymous 1984, edited by Kenney. Kenney translates *Moretum* over-neatly as “The Ploughman’s Lunch.” The poem tells the story of a peasant preparing a meal of bread or pancakes, cheese, and a salad consisting of red onions, chives, watercress, endive, rocket, garlic, parsley, rue, and coriander. The poem also describes the garden of the peasant, where he grows crops to sell on the market. Here we find cabbage, beets, sorrel, mallows, elecampane (a very bitter root), leeks, lettuce, radishes, and pumpkins.

40. Quintilian, Book VIII, iii, 11–12, who uses the word *institor* (vendor). For the quotation, see Erasmus 1979, 10.

41. Bakhtin 1968, 160–89; see also Losse 1980, especially 33–41 and 50.

42. Colie 1966, 276; see also 64 and 70. See also Bryson 1990, especially 145–50.

43. Junius 1588, 239–40, in my translation; see also Muylle 1986–87.

44. For example, Aertsen’s *Meat Stall* (fig. 3) is dated “1551.10.Martius”; and his *Kitchen Maid* (Brussels, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts) is dated “1559.16. Cal.Aug.”