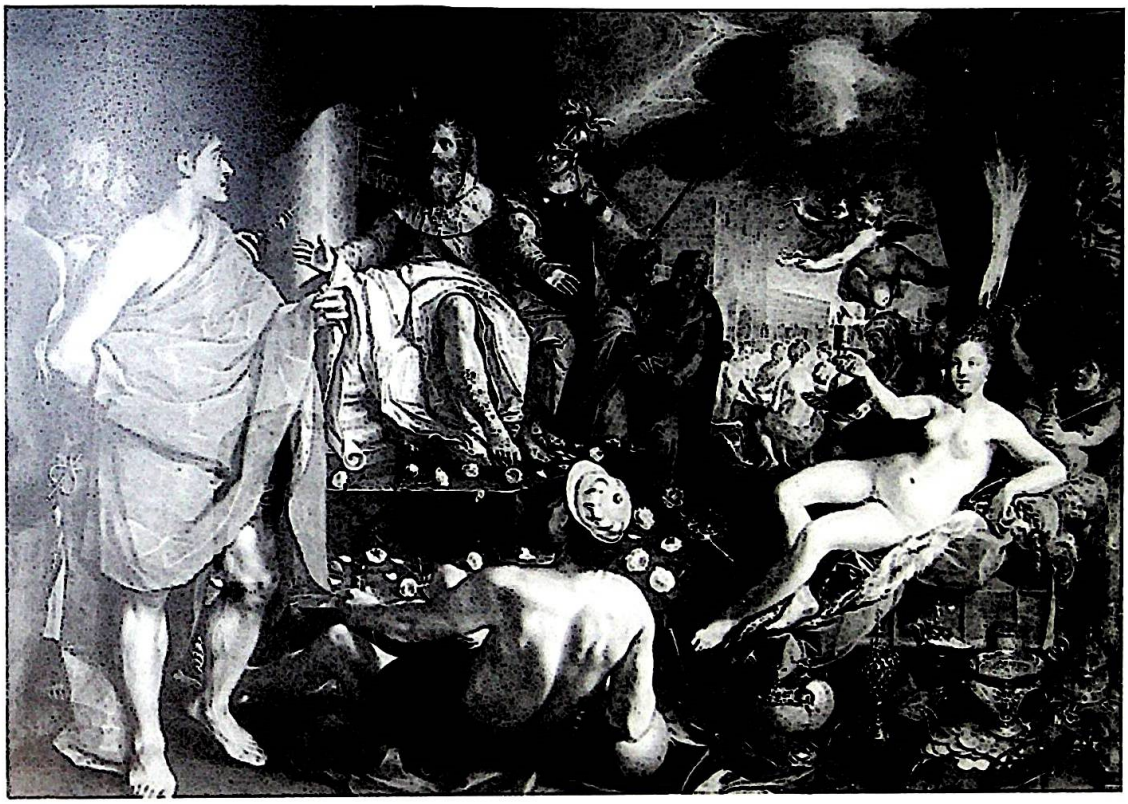
SILVER AND GOLD IN VANITAS STILL LIFES

by Dr. Yvonne Hackenbroch

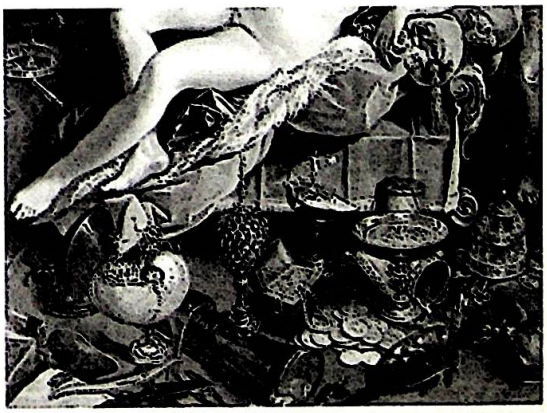
Curator Emeritus, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



1. Hendrik Goltzius Vanitas Still Life c. 1620 Oeffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel

Most still-life paintings celebrate the abundance of good things in life. They present colourful flower arrangements or, alternatively, fruits of all seasons. Some are displayed on well-appointed dinner tables, inviting to partake, at least visually. (fig. 1 & 2).

