

The Dutch still life is deceptively simple. These beautiful renderings of laid tables, flower pots, fruit baskets, kitchens, and more are wonderful glimpses of the foods and household customs of the aristocracy during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. However, a close examination reveals that the paintings have much more meaning behind them than simply a presentation of food and cutlery. Each item in those paintings is chosen for its narrative value. The flowers, the wine, the pastries are all full of symbolic meaning. The paintings become stories from the bible, or allusions to theological principles. A bowl of fruit is turned into an entire story simply by understanding what each item represents. These qualities are what drew me to the subject of symbolism in paintings of that era. Those works are strikingly beautiful at a glance, but simple inquiry turns them into powerful narratives. The ‘double life’ that each painting lives is what drew me to them.

The symbolism that permeated the still life genre during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is rooted in religious texts. The symbols included by the painters turned the paintings into narratives describing Christian ideals and stories. Each piece of the painting had its own significance, and examination of these symbols reveals how universal their meanings are. On the surface, the symbols allude to Christ, the Virgin Mary, the crucifixion, and other very Christian ideas. However, deeper inquiry makes it clear that universal themes and ideas such as good, evil, betrayal, vice, innocence, mercy, rejuvenation, seasons, etc. are also conveyed by each symbol. The symbolism in this genre of painting is not at all limited to a single religious interpretation. Keeping this in mind, it raises the question: could a still life be used to present any kind of story or message, even a secular one?

The still life is an artistic work that depicts inanimate objects, natural or artificial, arranged by the artist into a purposeful composition. Paintings that follow those simple guidelines have been created for centuries, however, the term *still life* is a relatively recent development in the history of the genre. The name first appeared halfway through the seventeenth century in Dutch inventories, as *stilleven*. The Dutch, who were collecting and commissioning that style of artwork since its earliest stages of development, used many other terms to describe the unique style of artwork, including: *fruytagie* (fruit piece), *bancket* (banquet), and *ontbijt* (breakfast). These terms were descriptions of the exact subjects of each painting, and the more general *still life* eventually became a catch-all for the entire genre of painting<sup>1</sup>.

The origins of still life are rooted in the illusionist style. Illusionist painting dates all the way back to antiquity. The famous classical Greek painter Zeuxis is said to have painted such realistic grapes that birds flew down and pecked at them<sup>2</sup>. By the fourteenth century illusionist work was a popular architectural tool. Early illusionist “still lifes” from this period were generally cubbies and shelves full of items painted onto walls. The painters studied perspective and were able to convincingly add rooms and items to walls. Giotto’s work in the Cappella degli Scrovegni is a fine example of this early stage in the development of still life.

Optical illusions continued to be sought by painters and Jacopo de’ Barbari’s *Still Life with Partridge, Iron Gloves and Bolt of a Crossbow* from 1504 is a wonderful example of the more developed illusionist work.

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<sup>1</sup> Schneider, Norbert. "The Art of the Still Life: Still Life Painting in the Early Modern Period [Paperback]." *The Art of the Still Life: Still Life Painting in the Early Modern Period: Norbert Schneider, Hugh Beyer: 9783822802960*

<sup>2</sup> The Elder, Pliny. "History of Nature"



The painting features a beautifully rendered pair of gauntlets hung alongside a dead partridge and a crossbow bolt. The painting would have been cleverly hung in a hunting lodge and was meant to provide amusement and entertainment as it fooled viewers into believing the objects were actually there. Ultra realistic *bedriegertje* ('little trickster') paintings maintained their popularity even as the still life blossomed into a developed genre. Adrian van der Spelt's *Flower Still Life With Curtain* painted in 1658, after still lifes had become popular, even plays with the idea of a decorative still life. The painting appears to be a bouquet of flowers with a lovely silk curtain hanging in front of it, but the curtain is actually part of the painting.

Rather than simply painting a very realistic piece of fabric, Adrian van der Spelt 'hung' his curtain in front of a painting to trick the viewer even more. Van der Spelt's mature illusionism, like the still life was influenced greatly by the empirical practices of the fifteenth century.

