



Vanitas Piece in Dutch and Flemish Seventeenth-Century Painting

'Vanity of Vanities, all is Vanity'
Ecclesiastes I, v.2.

The *Vanitas* piece as an individual genre is an integral part of the richness and variety of Low Countries art. But while isolated works are much admired, the genre as a whole has attracted relatively little attention. There has been no exhibition devoted to the Dutch *Vanitas* piece since the *Vanity of Vanities* (*IJdelheid der IJdelheden*) held at Leiden in 1970 and there seems never to have been a show devoted to the Flemish *Vanitas* piece. This is in strong contrast to the enormous interest shown in still life as a whole, which has seen many different aspects explored both in exhibitions and individual studies.

Even though the historical Low Countries were irrevocably split into two by the beginning of the seventeenth century, the revived artistic tradition, recovering after the iconoclastic crisis of the previous century, maintained a surprising unity of subject matter. It was in emphasis and artistic style that North and South diverged so dramatically. For example, although religious subjects appeared much more often in the Catholic South, they were never absent in the dominantly Protestant North. Conversely, realistic landscape developed in the North, although Rubens in the South was able to produce masterpieces of realistic landscape as magisterial as any large-scale Dutch work.

Still life painting in general is far more homogeneous in its approach, and this is proved by the difficulty of working out whether a peripatetic artist such as Jan Davidsz. de Heem altered his style between Utrecht and Antwerp. Only occasionally did Catholic subject matter appear in still life painting in the Southern Netherlands.

Since the development of modern art history on a largely national basis there has been a tendency for Dutch writers to halt their enquiries at the modern Belgian border and for Belgian art historians and publishers to confine themselves to the historical provinces of Flanders and Brabant. Although this rigid division has often led to a deeper understanding of local traditions, ranging from the richness of the Antwerp tradition to the penchant for portraiture in remote Friesland, the unity of the whole has been underemphasised. This lack of general coverage has particularly harmed the study of still life painting, as there was a consistent still life tradition in almost every centre, great and small.

Still life itself fell into many distinct categories or sub-categories defined by subject matter rather than style. The range here was enormously wide. On the simplest level we have shell paintings as found in the work of the Dutchmen, Balthasar van der Ast and Adriaen Coorte. At the other end of the scale we have the magnificent banquet pieces of the Dutch Abraham van Beyeren and the equally grand kitchen and larder scenes of the Flemish Frans Snyders. Most still life painting falls between these two extremes, but even such a humble area as fish painting ranges from fish indoors – the Flemish Alexander Adriaenssen – to fish outside on the beach – the Dutch Willem Ormea.

There has long been an interest in the origins of still life painting in the Netherlands, and its course in the sixteenth century is now fairly well charted, especially with such seminal figures as Pieter Aertsen and Joachim Beuckelaer whose influence ranges from Antwerp to Amsterdam, there being no political or religious boundary in their time. Many modern writers have emphasised the divergency of artistic style, resulting in distinctly ‘Flemish’ and ‘Dutch’ entities. When we turn to such areas as the fish painters we find it very much harder to work out whether the painting is from the North or the South, for the simple reason that the painters were observing exactly the same visual phenomena.

It is not surprising, therefore, that *Vanitas* painting has this unity of the subject matter between North and South. The message was the same and the depiction of the various warning devices required the same skill. It was not easy to paint flowers, wilting or fresh, nor to paint the human skull convincingly – not to mention the great difficulty of integrating each element into an agreeable composition.

The *Vanitas* piece by its very nature has a specific meaning – an arrangement of objects which warn the spectator either of the brevity of human life (the skull, the watch, the extinguished candle etc.) or of the uselessness of things of high monetary value when life itself is threatened. The luxurious vanities of the world – jewels, musical instruments, silver and gold objects – were a perfect excuse for the painter to display his skill in their depiction, and it was for the spectator to delight in that very clarity of observation. The moral became clear enough when *memento mori* such as the skull were included.

A good deal of writing on Low Countries *Vanitas* painting, especially the Dutch, has been concerned with its ‘hidden’ meaning. It has become a delightful intellectual game for scholars, and the general public has often been invited to join in by intriguing museum labels, exhibition catalogues, and books destined for general readership.

The *Vanitas* painter had nothing to hide. He wanted to depict each object as clearly as possible, at the same time allowing them to accumulate into an easily defined whole. It may be that some modern spectators are not used to soap bubbles because they are no longer a popular pastime with children. At the same time, modern urban living has virtually eliminated ‘bugs’ and so the bluebottle flies, which so often appear, may not so easily conjure up the idea of the maggots which are their larvae. We no longer have hour glasses in our drawing rooms and terrestrial globes in our studies, and we are tempted to regard these obvious symbols as merely quaint.

