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Question: *“How do traditional still life paintings use material objects to comment on social hierarchy's”.*

Still life paintings, particularly those from the 16th and 17th centuries, offer a fascinating glimpse into values, and beliefs of the societies that produced them. At first glance, these works may seem like simple representations of everyday objects with exceptional details. However, beneath their surfaces lies a profound commentary on the human condition, social structures, and the fleeting nature of life. As I explored this genre, I was drawn to the way artists used material objects not just for their aesthetic qualities, but also to convey deeper philosophical and societal reflections.

This essay will examine how still life paintings reflect deeper meanings through the themes of tradition, classism and inevitability, i will begin exploring how traditional techniques and conventions shaped this genre. Then, i will analyse how objects represent class structures and social hierarchy. Finally, i will explore how these artworks convey the inevitability of decay and death, revealing how still life can express ideas beyond its surface appearance.

Traditional:

In examining traditional still life paintings, it's essential to understand the conventions and stylistic choices that shaped the genre. The Dutch had an early interest in objects and their potential to hold symbolic meaning, especially moral or spiritual ideas. (Bilbao, G. (2025) *Still life*). These paintings frequently had their roots in a particular artistic style where composition, symbolism and attention to detail were crucial. The traditional still life typically adhered to precise norms, emphasizing balance, harmony and realism. The conventions not only reflected the artists' skill, but also the social and cultural values of the time. This emphasis on tradition became particularly significant in the context of the Dutch Golden Age, when still life paintings were commonly commissioned by the wealthy merchant class. It goes to say, when more is known about the artist who created a piece of art, the public's perception of it frequently shifts. At first glance, the painted fruits, nature, or glassware that make up a traditional Dutch still life may appear to be solely decorative or symbolic. However, what happens if we find out more about the painter's past, personal convictions, or goals? Instead of being a celebration of plenty, it could have a completely deeper meaning altogether. Similarly, when examined through the prism of *vanitas*, the incorporation of subtle symbols such as fading flowers, partially peeled fruit, or extinguished candles takes on a deeper meaning that reflects mortality and the temporary essence of existence.

Jan Davidsz de Heem (1606-1684) for example stands as a prominent figure in the 17th century Dutch and Flemish still life paintings, renowned for his intricate compositions that epitomize the *pronkstilleven* or even "sumptuous" still life genre. His works are characterized by meticulous detail, vibrant coloration, and symbolic richness, reflecting both the material wealth and the moral contemplations of his era. De Heem's paintings often feature lavish arrangements of fruits, flowers and luxurious objects, meticulously rendered to showcase texture and detail. This approach aligns with the *pronkstilleven* style, which emerged in Antwerp during the 1640s, aiming to display wealth and abundance, reflecting the social aspirations of the burgeoning merchant class (Meijer, 2008).



Fig 1, Jan Davidsz de Heem, *Still Life with a Glass and Oysters*, 1640

The piece follows the Baroque principles of dramatic lighting and balance in terms of style. The viewer is prompted to think about each object's symbolic value in addition to their materiality by the shadow and reflection. The peeled lemon, which is bitter, hints down the transient character of wealth and existence, while the oysters and wine represent indulgence. The work is deeply grounded in the tradition of moral commentary found in the Dutch still life paintings. De Heem's layering of meaning suggests a worry about consumption and control, even while his commitment to classic objects and patterns places him firmly within the canon of still life. His approach in some way traps tradition by performing the still life's expected visual language while revealing the frailty that lies behind its grace and order. While maintaining the aesthetic standards of the genre, his work quietly challenges the very social ideals it seems to support.

When it comes to conventional still life's, Clara Peeters stands out as a pioneer who influenced the genre in the early 17th century. Being one of the few female artists known to have worked in this subject during the Golden age of the Dutch and Flemish, Peeters created a highly symbolic and detailed style that embodies many of the traditional characteristics of the genre. She skilfully depicts lavish food settings, priceless objects and reflecting surfaces in her works, such as *Still Life with Cheeses, Almonds and Pretzels* (c.1615).



Fig 2, Clara Peeters Still Life with Cheeses, Almonds, and Pretzels, 1615

In addition to expressing the sociological interests of the early 17th century, this artwork by her captures the aesthetic standards and values of traditional Dutch and Flemish still life. During this period, the rise of a wealthy merchant class in the Netherlands fuelled demand for still life's that celebrated domestic abundance and material refinement (Vliege, 1998). With its symbolic layering, and precise realism the piece also adheres to conventional still life ideals, vanitas symbols warned viewers against the excesses of luxury and indulgence, and the half-eaten pretzels and cut cheeses allude to consumption and transience, which were key elements of the vanitas symbolism. Overall as her work offers insight into the gender roles and societal values of the Dutch Golden Age, it maintains the form and symbolism of conventional traditional still lifes.

