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The Visual Evolution of Death and *Memento Mori* in the 16th and 17th Centuries in Northern Europe

Death is said to be one of the only things that every individual has in common. Although we will all encounter it in our lives, it is one of the most feared and unsettling subjects. Death transcends all races, economies, and religions. Its pervasive nature has led to its depictions in all forms of art whether literary, musical, or visual. Death depictions are a reminder of what will happen to us all. But if death is such a worrying subject, why has it been such a common topic in visual and pop culture? The great literary artist Virginia Woolf once said, “Has the finger of death to be laid on the tumult of life from time to time lest it rend us asunder? Are we so made that we have to take death in small doses daily or we could not go on with the business of living.”¹ It seems Woolf’s idea of remembering death in our daily lives seems to have rung true throughout civilization and dates back as far as the Roman Empire. The phrase *Memento Mori* has been used in the visual arts as allegorical representations of the fleetingness of life and the promise of death to all humanity. The representations of *Memento Mori* in the Middle Ages evolving into the Baroque period is what this paper will focus on, specifically the changes in these representations particularly in the work by Philippe de Champaigne, *Still Life with Skull*. (Figure 1)

In Latin the phrase, *Memento Mori* literally translates to “remember we all must die.”

¹ Virginia Woolf. Orlando, Chapte

Memento Mori was a tradition that is traced to the time when Roman military generals would arrive back from war victorious. The emperor would hold parades in their honor; during their procession there was a slave that was given the sole task of whispering in the general's ear "Respite post te. Hominem te esse memento. Memento mori!" or "Look behind. Remember thou art mortal. Remember you must die!"² As civilizations have changed, the idea has persisted, yet the representation of Memento Mori has evolved. The idea as well as the depictions of death became a popular image in paintings and visual culture. Many of the earliest depictions of death were rendered with the dead as a "still image" of the living. These depictions were peaceful and serene showing their faith in a heavenly afterlife. During the Middle Ages however, this changed, death was usually represented as a skeleton among the living, such as the "Three Living and Three Dead," which was a popular theme in manuscripts.³ Another example is the engraving done in the Netherlands in the Fifteenth century by the Master I.A.M. of Zwolle titled simply, *Memento Mori*. (Figure 2) This engraving shows a contorted skeleton in an alcove with a snake coming through the lower jaw. The skeleton's hands and feet are curled in while a ill-defined animal is crawling into his entrails. Much like other images during this time, the representation is vaguely sinister or menacing. Other depictions would sometimes include the different stages of decay or decomposition of the body. A change in these representations occurred along with a resurgence in the idea of Memento Mori during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries. The depictions were no longer full skeletons but instead more representational images with skulls and other symbols representing the fleetingness of time. This resurgence also came with another allegory which was also depicted along with Memento Mori

² "History of Memento Mori." Daily Stoic, January 23, 2020. <https://dailystoic.com/history-of-memento-mori/>.

³ British Library. <https://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2014/01/the-three-living-and-the-three-dead.html>.

known as *Vanitas*.⁴ Vanitas was often portrayed alongside Memento Mori and sometimes the terms were used interchangeably. Vanitas or “vanity” is significant to the Memento Mori artworks because it too depicts the fleetingness of life but often through the lens of beauty. An example of this intersectionality is Philippe de Champaigne’s *Still Life with Skull*. Although this work is titled *Still Life with Skull* it is sometimes given the title of *Vanitas* as opposed to its more common title.

Still Life with Skull, was created in 1646 by Philippe de Champaigne, a Danish born painter who lived in France.⁵ This painting depicts three objects set atop a plain surface. A small simple glass vase is set on left side of the painting with a single tulip in water. In the center, a human skull is depicted looking directly at the viewer with only few teeth remaining intact. On the right of the work is an hourglass with sand moving through it. Typical to the period, the background is dark and uses tenebrism to illuminate and create drama. The artwork is simple in its inclusion of very few objects with little adornment while containing a depth of information below the surface.

The skull has been an image associated with death, but this is not its only significance. According to “A Dictionary of Symbols” by Juan Cirlot, a skull represents “an emblem of the mortality of man, ... it is in truth ‘what survives’ of the living being once its body has been destroyed. It therefore comes to acquire significance as a receptacle for life and for thought, it is with this symbolic meaning that it figures in books on alchemy, where it is represented as the receptacle used in the processes of transmutation.”⁶ Much like Cirlot, “The Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art,” by James Hall adds to this that the skeleton is usually replaced by

⁴ Curtis G. Coley, “A ‘Vanitas’ Still-Life by Petrus Schotanus.

⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Philippe-de-Champaigne>

⁶ Juan Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, pg. 299.

the skull in the 17th century.⁷ Hall also notes that different ways in which the skull is used as a representation of different attributes that an artist is trying to portray during portraits such as piety or virtue based on the way the skull is placed amongst the person.⁸ He continues to mention that “Saints at prayer are depicted, particularly from the end of the 16th cent., gazing at a skull, perhaps held in their hand. It is the special attribute of Francis of Assisi, of Romoald, of the hermit saints, in particular Jerome, and of Mary Magdalene as a penitent.”⁹ One such depiction would be Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio’s piece, *Saint Jerome Writing*, created in 1605-1606. (Figure 4) Caravaggio depicts the Saint as he had in the past with books and a writing utensil but now there is a skull upon his desk and he is partially clothed, draped in a red cloak. A similar depiction of this scene is located at the Cincinnati Art Museum and was created by Philippe de Champaigne, the same artist who made the *Still Life with Skull*. This change in the view of the saint, strengthens the idea of a preoccupation with death’s depictions becoming so prominent during this time.

The image of the single tulip in the artwork is used as a representation of life and beauty. Cirlot states that flowers were used by the Greeks and Romans who would “strew flowers over the corpses as they bore them to the funeral pyre and over their graves (not so much as an offering but as an analogy).”¹⁰ Cirlot also mentions that “because of its shape, the flower is an image of the ‘Centre’, and hence an archetypal image of the soul.”¹¹ De Champaigne’s painting depicts a red tulip which has been said to represent “life, blood and passion.”¹² Hall states that

⁷ James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*. Pg. 338.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Juan Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, pg. 110.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

flowers can also be a symbol of Hope.¹³

The last image depicted in the De Champaigne's painting is the hourglass with sand running through it. These were used to show the passing of time but also as representatives of the passing of one's life. Cirlot states that the hourglass is "a symbol denoting the inversion of the relations between the Upper and Lower Worlds."¹⁴

Although the iconography can give much needed insight into the viewer's perspective, it doesn't paint the whole picture. Around the time of de Champaigne's piece there were many historic events occurring that effected the citizens of northern Europe and France such as the Thirty Years War, multiple outbreaks of the plague, as well as the rising tension in the counter reformation movement. The societal shifts and changes that resulted from these events is visible in artworks created during this time.

The Thirty Years War was a war that began as a Habsburg Empire civil war, but as it continued included most countries in Europe including the Netherlands, Spain, France, as well Germany.¹⁵ With the war lasting multiple decades throughout Europe, the resulting death toll in some areas was anywhere from thirty-five to sixty percent of the population.¹⁶ In addition to the casualties of war, the war also created an easy route for the spread of multiple illnesses. Some of the most common were dysentery, typhus and the bubonic plague which also left behind its own abundance of victims.¹⁷ With such an immense loss of life, a third tragedy began to unfold in the rural communities effected by war. The agricultural market during this time was heavily reliant on a large workforce and suffered greatly from such a hit to their population. Without the

¹³ James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*. Pg. 167.

¹⁴ Juan Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, pg. 153.

¹⁵ Myron P. Gutmann, "The Origins of the Thirty Years' War." Pg. 752-753.

¹⁶ Henry Kamen, "The Economic and Social Consequences of the Thirty Years' War," pg. 49.

¹⁷ Ibid, pg. 50.

necessary workforce, food production was much lower and resulted in famines across multiple countries.¹⁸ These famines created fear, rising tension as well as additional loss of life.

Along with these tragedies, another factor that would have played a role in society would have been the continuation of the conflicts between the Protestants and Catholics during this time which resulted in the counter reformation movement. This continued battle between the two religions created a friction among their followers and new religious sects continued to develop.

