

## **THINKING SMALL: DUTCH ART TO SCALE**

*Student-curated exhibition illuminates how the smallness of 17th-century artworks from the Netherlands compelled viewers to reconsider their relationship to the world around them*

February 17–July 23, 2023

February 2023, New Haven, Conn.—In February 2023, the Yale University Art Gallery presents *Thinking Small: Dutch Art to Scale*, a student-curated exhibition focusing on artworks from the 17th-century Netherlands that were designed to encourage slow, intimate, and contemplative engagement. The exhibition was originally conceived in a History of Art graduate seminar at Yale University and then developed by its four student curators in collaboration with both the Gallery and the Center for Netherlandish Art (CNA) at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA)—an innovative research center for the study and appreciation of Dutch and Flemish art. Bringing together a wide array of objects in diverse media, the exhibition comprises major loans from the MFA’s collection and selections from the Gallery’s rich holdings, in addition to objects from the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, the Harvey Cushing/John Hay Whitney Medical Library at Yale, and a private collection. The artworks on view in *Thinking Small* illustrate how the smallness or intricacy of an object can compel the viewer to reconsider their relationship to the world around them.

The concept for the exhibition was inspired in part by a stunning Dutch artwork in the Gallery’s collection: a nautilus shell that was engraved by Jan Bellekin, a master shell carver active in Amsterdam in the mid- to late 17th century. This intricate object, now mounted on a gilt stand and engraved with images ranging from rowdy peasants to delicate insects, was created to invite its owner’s careful study of nature and humanity, through not only sight but also touch. The combination of its polished surface and complex imagery speaks to the elaborate process of the shell’s making, its extended journey to the Netherlands from the South Pacific, where the shell would have been harvested, and the contemporary perception that the nautilus represented the wonder and perfection of divine creation.

The other works of art in *Thinking Small* demand the same close attention. Amid the global expansion of Dutch commerce in this period, diagrams and maps miniaturized large geographic areas, botanical books bore witness to their makers’ meticulous study of the natural world, and paintings were filled with minute yet accurate details. The display is separated into three



Jan Bellekin, *Nautilus Cup*, ca. 1660. Engraved shell with silver-gilt mount (added later). Yale University Art Gallery, Marion M. Kemp Fund in memory of her brother, Arthur T. Kemp, B.S. 1894

sections—“Sensing the Small,” “Miniaturizing the Distant,” and “Studying the Miniscule”—and includes medals, portrait miniatures, navigational maps, microscopic studies, botanical specimens preserved between bindings, and examples of distinctly Dutch media, like pen painting and mother-of-pearl inlay. Whether handling and meditating on a death medal as a means of commemorating a loved one or using a highly technical but equally engrossing navigational diagram to steer a ship, in the 17th century artists and viewers alike were constantly “thinking small”—which nevertheless prompted them to consider larger questions, such as the ephemerality of human existence.

The development of this exhibition took place almost entirely during the COVID-19 pandemic, beginning over Zoom in spring 2020 during a seminar taught by Marisa Bass, a professor in Yale’s History of Art Department. The four students who went on to co-curate *Thinking Small* overcame the challenge of working in large part remotely by embracing a spirit of collaboration. This small show thus exemplifies the same kind of thoughtful and intimate exchange that generated many of the artworks it showcases.

Following its debut at the Gallery, the exhibition will travel to the MFA in November 2023, where it will be on display in the Center for Netherlandish Art’s Gallery for Innovative Scholarship.

### **Exhibition Credits**

Exhibition organized by the Yale University Art Gallery in partnership with the Center for Netherlandish Art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Exhibition made possible by the Jane and Gerald Katcher Fund for Education, Yale University Art Gallery, and the Bob and Happy Doran Fund for the Center for Netherlandish Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Organized by Adam D. C. B. Chen, TD ’23, B.A./M.A. candidate, History of Art; Ekaterina Kuposova, Ph.D. student, History of Art; Renata Nagy, Ph.D. candidate, History of Art; and Joyce Yusi Zhou, Ph.D. student, History of Art, all Yale University, under the mentorship of Marisa Bass, Professor in the History of Art, Yale University; Jessie Park, the Nina and Lee Griggs Assistant Curator of European Art, Yale University Art Gallery; and Freyda Spira, the Robert L. Solley Curator of Prints and Drawings, Yale University Art Gallery.

### **Yale University Art Gallery**

Founded in 1832, the Yale University Art Gallery is the oldest college art museum in America. Today, it is a center for teaching, learning, and scholarship and a preeminent cultural asset for Yale University, the wider academic community, and the public. The museum collects, preserves, studies, and presents art in all media, from all regions of the globe and across time, with a collection numbering nearly 300,000 objects.

### **General Information**

The Yale University Art Gallery is located at 1111 Chapel Street, New Haven, Connecticut. Museum hours: Tuesday–Friday, 10 am–5 pm; Thursday until 8 pm (September–June); and Saturday–Sunday, 11 am–5 pm. The Gallery is closed Mondays and major holidays. Free and open to the public. For general information, please call 203.432.0600 or visit the website at [artgallery.yale.edu](http://artgallery.yale.edu).

## **About the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Center for Netherlandish Art**

The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA), brings many worlds together through art. Showcasing masterpieces from ancient to modern, its renowned collection of nearly 500,000 works tells a multifaceted story of the human experience—a story that holds unique meaning for everyone. From Boston locals to international travelers, visitors from across the globe come to experience the MFA. Through both art and audience, the Museum brings together diverse perspectives—revealing connections, exploring differences, creating a community where all belong. Plan your visit at [mfa.org](http://mfa.org).

## **Center for Netherlandish Art MFA/Boston**

Through an expansive library, a residency fellowship program, and an active slate of public and academic programs, the Center for Netherlandish Art (CNA) shares Dutch and Flemish art with wide audiences in Boston and beyond; stimulates multidisciplinary research and object-based learning; nurtures future generations of scholars and curators in the field; and expands public appreciation of Netherlandish art—especially works from the 17th century.

The Founders of the Center for Netherlandish Art are Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo and Susan and Matthew Weatherbie. The partnership with the Yale University Art Gallery is generously supported by the Bob and Happy Doran Fund for the Center for Netherlandish Art.

### **Press Contact**

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