Her work strongly resembles that of her male contemporaries and the larger history of depicting materiality with nearly scientific accuracy because of its adherence to surface and texture. Her methods invite close examination while incorporating themes about transience and control which reinforces the traditional goals of a still life, to both impress and ethically instruct. Peeters technical skills and brushstrokes are therefore essential to the conventional still life identity of her paintings rather than merely being ornamental.

Classism:

Since many traditional still life paintings were commissioned by the upper and rising middle classes, classism is essential to understanding these artworks. The items in these paintings frequently represent social standing, prosperity and success, reflecting the patron's material goals. As international trade grew and the merchant elite prospered during the Dutch Golden Age, there was an increasing desire to show off one's financial status by amassing luxury goods. This time of wealth was captured through still life paintings, which turned common items into status and social prestige markers. Abraham van Beyeren and Jean-Baptiste-Simeon Chardin used this genre to make observations about class systems in the 17th and 18th centuries but did it in two completely different ways. Van Beyeren's lavish compositions captured the opulence of the Dutch Golden Age while Chardin's muted scenes provide a reflective look at the French bourgeoisie.



Fig 3, *Abraham van Beyeren, Still Life with Lobster and Fruit, early 1650's*

Dutch painter Abraham van Beyeren is well known for his opulent still lifes, or *pronkstilleven*s. These pieces frequently included lavish displays of upscale goods, such as fine porcelains, exotic fruits, and cutlery, placed in intricate compositions. During this period these objects signified because they were rare, expensive, and signified wealth, global reach, and social status. For instance, in *Still Life with Lobster and Fruit* (early 1650's) van Beyeren presents a table with delicacies and objects, which symbolized the wealth and global reach of the Dutch Republic during its Golden Age (Public Domain Review, 2025). In addition to demonstrating the wealth of the Dutch

aristocracy, the display of such objects subtly criticises their materialism. Half eaten food and toppled goblets are examples of elements that allude to the fleeting nature of pleasure and the pointlessness of excess. These vanitas emblems serve as a reminder to viewers of two prominent themes in Dutch still life paintings: the Transience of material belongings and the certainty of death. In an article, Miya Tokumitsu emphasises how van Beyeren's work simultaneously presents and conceals the realities of consumption, excess and labour and how his compositions give an illusion of effortless abundance. Tokumitsu notes that this illusion is "as if by magic rather than toil" revealing how the paintings obscure the real labour and exploitation behind the scenes of wealth (Tokumitsu, 2021).



Fig 4, Jean-Baptiste-Simeon- Chardin, *Saying Grace*, 1740

Jean-Baptiste-Simeon Chardin (1699-1779) on the other hand, concentrated on the simplicity of ordinary life in his genre scenes and still life paintings. Chardin depicted the modest interiors and lowly pursuits of the French middle class instead of the opulence of the aristocracy. His painting *Saying Grace* depicts a family, which seems they are enjoying a modest dinner while highlighting virtues like devotion and harmony in their home. His work questions the conventional hierarchy of genres, which ranked religious and historical paintings above still lives and domestic scenes, by emphasising the dignity of everyday items and scenes. His work elevates the status of the bourgeois, presenting their lives as worthy of artistic representation and contemplation (Art UK, 2017) meaning that Chardin's paintings helped to raise the social and cultural importance of the middle class by choosing to depict their ordinary, everyday life with seriousness, and respect.

Although van Beyeren and Chardin both employ still life to make statements about class, their methods are very different. Beyeren uses symbols of wealth to highlight the

moral implications of material excess in his works, which both mirror and mock the luxury lifestyles of the Dutch elite. Whereas Chardin challenges the idea that only the lives of the aristocracy are deserving of artistic representation by highlighting the modesty of the bourgeoisie and elevating their everyday realities.

Inevitability:

As we know, death is everywhere as life is a cycle. Decay is constant, quiet, and inevitable. Nothing lasts untouched by time whether it being an existing soul, nature or foods. Everything at the end of someday, will end up dying. Traditional still life paintings, particularly those that incorporate vanitas symbolism, revolve around the idea of inevitable fate. The word refers to a passage in the Old Testament which contrasts the transience of worldly life with the everlasting nature of faith: 'All is vanity' (The National Gallery, 2016). These paintings frequently used objects to make statements about mortality while illustrating the frailty of existence and the inevitable nature of death. Symbols like skulls, hourglasses and rotting fruits were used to highlight the passing of time and the transient aspect of life. Many artists produced a potent visual commentary on the fleeting nature of life by contrasting objects of riches and beauty with those that represent death and decay.



