

*Vanitas: A New Perspective*

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By  
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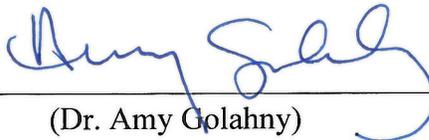
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*Vanitas: A New Perspective*

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century a new theme in art emerged in Dutch culture known as *vanitas*, the Latin root being *vanitas* is “vanity”. This theme consists of objects that are symbolic of the inevitability of death and “the transience and vanity of earthly achievements and pleasures; it exhorts the viewer to consider mortality and repent.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, *vanitas* are typically considered to show the morbid truth of life that everything dies, making things like the arts, sciences, and earthly pleasures something to be wary of. This type of imagery began in the Renaissance, but flourished well into the Baroque period. My research examines this topic from a different perspective, rather than showing the follies of life, *vanitas* depict things that can be endowed with greater symbolism and deeper meaning than those of the traditional *vanitas*. This different perspective is looked at through Dutch art in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and ending with the recent works by Audrey Flack who challenged the typical ideas of *vanitas*.

The term *vanitas* was first coined in seventeenth century Dutch culture. *Vanitas* refers to “still-lives” that consist of objects that are symbolic of death and the vanities of life. The term “still-life” comes from the Dutch word *stilleven* and refers to the painting of objects that do not move.<sup>2</sup> The seventeenth century was a period where there was a coexisting, safe balance of quality of performance and sureness of instinct.<sup>3</sup> Dutch painting embraces classicism as well as

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/art/vanitas-art>

<sup>2</sup> Seymour, Slive. *Dutch Painting*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press: Pelican History of Art, 1995, 277.

<sup>3</sup> Seymour, Slive. *Dutch Painting*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press: Pelican History of Art, 1995, 7.

realism allowing it to be considered part of Baroque Art.<sup>4</sup> There are many different variations of definitions for *vanitas*. The most common one being that *vanitas* depict the transience of life or in other words they depict the fact that life is short and death is inevitable. These paintings emphasize the “ephemeral nature of life and all our earthly pleasures.”<sup>5</sup> There is a wide range of objects that are typically depicted in *vanitas* paintings. The standard objects included are bubbles, flowers, food, candles, hourglass, clock, books, globe, music, items of wealth, and skulls which are endowed with symbolic meaning.

Artists Jacques de Gheyn II (1565-1629), Pieter Claesz (1597-1661), Maria van Oosterwijck (1630-1693), Edwaert Collier (1640-1707), and Herman Henstenburgh (1667-1726). were known Dutch still-life artists that created *vanitas*. As *vanitas* grew in popularity, it spread to other countries like Italy. Italian artist Jacopo Ligozzi (1547-1627) was a Baroque artist who also utilized the theme of *vanitas* in their work. Ligozzi’s work, though it had a similar theme, did not have the same technique. Ligozzi’s painting (fig. 22) is a smoother connection between objects where there is a blur of color with some understanding of where each object is. In other words it is hard to tell where one object begins and another one ends. Not only did the *vanitas* theme expand to other countries, but it has expanded throughout history. *Vanitas* even made their way to America with William Michael Harnett (1848-1892) and Audrey Flack.

## Bubbles

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<sup>4</sup> Seymour, Slive. *Dutch Painting*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press: Pelican History of Art, 1995, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Claire, Lozier. “Breath as Vanitas: Beckett’s Debt to a Baroque Genre.” *Samuel Beckett Today* 22. (2010), 241.

One of the most interesting objects used in *vanitas* paintings is the soap bubble. A quote by Mark Twain from *The Innocence* refers to the intrigue of soap bubbles:

“A soap bubble is the most beautiful thing and the most exquisite in nature...I wonder how much it would take to buy a soap bubble if there was only one in the world.”<sup>6</sup>

*Vanitas* painters would naturally be drawn to the beauty of a bubble. This beauty; however, was not their primary purpose for the use of the bubble. They were more drawn to the symbolic use of the bubble. Bubbles were used to show the brevity of human life for a bubble pops as quickly as it was formed. Literature of the time also utilized the illustration of the bubble. The phrase “Homo Bulla-Man is a bubble” became well known. This simply meant that man can break and vanish in a second.<sup>7</sup> Another artist Hendrik Goltzius created a print that directly references the phrase and is simply titled *Homo Bulla* (fig. 1). This print depicts a child leaning on a skull blowing bubbles. A connection is made between bubbles and childhood games.<sup>8</sup> Earlier uses of the bubble in *vanitas* can be seen with artist Jacques de Gheyn in his *Vanitas Still Life* of 1603 (fig. 18) where a large bubble hovers over a skull taking command of the focus. David Bailly

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<sup>6</sup> Michele, Emmer. “Soap Bubbles in Art and Science: From the Past to the Future of Math Art.” *Leonardo* 20, 4. (1987), 327.