One of these new sects which began during this time was known as Jansenism.¹⁹ Jansenism was a sect that was based on Augustinian teachings that wanted to change the Catholic Church from the inside.²⁰ It was a protestant ideology with a pension for extremism. One of the most famous followers was the artist, Philippe de Champaigne.²¹ Jansenism created such a controversy because among other things its followers believed that freewill was not absolute and some were destined to damnation.²² This theory brings an additional complexity to de Champaigne's works as it lets the viewers interpret it differently than other painters of the time that would have followed more traditional philosophies. His work, becomes possibly more macabre, without the possibility of eternal life that Catholicism or Protestantism would have believed in. Although this theory in Jansenism brings an additional complexity to the depictions of death during this time, this denomination didn't last long as it was outlawed by the Catholic religion calling it heresy.²³

Along with different ideologies, the counter reformation brought an increase in the distribution of literature about religious ideologies surrounding death.²⁴ A pamphlet known as

¹⁸ Ibid, pg. 53.

¹⁹ Conisbee, "French Painting of the Fifteenth through the Eighteenth Century."

²⁰ "Jansenism." Encyclopedia Britannica. Accessed March 15, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Jansenism>.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Corinna, Ricasoli, "'Memento Mori' in Baroque Rome," pg. 457.

the *Ars Moriendi*, which was printed anonymously in Cologne, became popular in the 17th century among those of the Catholic religion.²⁵ The *Ars Moriendi* was a manual for the ill and dying and was meant to aid the readers in ways to avoid the devil's manipulations and retain your Christian virtues.²⁶ Other writings also began to follow in the footsteps of the *Ars Moriendi* including *Meditations on Death* written by Thomas À Kempis in the 15th century and *De arte bene Moriendi*, written by Robert Bellarmino in the 17th century.²⁷ Thomas À Kempis, one of the most prolific spiritual writers of the time was both a monk as well as a priest who wrote *Meditations on Death* as a way for his followers to keep death on the mind daily of the pious not to scare them but as a reminder.²⁸ It wasn't as much a meditation on what death would be like but more of a reflection. Both texts focused on the way to live a more virtuous life throughout one's life rather than just when one is actively dying.²⁹ The Jesuits had an entire meditation devoted to the different parts of death that one must endure to become more ready to die, such as how one must meditate on the idea of separating oneself from their loved ones so they can understand what death will entail for the soul.³⁰ "Remembering one must die" began to be combined with the hopeful views of eternity and the saying *Memento Vivere*, remember to live, began to appear more along side the phrase *Memento Mori*.³¹ These two sayings together gave the idea of death a less negative connotation as it was meant to make Christians live more pious lives so that the eternal life would be sanguine. These teaching led to followers carrying prayer beads as well as other small talisman with *Memento Mori*, *Memento Vivere* represented. These

²⁵ Corinna Ricasoli, "'Memento Mori' in Baroque Rome," pg. 457.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Robert Nixon. *Meditations on death: Preparing for eternity, Thomas À Kempis*.

²⁹ Corinna Ricasoli, "'Memento Mori' in Baroque Rome," pg. 457.

³⁰ Corinna Ricasoli, "'Memento Mori' in Baroque Rome," pg. 456.

³¹ Ibid.

depictions usually would have skulls on one side and on the other would be a representation of life or the living. These were meant to be used as daily meditations on this ideology so it could be carried by the devout at all times. One of these examples would be the *Ivory Rosary*, from the 1530s. (Figure 3) This small rosary depicts, the faces of the Virgin Mary, Popes, St. John the Evangelist, other wealthy individuals as well skulls representing their deaths.³²

The combination of encountering so much death and the push by the church to create a more hands on approach to confronting death would correspond to such an increase in the visual depictions of death in the seventeenth century. The move from depictions of full skeletons to primarily skulls in these depictions creates another intersection in history. In the Middle Ages, as stated previously, there were full gruesome depictions of skeletons in these artworks but as the reformation and counter reformation occurred the development of personal meditations on death began. The beads shown in the *Ivory Rosary*, as well as other personal meditation aids moved towards a more singular object in the representation of death as space was limited. The skull began to emerge as the sole representation of death instead of the full body. Now the skull begins to take over as the icon of death. *Still life with Skull*, is a great representation of this change in depiction. This is not the only place though that we see these change in depictions though. They also coincide with an increase in the importance and emergence of the still life genre.