In spite of the attempts of so many writers, it is otiose to search for deeper

Nicolaes van Veerendael.
Vanitas. Panel, 34 x 45 cm
Musée des Beaux-Arts,
Caen (Photo by Martine
Seyve).



meanings in the *Vanitas* piece beyond the obvious symbolism of each lovingly depicted object. These deceptions of ordered reality were not intellectual puzzles but a gentle and usually decorative reminder of the human condition. Even religious symbolism is usually absent from the average *Vanitas* piece. Reminders of the possibility of Redemption were left to priest or preacher.

In his recent book on *The Cheerfulness of Dutch Art*, Oscar Mandel has written a short chapter on the *Vanitas* piece claiming, quite rightly, that the *Vanitas* piece falls into line with the rest of Dutch art – that it was essentially cheerful and was concerned on the simplest of levels with both story-telling and delight in the visual world. Mandel cites, albeit briefly, the contrast with Southern European art in the depiction of the same essential message – the brevity of human life.

In Southern Europe, still life was used much more rarely. It was easier to make the point with the depiction of the physical decay of the flesh: to the more decorous Northerners the message itself is identical. One of the most celebrated examples is the group of paintings in the Hospital de la Caridad, Seville. Here the normally sober Baroque artist Valdes Leal depicted the decay of the flesh with dramatic reality; his subjects were a full-robed bishop and a fully-clothed knight. Such an approach is nowhere found in the North, where the skull itself usually suffices to remind the spectator that the *Vanitas* is human.

The hardest task for the modern viewer in coming to terms with the astonishing variety of the *Vanitas* piece in the seventeenth century is to understand that these paintings were intended to delight as well as moralise. They seem much more sinister today, especially as the juxtapositions are, to modern taste, bizarre. The *Still Life with Two Skulls* by Nicolaes van

Veerendael still shocks on account of the lovingly crafted garlands of flowers which adorn the skulls. Veerendael was indeed a flower specialist and the skulls are truly unexpected in his art. There is an obvious delight in the painting of both the skulls and the flowers, and they are given equal emphasis by the artist.

Explanation of this juxtaposition does not come easily, but there is a clue in Shakespeare. 'Krantzes' are referred to by Ophelia: these were funeral garlands, and the tradition survived in England until the eighteenth century of weaving a garland of paper flowers to be hung over a virgin's pew in church after she had died. Here we may have a lost symbolism – the flower garland on the skull may tell us that the dead were virgins or lovers: on the other hand, if we follow Mandel, we may conclude that the picture is nothing more than an obvious display of skill with a *Vanitas* theme.

Veerendael's masterpiece raises further questions. We do not know whether this unusual picture was painted to order for a particular patron or whether it was painted for the open market in Antwerp. If the latter was the case, the artist would hardly have troubled to keep repeating a subject for which the demand was obviously limited.

The theme of the skulls as a specific emblem was taken to an amazing

Abraham van der Schoor,
Still Life with Skulls,
Canvas, 63.5 x 73 cm.
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



extreme by the obscure Dutch artist Abraham van der Schoor. The symbolism remains obvious but the artist has demonstrated his uncanny ability by painting it from numerous different angles and arranging the result pell-mell as in a charnel house. Again, for the seventeenth-century spectator it would have been the sheer skill which overrode the melancholia of the subject. The other *Vanitas* elements in the picture are decorative adjuncts which bring some limited colour to an otherwise monochrome composition. The books fill in the background, while the lit candle, rose and hour-glass fill the awkward spaces remaining at the sides. It would be hard indeed to find a hidden meaning in so uncompromising an image, depicting our collective deaths rather than the more usual solitary one.

The *Vanitas* work of Van der Schoor and Veerendael is essentially intimate in scale and purpose and it is this aspect of intimacy which is so often and wrongly seen as the essence of Low Countries art of the seventeenth century. Writers and museum curators have often concentrated on the small-scale works which are so much easier for study and contemplation.

Perhaps the masterpiece of the large-scale *Vanitas* akin to the banquet piece is Pieter Boel's *Allegory of the Vanities of the World*. It is dated 1663 and is therefore exactly contemporary with the late work of Rembrandt and the mature work of Jacob van Ruisdael and Meindert Hobbema. In the local Antwerp context, however, it comes rather late in the day, as the output of large-scale work was already in decline after the death of Rubens in 1640.

