

Still-Life Painting



Still-life painting, as a subject worthy in its own right, seems to have appeared more or less simultaneously in Italy, northern Europe, and Spain in the sixteenth century. Painters turned their focus on plants, animals, and man-made objects just as scientists and natural philosophers developed a new paradigm for learning about the world that emphasized investigation over abstract theory. Exploration, by Spain and the Netherlands especially, increased interest in exotic specimens from around the globe and created a market for their accurate renderings. Still-life painting also spoke more universally about the bounty of God's creation and the nature of art and life. "Simple" paintings of flowers and food could have complex appeal and various meanings for viewers.

Ars longa, vita brevis (Art is long, life is short)

Painted images prolonged the experience of nature. Finely painted flowers brought tremendous pleasure during a cold Dutch winter. Permanence was considered a great virtue of art—it outlasts nature. Still life reminded viewers of the prosperity of their republic. It is probably not a coincidence that it emerged parallel with the world's first consumer society. The Dutch were proud of their wealth and the effort that

produced it, yet abundance could also nudge the conscience to contemplation of more weighty matters. Paintings in which fruit rots, flowers wither, insects nibble at leaves, and expensively set tables lie asunder served as a *memento mori* or "reminder of death," intended to underscore life's transience and the greater weight of moral considerations.

Still life did not rank high with art theorists. Hoogstraten (see p. 125) called still-life painters "foot soldiers in the army of art." Yet Dutch still-life paintings were hugely popular. They attracted some of the finest artists and commanded high prices. Many painters specialized in certain types of still life, including pictures of flowers or game, banquet and breakfast pieces that depict tables set with food, and *vanitas* still lifes, which reminded viewers of the emptiness of material pursuits.



Pieter Claesz, Dutch, 1596/1597–1660, *Breakfast Piece with Stoneware Jug, Wine Glass, Herring, and Bread*, 1642, oil on panel, 60 × 84 (23⁵/₈ × 33), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Bequest of Mrs. Edward Wheelwright, 13.458

Willem Kalf, Dutch, 1619–1693, *Still Life*, c. 1660, oil on canvas, 64.4 × 53.8 (25³/₈ × 21³/₁₆), National Gallery of Art, Washington, Chester Dale Collection



STILL-LIFE SUBJECTS

Breakfast and Banquet Pictures

Pieter Claesz' quiet tabletop still lifes, such as this simple breakfast of fish, bread, and beer, have extraordinary naturalism and directness. His warm, muted colors echo the tonal qualities that appeared in Haarlem landscapes around the same time (see p. 74). Willem Kalf's more sumptuous painting reflects a later style, called *pronkstijl*, which featured brighter colors and more opulent objects, like this Chinese porcelain.

Game Pictures

Game pictures were especially sought by aristocratic patrons (or those with aristocratic pretensions) who alone had the land and means to practice the hunt. In this large painting Jan Weenix combined a still life—the textures of feathers and fur done with remarkable skill—with a landscape. The sculpted relief, pond, architectural follies, and garden statuary would have been found on a patrician estate. The painting, however, also has religious connotations: the relief represents the Holy Family, and the departing dove beyond the dead swan probably relates to the freeing of the soul after death. Even the plants reinforce the symbolism—bending before the plinth is a calendula, symbolically associated with death, while the rose thorns in front recall Mary's sorrows.

Vanitas

Like the Flemish painter Jan van Kessel, some Dutch painters also referred explicitly to the transience of life by incorporating skulls, hourglasses, watches, and bubbles. All these reminders of death serve to underscore the “vanity” of life and the need to be morally prepared for final judgment.



Jan Weenix, Dutch, 1642–1719, *Still Life with Swan and Game before a Country Estate*, c. 1685, oil on canvas, 142.9 × 173 (56¼ × 68⅞), National Gallery of Art, Washington, Patrons' Permanent Fund



Jan van Kessel, Flemish, 1626–1679, *Vanitas Still Life*, c. 1665/1670, oil on copper, 20.3 × 15.2 (8 × 6), National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Maida and George Abrams