But there is as yet another kind of still-life, though of less colourful type. These still-lifes do not celebrate the bounty of nature; instead they invite reflections upon the brevity of time granted to enjoy such delights. These transitory aspects are certainly not new. But they intensify as an aftermath of the Thirty-Years-War, a war that had spread misery and devastation across most of central Europe. A sense of futility prevailed among those who had witnessed thirty years of power struggle between ambitious rulers. Although most of them had experienced moments of power and glory, hardly any were lasting. Doubts arose whether such claims to fame would outlast their individual life-spans. Hence an increased concern with



2. Hendrik Goltzius
Vanitas Still Life c. 1620 — detail
Oeffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel

the futility of these pursuits. Such thoughts and reflections explain the appearance of a variety of fallen power symbols in XVIIth still-lifes, such as crowns, tiaras, mitres, arms and armour. To counterbalance that intense preoccupation with the finality of death, the MEMENTO MORI, solace was sought and found in works of art of permanent artistic merit. The creative impulse of artists, revitalised by adversity, introduced new permanent values into a war-torn world. Thus they attracted and fascinated new patrons, who were only too ready to embrace an optimistic approach to life, seduced by the sparkle of silver and gold. Following the prolonged war experience, the traditional Vanitas still-lifes had adopted increasingly more pessimistic aspects, expressed by smoke, soap bubbles and rose petals, all ending in nothingness, beside fallen crowns and pityless hour-glasses, to name only a few of the well-understood signs indicative of the brevity of life.

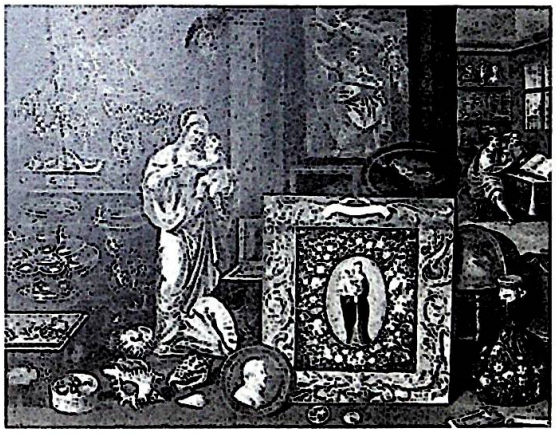
The still-lifes chosen to illustrate this article show a new *joie de vivre*. They include items made of silver or gold that had been the owner's favourite possessions. They invite appreciation of the brighter sides of life whilst challenging the all pervading pessimism previously expressed in *memento mori* representations. The exuberant style of most Dutch XVIIth century silver shows at a glance that new forces are at play, full of boisterous energies and originality. Joyful putti and happy-go-lucky creatures of the sea dominate the designs of standing cups that hold their own, even next to power symbols of bygone ages. In fact, they would seem to emphasise the fundamental contrast between the forces of creation and destruction, as well as the lasting enjoyment of art and beauty

The earliest Vanitas still-life of this sequence is by Antonio de Pereda, painted about 1640 in Spain under Phillip IV, after the loss of Portugal and Catalonia, and the hopeless struggle against the Netherlands (fig. 3). Hence the legend: NIL OMNE (all nothing). Fame, in the guise of an angel, holds a cameo portrait of Emperor Charles V and a globe, referring to the Habsburg realm in which the sun never sets, but had done so by the time that picture was painted. Only the inclusion of a Roman coin with portrait of Augustus is a reminder that the fame of both Emperors outlasted the passage of time.

David Bailly painted his Vanitas with self-portrait in Leiden 1651 (fig. 4). He shows himself as a youth and in later years when painting the oval portrait in his hand. He may have felt that time was running out, as implied by the symbols of the brevity of life, including the burned-down

3. Antonia de Pereda The Passage of Time c. 1654 — detail Kunsthistorischen Museum, Wein

4. David Bailly
Self Portrait with Symbols of Vanitas, 1651
Stedelijk Musem de Lakenhal, Leiden



5. Frans Franckens the younger
Still Life — 1636
Historisches Museum, Frankfurt

6. Pieter Boel
Vanitas Still Life — 1663
Musee des Beaux-Arts, Lille

candle. The highly original Dutch covered cup could have been shown to honour contemporary goldsmiths, and encourage their patronage.