During the fourteenth century there was a movement towards observational work. Artists were seeking inspiration from their immediate surroundings. Gradually the pattern books that dominated artistic practices in the previous century and earlier were replaced by the newer empirical methods. As art moved in this direction still lifes were found more and more in the world of painting.

The early still lifes of the fifteenth century were found in French and Dutch paintings. Painters were creating Biblical scenes with attention to their own perception and observation, and inanimate subjects entered their compositions in the form of minor decorative additions. The subjects that would eventually dominate the still life genre were still playing second fiddle to the religious narratives that were the focus of the paintings. However, the inanimate subjects would receive far more attention as technology developed.

The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries experienced some of the greatest innovations in agriculture up to that point in history. New methods of cultivation led to higher yields of crops and relative abundance that had not yet been experienced. Finally the still life was coming into full form as artists tried to capture the excitement of those new days of plenty. Market scenes became common subjects.<sup>3</sup> Peter Aertsen's *Christ and the Adulteress* (1559) is a fine example of the new style. The painting is a Biblical story, but the figures of Christ, the adulteress, and the soldiers are isolated to the left corner of composition and are far in background. Food is what dominates the composition. Baskets of vegetables and fruits are stacked and piled into a mountain of plenty that is so carefully rendered that it completely distracts the eye from the Biblical story unfolding in the rear. Now the inanimate was becoming the subject of the artist's work. There were still figures, but they were dwarfed by the wealth of food that was depicted, and even they were being phased out of the work.

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<sup>3</sup> Schneider, Norbert. "The Art of the Still Life: Still Life Painting in the Early Modern Period [Paperback]." *The Art of the Still Life: Still Life Painting in the Early Modern Period: Norbert Schneider, Hugh Beyer: 9783822802960*

Economic growth was also a subject of these early still lifes. The development of factories, joint stock companies, the cottage industry, and more caused booms in central Europe's economy. Domestic scenes of kitchens also appeared in paintings at this time. Similar to market paintings, the focus is on the wealth of food and material possessions, not the human characters. However, the kitchen scenes are representative of the satisfaction of the domestic economy, rather than the commercialization of agriculture. The paintings boasted a newfound wealth and made way for even more concentration on the inanimate as the subject of paintings.

With roots that can be extended all the way back to antiquity, the still life became one of the most popular forms of painting in the Dutch 'golden age', and maintained their popularity for centuries after. The illusionist work that was added to the walls of cathedrals and painted on canvases

developed as observation became the basis for art. And with those two movements as a foundation, the still life made its way into the art world over the course of three centuries. From the fifteenth into the seventeenth century painting inanimate objects blossomed into a genre that went far beyond simply



painting bowls of fruit. Subgenres and styles developed that were all under the umbrella of the still life. There came to be confectionary still lifes, game still lifes, flower still lifes, and more, and each has its own history that is deserving of volumes of analysis and background. This long-lived genre has an intricate past that is almost as complex as one of the still lifes.

Symbolism is a crucial part of the 'golden age' Dutch still life. From the middle-ages to the eighteenth century, theologians investigated objects in an effort to use them as symbols for pieces of Christian history. The thinkers sought the 'essence' of objects, but were limited in their search because they knew that their senses could only comprehend the appearances of each object. As a result of this limitation theologians looked at different aspects of an object and compared them to scripture using symbolical speculation. This practice was based on medieval Bible study. According to the religious scholars of medieval Europe, everything had a literal meaning, an allegorical meaning, a figurative meaning that regarded Christian Morality, and a mystical meaning. In that field of study, different scholars with different ideological opinions developed their own system of symbolical assignment. Artists often identified themselves with

those different schools, and they filled their canvases with symbols according to the ideas outlined in each one<sup>4</sup>.

The still life was an optimal vehicle for such symbolism. The paintings were exclusively of objects and the artists, with careful consideration, could pick and choose their subjects to present, for example, a moral Christian tale while still painting a decorative planter, or a breakfast table. The 'golden age' still lifes are filled to the brim with symbols that relate to Christian scripture, and the meanings must have been comprehended by the audiences of the time, but the religious meanings are, sadly, often lost on the modern viewer.