Fig 5, Harmen Steenwijck, Still Life: *An Allegory of the Vanities of Human Life*, 1640

The vanitas motif is the most direct way in which still life paintings address the inevitability of death. Artist Harmen Steenwyck included explicit references to mortality. The composition masterfully employs a range of objects, each having its own significance to convey that one day, they will no longer be here. A human skull, a stark memento mori, meaning “Remember you must die” (Oxford Dictionary) that forces the observer to face the unavoidable fact of death, is at the centre of the artwork, as well as life. Surrounding the skull are various objects that symbolise human knowledge, pleasure and wealth, which again emphasises that such riches are impermanent and cannot prevent death. The attention to detail further adds to the painting's ‘educational’ intent. Viewers can consider the fleeting nature of their own interests and lives by the realistic portrayal of objects within this painting, it's as if Steenwyck encourages reflection on mortality and the importance of spiritual over material values by transforming everyday objects into moral teachings through the presentation of these symbols in a still life setting.

In contrast, Pieter Claesz's vanitas still lifes are often quiet, subtle and deeply introspective. His usage of subdued colour scheme and soft natural light in his piece *Vanitas Still Life with a Skull and a Writing Quill* (c.1628) created a solemn atmosphere. His symbolic items are frequently positioned casually or partially hidden. This nuance reinforces the silent passage of time by encouraging the viewer to recognise mortality in ordinary occasions. By portraying death as an unavoidable shadow inside everyday life rather than as an interruption, he encourages reflection, rather than horror. However, critics have debated whether Claesz intended moral messaging or simply catered to bourgeois tastes of the time. His work invites interpretation without insisting on it, striking a delicate balance between aesthetic beauty and philosophical depth (Westermann, 2005).



Fig 6, *Pieter Claesz, Still Life with a Skull and a Writing Quill, 1628*

One of the main motifs, the skull, is depicted without dramatisation with quills, books, and extinguished candles items associated with knowledge, time, and the fleeting nature of life (Alpers, 1983). The idea of impermanence is further enhanced by the use of reflection, especially on metal or glass surfaces. In contrast to his more colourful peers, Claesz's moderation promotes gradual engagement. His focus on texture and material detail reveals both technical proficiency and a profound appreciation for the fleeting beauty of objects. As a result, Claesz offers a quiet setting that challenges the audience to face their own death through the ordinary and the familiar, going beyond simple decorative art.

Despite these variations, the vanitas genre is used by both artists to confront the inevitable nature of mortality. Through symbolic items and thoughtful composition, they serve as a reminder that all human endeavours wealth, fame, and knowledge which become ultimately pointless once death. Steenwyck preaches, as Claesz ponders. The emotional breadth and philosophical profundity that still life painting during the Dutch Golden Age could accomplish are best represented by their combined works

Conclusion:

Upon exploring the three themes of tradition, classism and inevitability. I want to further investigate how they interact within traditional still life paintings. Studying how objects are chosen, arranged, and rendered provides an insight into how these works reflect the values and social structures of the societies that produced them. For instance, how do luxury goods and imported items visually express wealth or status, and what does this

reveal about historical social hierarchies? I also find it compelling to examine how these paintings convey the inevitability of death through metaphors like decay, food spoilage, or vanitas symbolism. This leads me to question whether the still life genre often seen as passive or decorative can instead be interpreted as deeply reflective, even critical of the fragility of human life and constructed systems of power. My aim is to analyse how these paintings, while rooted in tradition, subtly challenge or reinforce the boundaries of social class and mortality. A working question i have come up with for my dissertation based on this study is *“How do traditional still life paintings use material objects to comment on social hierarchy's”*.

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Figures:

Fig 1, Jan Davidsz de Heem, Still Life with a Glass and Oysters, 1640

Available at: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436636>

Fig 2, Still Life with Cheeses, Almonds, and Pretzels, 1615

Available at: <https://www.mauritshuis.nl/en/our-collection/artworks/1203-still-life-with-cheeses-almonds-and-pretzels>

Fig 3, Still Life with Lobster and Fruit, early 1650's

Available at: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/435663>

Fig 4, Saying Grace, 1740

Available at: <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/jean-simeon-chardin-saying-grace-la-benedicite>

Fig 5, Still Life: An Allegory of the Vanities of Human Life, 1640

Available at: <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/harmen-steenwyck-still-life-an-allegory-of-the-vanities-of-human-life>

Fig 6, Still Life with a Skull and a Writing Quill, 1628

Available at: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/435904>