Flavored with currants and expensive spices, mince pie was a treat reserved for special occasions. Other foods on this sumptuously set table are also exceptional—imported lemons and olives, oysters to be enjoyed with vinegar from a Venetian glass cruet, seasonings of salt mounded in a silver cellar, and pepper sprinkled from a rolled paper cone. At the top of Heda's triangular arrangement is a splendid gilt bronze goblet. But the meal is over and the table in disarray. Two platters rest precariously at the edge of the table. Vessels have fallen over and a glass has been broken. A candle has been snuffed out. Along with the edible items, these objects were familiar symbols of life's impermanence, reminders of the need

to be prepared for death and judgment. Another warning may lie in the oysters, which were commonly regarded as aphrodisiacs. Empty shells litter the table, while in the center of the composition a simple roll remains the only food uneaten. Enjoying the pleasures of the flesh, these banqueters have ignored their salvation, leaving untouched the bread of life.

Characterized by a contemporary Haarlem historian as a painter of “fruit and all kinds of knick-knacks,” Willem Claesz Heda was one of the greatest Dutch still-life artists, noted particularly for breakfast and banquet (*ontbijtje* and *banketje*) pieces. The large size of this painting suggests that it was probably made on commission. Its scale helps create the illusion of reality—objects are life-size. The projection of the

two platters and knife handle and the dangling lemon peel bring the scene into the viewer's own space. These elements, which increase the immediacy of seeing, connect viewers with Heda's message about the true value in life.

This painting is an example of the monochrome palette Dutch artists preferred for still lifes and landscapes (see p. 74) from the 1620s to the late 1640s. Heda was a master of these cool gray or warm tan color schemes. The colors of gold, silver, pewter—even the vinegar and beer in their glass containers—play against a neutral background and white cloth.



Willem Claesz Heda,
Dutch, 1593/1594–1680,
*Banquet Piece with Mince
Pie*, 1635, oil on canvas,
106.7 × 111.1 (42 × 43³/₄),
National Gallery of Art,
Washington, Patrons'
Permanent Fund

FLOWERS AND FLOWER PAINTING

The Dutch prized flowers and flower paintings; by the early seventeenth century, both were a national passion. Flowers were appreciated for beauty and fragrance and not simply for their value as medicine, herbs, or dye-stuffs. Exotic new species from around the globe were avidly sought by botanists and gardeners. Paintings immortalized these treasures and made them available to study—and they gave sunny pleasure even in winter. Viewers could see—almost touch and smell—the blossoms.

The Tulip Craze

The Dutch were entranced most of all by flowering bulbs, especially tulips. After arriving in the Netherlands, probably in the 1570s, tulips remained a luxurious rarity until the mid-1630s, when cheaper varieties turned the urban middle classes into avid collectors. The Dutch interest in tulips was also popularized around Europe, as visitors to the Netherlands were taken with these exotic flowers and with Dutch gardening prowess in general. At the same time, a futures market was established. Buyers contracted to purchase as-yet-ungrown bulbs at a set price, allowing bulbs to be traded at any time of the year.

On paper, the same bulb could quickly change hands many times over. Speculation drove prices upward. The price of a Semper Augustus was 1,000 guilders in 1623, twice that in 1625, and up to 5,000 guilders in 1637. The *average* price of a bulb that year was 800 guilders, twice what a master carpenter made annually. A single tulip bulb could command as much as a fine house with a garden. People from all walks of life entered this speculative market, and many made “paper” fortunes, which disappeared after a glut caused prices to plummet.

Among those ruined was the landscape painter Jan van Goyen (see section 10). Eventually bulb prices normalized to about 10 percent of their peak value. They were still costly, but not outrageously so.



This painting, based on a print, was made shortly after the tulip market's collapse. Haarlem weavers, who have abandoned their looms, follow the goddess Flora as her chariot drives blindly to the sea. She holds out flamed red-and-white Semper Augustus tulips while another woman weighs bulbs, and other companions in fool's caps, one with a bag of money, drink and chatter on.

Hendrik Gerritsz Pot, Dutch, c. 1585–1657, *Flora's Wagon of Fools*, c. 1637, oil on panel, 61 × 83 (24 × 32½), Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem

This watercolor was made for one of the many *tulpenboeken*—illustrated catalogues of tulip varieties. Flamed tulips were highly sought after. Today it is understood that their broken color results from a virus.