Boel adopts all the conceits of the banquet piece, piling up familiar objects in unlikely and unusual juxtaposition. In most banquet pieces the artist rarely depicted a table, as it would have been laid for eating: instead the idea was to pile up the objects in order to enhance the magnificence of

Pieter Boel,
Allegory of the Vanities of the World, 1663.
Canvas, 207 x 260 cm.
Musée des Beaux-Arts,
Lille.





Salvator Rosa.
L'umana fragilità.
Canvas, 199 x 133.1 cm
Fitzwilliam Museum,
Cambridge.

the composition. Here the effect is overwhelming. There are few elements of wealth as valued at the time. The arts, the sciences and war are given equal emphasis. The main element in the centre of the composition is the bishop's mitre – ecclesiastical vanity was just as worldly as that of the arrogant militiaman. The whole is held together by an elaborate compositional device: the tableau is set in a ruined gallery piled up beside and over a solemn sarcophagus. When we search the picture for symbolism we find none. Each element speaks for itself as an object of earthly status and wealth, showing pride in ownership, pride in status, monarch and church, and (gentle reminder to the writer) pride in learning and creativity, with the globe, artist's palette and books.

The contrast between the Low Countries and Southern Europe has already been noted. Boel's approach can be seen in its true context of a delight in the physical object when we consider Salvator Rosa's *L'umana fragilità*. The image itself may be familiar enough to many people: it depicts an event and is not strictly a still life as this was not the Italian way of making the same point as the Low Countries painters. The winged figure of death swoops down on the figures of a woman and a child. It is only when we

examine the numerous still life elements in the picture that the fundamental difference between North and South appears, adding further proof to Mandel's hypothesis. The still life elements are included as symbols and are not painted with any delight in their physical appearance. The owl (symbol of death) lurks in the right-hand corner, the soap bubbles, symbolising transience, blown by the child on the left, are difficult to see. The barely visible obelisk in the left background contains arcane symbols of death and discord which would have been understood only by the learned. In such a picture the artist has denied himself the sensuality which he could bring to bear when painting his large landscapes.

When we search in Low Countries art for parallels to Rosa's approach we still find a much more literal or matter-of-fact approach. This is seen in Leonaert Bramer's *Allegory of Transience* which takes an almost humorous approach. We see this in the seated skeleton, holding in its hands another skull, staring each other out with mock grimaces. The other objects are



Leonaert Bramer,
Allegory of Transience.
Panel, 80 x 61.3 cm.
Kunsthistorisches Museum,
Vienna.

varied enough but the emphasis is generally military, and a discarded pile of military accoutrements dominates the centre. The near light-heartedness of Bramer's approach is entirely in keeping with his temperament. Ultimately the picture speaks for amusement, and is entirely lacking in the scaring and profound quality of Rosa's work.

One of the extremes of object-based observation in the *Vanitas* piece is Adriaen van Nieulandt's *Vanitas* of 1636. As usual, we are left in no doubt about the object or its meaning, from the fly on the skull to the butterfly perched on the ledge. The inscriptions are unusually explicit. '*Mourir pour vivre*' sticks out of the pile of books and '*Ecquid sunt aliud, quam breve gaudium*' ('Are there other things than a brief joy?'). The element of delight in the picture is emphasised by its small scale. The artist's skill can be marvelled at, even when, as in this instance, he was not a specialist in still life.

A question often asked concerns the ownership of these *Vanitas* pictures. Were they handed down in families as moral talismans, or were they traded in common with the other genres? The short answer is that we still do not know enough about collecting at the time. As with a high proportion of Low Countries art, the pictures discussed here – except, of course, the Rosa – do not have unbroken histories going back to the seventeenth century.

After a long absence, the *Vanitas* piece has come full circle in the late twentieth century. The seventeenth-century ones are appreciated at a safe distance: but once a living painter tries to bring the genre up to date, there are serious protests, as it is believed that the modern *Vanitas* offends against decorum. Damian Hirst has taken the old theme and changed it stylistically by exhibiting dead animals or parts of them preserved in formaldehyde. The reminder is exactly the same: the mortality of the animal is emphasised and sometimes physical decay is allowed to happen in the shocked presence of the gallery visitor.

It is a paradox of our times that so many people can find themselves in tune with the meaning and emotion of a Rembrandt, or uplifted by the Baroque ecstasy of a Rubens, but they still cannot take the homespun moral of the simple *Vanitas* piece.

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