The extent to which symbols were utilized varied from artist to artist. Some only saw them as secondary details, but others took symbolism to an almost absurd level. One painting with a wealth of symbols is *Still Life with Bread and Confectionary* by Georg Flegel. The 21.7 x 17 cm painting is small, but it contains a huge amount of religious symbolism.



The painting depicts a collection of delicious sugar coated desserts with some baked goods, wine, and insects. The insects in the picture seem a bit out of place, of course some bugs are attracted to sugar, but a ladybug, a butterfly, and an oversized wasp make up an absurd assortment. The strange collection can be used as a hint that there is more to the painting than

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first meets the eye. Upon closer examination it is revealed that the work is full of Christian allusions. The most obvious symbol in the painting is the loaf of bread in the lower left corner. The rectangular stick of sugar has been carefully laid across the bread to make the shape of a cross. Next to the bread there are some oddly shaped treats. To the right lies a circle, or O-shaped candy. Directly in front of the bread there is a pile of sugary sticks that form a broken A shape. These desserts are intentional references to Apocalypse 1:8 and 21:6, where Christ is named the beginning and the end, the Alpha and Omega. The wine is yet another symbol for Jesus, in an obvious reference to the communion. Wine was used very widely as a religious symbol in paintings of this era because of its very strong association with scripture. The symbols in this painting are rather clear and their meanings are difficult to dispute, but there are some objects whose meanings are often subject to reinterpretation.

The oyster is an animal that has been used to signify very contradictory ideas. As far back as the third century C.E. the oyster had a religious connotation. The creature was used as a symbol of the Virgin Mary, who gave birth the “pearl” that was Jesus Christ<sup>5</sup>. However, as time progressed the oyster was used to signify something very different from Mary. Dutch genre painters of the seventeenth century often employed the oyster as an erotic symbol. The shucked shells were understood to be references to female genitalia and they gave paintings like Frans van Mieris’s *A Meal of Oysters*, much more adult themes. Many objects have had their meanings change with times and fashion and this sometimes makes the interpretation of still lifes difficult.

The difficulties that arise from attempting to correctly interpret the symbols used by painters in any era are frustrating, but they do have simple solutions. Context is very important to symbolism. Understanding the time period during which a particular artist was working will shed light on the artist’s intentions. It is also important to know what sort of religious ideologies the artist prescribed to. Beyond that, an understanding of the extensive theological study that has been devoted to assigning meanings to almost everything on earth since the middle ages is very helpful because it provides a base from which to begin one’s inquiry. But still the most important thing to study is the artist whose paintings are being interpreted. Artist’s often use the same symbols in many paintings, for example Fliegel always used sugar to symbolize “spiritual sweetness”. Artists are the ones who assign the initial meaning to the symbols in their paintings, and although each viewer can interpret something else, the artist’s original intentions are the most helpful to understand, because they provide the most insight into the painting.

It is easy, and often correct, to interpret symbols in paintings by the old masters as religious. When the still life painters of the Dutch Golden age used plants, foods, and other inanimate objects, they assigned religious meanings to them. However, the ideas behind the religious symbols are, in fact, rather universal. Take coins, for example. When used by a still life painter in the sixteenth century, they probably are a reference to Judas. Judas betrayed Christ for thirty pieces of silver, so coins are a logical way to represent him. Used in this way, coins are a very solid Christian symbol. But that is not where the symbolism ends. Judas is such a crucial figure in Christianity because of his betrayal. So it is very easy to say that coins might not represent Judas himself, but the idea of betrayal. Of course this interpretation does require religious symbolism as an initial step in the train of logic that ends with the very universal idea of betrayal, but the final result is a rather secular interpretation. Keeping in mind the broad, non-religious, ideas behind the religious symbols, it is possible to use the symbols of the “golden age” still lifes to represent something very secular in nature.

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<sup>5</sup> “Physiologus, third century Christian book on animal behavior