Unknown artist, Dutch, *Geel en Roodt van Leydden* (Yellow and Red of Leiden), from a tulip book, 1643, watercolor on parchment, volume 39.7 × 28.5 (15½ × 11½), Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem

For religious reasons, Bosschaert moved from Antwerp to Middelburg, one of the centers of the Dutch East India Company and noted for its botanical garden. Several of the blooms he included here appear in more than one of his paintings, sometimes reversed. They are based on initial studies made from life. Sometimes artists waited whole seasons for a particular plant to flower so it could be drawn. The species here actually flower at different times of the year: cyclamen (lower right) blooms from December to March and iris (top right) from May to June. Spring bulbs and summer roses are shown as well.

This must be among Bosschaert's last paintings. The French inscription, added after his death, is a testament to the painter's fame: "It is the angelic hand of the great painter of flowers, Ambrosius, renowned even to the banks of death."

Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder, Dutch, 1573–1621, *Bouquet of Flowers in a Glass Vase*, 1621, oil on copper, 31.6 × 21.6 (12 $\frac{1}{16}$ × 8 $\frac{7}{16}$), National Gallery of Art, Washington, Patrons' Permanent Fund and New Century Fund



This sheet from a florilegium, a book devoted to flowers, depicts an imaginary garden, but several cities in the Netherlands opened real botanical gardens. The first, one of the earliest anywhere in the world, was established in 1590 at the Leiden University. Carolus Clusius (1526 – 1609), among the most important naturalists of the sixteenth century, arrived there in 1593 and remained as professor of botany until his death. He collected plants from around the globe and traded them with scholar-friends. In those exchanges he probably introduced the tulip to Holland. Clusius was most interested in tulips' medicinal potential, but others were charmed by their beauty and rarity. Clusius' own tulips were stolen, but today his garden has been re-created at the university botanical garden.

Crispijn van de Passe II, Dutch, c. 1597–c. 1670, *Spring Garden*, from *Hortus Floridus* (Flowering Garden) (Arnhem, c. 1614), hand-colored book illustration, 19.1 × 55.3 (7 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 21 $\frac{3}{4}$), Collection of Mrs. Paul Mellon, Oak Spring Garden Library, Upperville, Virginia

The illusion is so convincing that it extends to senses beyond sight. In 1646 a Dutch poet extolled the beauty of a flower picture *and* its fragrance: “our eyes wander in the color, and also her fragrance permeates more than musk.”

Dew clings to leaves whose every vein is delineated; it is difficult to fathom that paint, not surface tension, shapes these droplets. Tulip petals are silky, a poppy paper-thin, a burst seed pod brittle and dry. Yet the likeness is shaped by art and embodied with meaning beyond surface appearance.

Still-life painting was not a slavish recording of what the artist saw before him—all art demanded imagination, artifice. Here are blossoms that appear at

different times of the year. This arrangement of peonies and roses, poppies and cyclamen not only reflects the wonders of nature’s creations but also something of the artist’s making. He manipulated the forms: exaggeratedly long stems allow for a more dynamic composition, and the dark background intensifies his color.

This painted bouquet outlasts nature, and permanence was argued by theorists to be one of art’s fundamental virtues. By contrast, caterpillars and tiny ants that eat away at leaves and flowers, petals that begin to wither, flower heads that droop—all remind us of the brevity of life. De Heem’s bouquet also seems to make symbolic reference to Christ’s resurrection and man’s salvation. In addition to the cross-shaped reflection of a mullioned window

in the glass vase, there are other signs. A butterfly, often associated with the resurrection, alights on a white poppy, a flower linked with sleep, death, and the Passion of Christ. A sweeping stalk of grain may allude to the bread of the Eucharist. Morning glories, which open only during the day, may represent the light of truth, while brambles may recall the burning bush signaling God’s omnipresence to Moses. Perhaps not every viewer would “see” these meanings, but they were certainly intended by the artist.

Dutch painting is not an ordinary mirror of the world. Bouquets such as De Heem’s address the meaning of life, the nature of art, and the bounty of God’s creation.



Jan Davidsz de Heem,
Dutch, 1606–1683/1684,
Vase of Flowers, c. 1660,
oil on canvas, 69.6 ×
56.5 (27³/₈ × 22¹/₄),
National Gallery of Art,
Washington, Andrew W.
Mellon Fund