Still life artworks before the 16th century did not hold the importance that other genres did such as historical representations, religious works or even portraiture. Many times, still life was considered a lower art form because it did not depict the human figure which was thought to be much more complex. In Northern Europe, there was a change in this idea that would later follow in other parts of Europe around the turn of the 16th century. The emergence began to

³² Victoria and Albert Museum. <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O130961/rosary-rosary-unknown/>

erupt in the Northern Renaissance during the 16th century with more attention being paid to the details in the “still” objects that are seen portrayed in the backgrounds of other artwork.³³ This can be seen Paul de Limbourg’s *Tres Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, where de Limbourg illustrates beautiful tablescapes in the background of the January book.³⁴ David Ekserdijan, in *Still Life Before Still Life*, relates this development of still life to the increased fascination with nature and its ever-evolving beauty.³⁵ At this time, there begins to also emerge more horticultural depictions, especially depictions of flowers.³⁶ Jan van Eyck renders a beautiful depiction of lilies in his famous *Annunciation*, again precluding to this emergence of the genre.³⁷ The Dutch became so enthralled with different flowers that a phenomenon occurred during this time referred to as “tulipomania.”³⁸ Tulips of different varieties became so sought after that they could be traded in a market much like stocks are today.³⁹ As tulips and other foreign flowers are in their prime, artists naturally begin to increase their depictions in artworks. The new grand value of these botanical varieties creates a market for these natural depictions. Some of the most notable of these paintings were created by women artists; Clara Peeters and Rachel Ruysch a few years later.⁴⁰ One example would be the Clara Peeters, *A Bouquet of Flowers* created in 1612. (Figure 5) *A Bouquet of Flowers* depicts a flower arrangement in a vase atop a pedestal. Flowers of many varieties and colors are rendered including a butterfly with lifelike accuracy. The increased interest in horticulture mixed with the beauty of the tulips creates this perfect combination for these types of works to gain ground in the fine art world. At first glance,

³³ David Ekserdijan, *Still Life Before Still Life*, pg. 16.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Whitney Chadwick, *Women Art and Society*, pg. 132-135.

³⁷ David Ekserdijan, *Still Life Before Still Life*, pg. 46.

³⁸ Whitney Chadwick, *Women Art and Society*, pg. 135.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Whitney Chadwick, *Women Art and Society*, pg. 132-135.

Peeter's work appears to demonstrate the simple beauty of the flowers. On closer inspection it becomes apparent that these flowers are not just meant to be representing this perfection and ideal of beauty; these flowers are representing both the ideal and decay, life, and death. These sorts of depictions are where the idea of vanitas is seen represented in the art at the time. The floral still life specifically, is a prime example of the fleetingness of beauty. Although appearing much more beautiful and less macabre, the floral still life again returns to the ever-present subject of the inevitability of death.

The Memento Mori still life artworks naturally evolved from the floral still life and the culture in which it was surrounded. De Champaigne's artwork, *Still life with Skull*, includes not only the skull representative of death but also the tulip representing the fleetingness of life, beauty as well as wealth, creating a culmination of the different aspects affecting the people of Northern Europe during this time. Memento Mori was not meant to be a somber depiction because of a fascination with death, it was a product of the world in which these artists and their viewers lived in. Death was not a taboo subject during this time; there was a much better understanding because of the lives these people lived that everything must end.⁴¹ Perhaps this was a way in which the people were able to deal with their grief as well, giving them a concrete object to associate with their emotions. These depictions were meant to give hope as well as remembrance to what they have lost but also what they hoped to gain.

⁴¹ Corinna Ricasoli, "'Memento Mori' in Baroque Rome," pg. 456.

Images



(Figure 1) Philippe de Champaigne, *Still-Life with a Skull*, 1646, Oil on Canvas, Musée de Tessé, Le Mans, France.



(Figure 2) Master IAM of Zwolle, *Memento Mori*, late 15th century, Woodblock Print, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York.



(Figure 3) Unknown Artist, *Ivory Rosary*, 1530, Ivory, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, United Kingdom.



(Figure 4) Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Saint Jerome Writing*, 1605–1606, Oil on Canvas, Borghese Gallery and Museum, Rome, Italy.



(Figure 5) Philippe de Champaigne, *Saint Jerome*, 1648, Oil on Canvas, Cincinnati Art Museum, Cincinnati, Ohio.



(Figure 6) Clara Peeters, *A Bouquet of Flowers*, 1612, Oil on Canvas, Metropolitan Museum, New York City.

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