The still-life by Frans Franckens, of 1636 resembles more a collector's cabinet than a Vanitas representation. Two scholars, seen through a doorway (fig. 5), represent the humanist guidance needed to assemble treasures from ancient to modern times. The inclusion of the figure of a Roman river god among small excavation pieces, and of two representations of Virgin and Child illustrates once again the passage of time, expressed by means of works of art.

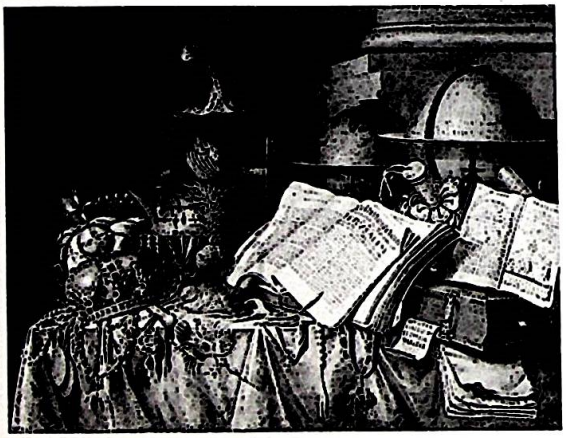
Edwaert Collier of Breda, active mostly in Leiden, is among the most inventive painters of Vanitas still-lifes. At the Rijksmuseum is one, signed and dated 1662, offering a fascinating still-life emblematic of the brevity of life: VANITAS VANITATUM ET OMNIA VANITAS. Almost gliding off the corner of a table is a crown from beneath emerge a sceptre, the Order of the Golden Fleece, the Danish Elephant Order and several chains hung with *Gnadenpfennige*, rewards for services rendered that appeal to vanity. A lute with broken string refers to the fleeting enjoyment of music; and a large volume containing the History of the Jewish War, is opened where Josephus describes the destruction of Jerusalem. Among these and more meaningful objects, referring to the passing of time and the destruction and death it brings, stands a glorious, silver cup. From a trumpet shaped foot rises a tall branch of spiky coral that supports the asymmetrical cup with curving outlines, and a cover rising as if made of whipped cream rather than silver.

Dutch silver is also assembled in a Vanitas still-life signed by Cornelis Vos at Brunswick, in which a seated lady allows her pearls and jewels to glide off her lap. Next to her, two children blow soap bubbles, behind her the table is heaped with plates, including two nautilus cups, a set of ewer and basin of monumental proportions, plates, crown and sceptre, all in unstable arrangement, and each of utmost originality.

To conclude this abbreviated survey, we refer to the impressive vanitas representation by Pieter Boel, dated 1663 (fig. 6). Boel, who came from Antwerp, worked for Charles Lebrun at the Gobelins, which explains his utterly grand baroque manner. His vanitas still-life is placed within a ruined church, filled with objects reminiscent of the brevity of life. They include a Roman sarcophagus on which a variety of treasures are heaped. An ermine trimmed cloak and a turban, not seen elsewhere, refer to victories over the Turks, crown and mitre are representative of worldly power and the might of the Church, arms and armour hint at military conquests. Accumulated riches, in the shape of jewels and silver plate, refer to worldly possessions and the musical instrument with broken string emphasises that the last tune has rung out and the rest is silence (fig. 7).

7. Cornelis de Vos
Allegory of Vanity, c. 1640
Herzog Anton Ulrich – Museum

It has been reassuring to note that in spite of the restricting aspects imposed by the transitory values of life, pleasures derived from works of art, add a touch of permanence to the enjoyment their companionship offers. These pleasures increase as masterpieces, like those contributed by jewellers and goldsmiths, are handed down from one generation to the next, until they become rare collector's items, enhanced moreover by past associations and history (fig. 8).



8. Edwaert Collier
Vanitas Still Life c. 1650
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.