<sup>7</sup> Michele, Emmer. “Soap Bubbles in Art and Science: From the Past to the Future of Math Art.” *Leonardo* 20, 4. (1987), 328.

<sup>8</sup> Michele, Emmer. “Soap Bubbles in Art and Science: From the Past to the Future of Math Art.” *Leonardo* 20, 4. (1987), 328.

also utilizes bubbles in his *vanitas* painting where they can be seen floating around the air of painting *Vanitas stilleven* (fig. 2). There are many other *vanitas* symbols seen in this painting. On the table is a skull, pearls, candles, flowers, art, coins and an hour glass among other things. The bubble in the *vanitas* sense is used as, “a symbol, an allegory of transience, of the fleeting nature of human destiny, of life itself: insubstantial and weightless, they are forever intriguing for their infinite variety of forms and colors”<sup>9</sup> French artist Pierre Mignard (1612-1695) also depicted bubbles, but in a different setting for painting *Portrait of Mademoiselle Blois* from 1680-1690 (fig. 3). This painting shows a girl of higher status (as seen with her robes, pearls in her hair, plush cushions, parrot, and dog) blowing bubbles. This shows that the use of bubbles in paintings is adaptable. Though this painting might not be a *vanitas* painting it shows the use of bubbles in the start of the 1600s.<sup>10</sup> Soap bubbles can be seen again in the 1800s with famous artist Manet and his painting *Soap Bubbles* (fig. 4) which shows a boy possibly of lesser class blowing bubbles from a dish bowl. The deeper idea being depicted that blowing bubbles was a pastime for both rich children and poor children alike. It adds a playful pursuit.<sup>11</sup> Bubbles can be seen in many other famous *vanitas* paintings as it was a popular and at one point, a fundamental, symbol used.

## Flowers

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<sup>9</sup> Michele, Emmer. “The Spherical Rainbow.” *FMR 2*. (2004), 28-29.

<sup>10</sup> Michele, Emmer. “The Spherical Rainbow.” *FMR 2*. (2004), 31.

<sup>11</sup> Michele, Emmer. “The Spherical Rainbow.” *FMR 2*. (2004), 38-39.

Flowers were used commonly in the creation of *vanitas* paintings. Prior to the emergence of the *vanitas* theme, flowers were utilized as a focus for paintings throughout many different centuries and cultures. Paintings of flowers were considered the oldest still-life style in Dutch culture as they played a major part in their culture.<sup>12</sup> Major trade between countries led to the spread of exotic flowers and the creation of the first Botanical Gardens in Holland in 1593. Tulips, more specifically the flame tulip, were particularly in high demand and considered the most valuable. The demand for exotic flowers spread with a feverish passion, but these new flowers were of high expense so to counter the cost paintings were commissioned.<sup>13</sup> The earlier flower still-life paintings are interesting with their mixture of flowers that blossomed at different times of year. The paintings were created from drawings at different sittings at different times of the year. This is important because it shows that the paintings were “the result of careful elaboration in the studio.”<sup>14</sup> As a result of the need for commissioned paintings, many Dutch artists painted flowers. Flowers showed the idea of transience with the very essence of their brief lifespan and how humans alike have a brief lifespan. The Bible passage Isaiah 40: 6-7 speaks of the fading of flowers, “all flesh is grass, all the goodness thereof is as the flowers of the field: the grass withereth, the flower fadeth; because the spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it...” These artists included Jacques de Gheyn (1565-1629), Ambrosius Bosschaert (1573-1621), Jacob

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<sup>12</sup> Seymour, Slive. *Dutch Painting*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press: Pelican History of Art, 1995, 279.

<sup>13</sup> Ember, Ildiko. *Delights for the Senses: Dutch and Flemish Still-Life Paintings from Budapest*. Wausau, Wisconsin: Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum, 1989, 31.

<sup>14</sup> Dageraad. *Dawn of the Golden Age: Northern Netherlandish Art, 1580-1620*. New Haven, New York: Yale University Press, 1993, 92.

Vosmaer (1574-1641), Willem van Aelst (1627-1683), Maria van Oosterwijck (1630-1693), Rachel Ruysch (1664-1750), and Margaretha Haverman (1693-1722).

Prior to creating his renowned *Vanitas Still Life* of 1603 (fig. 18), Jacques de Gheyn made a few flower still lifes. To create his final pieces, de Gheyn created separate sketches of different flowers with watercolor on vellum. This included *Four Flowers* (fig. 5) which, as the title suggests, depicts a detailed rendition of four flowers.<sup>15</sup> What is the purpose of mentioning this piece? It shows how de Gheyn took the time to make sketches of every flower as a trial run for a grander piece. In 1615, *Vase of Flowers with a Curtain* (fig. 6) shows the same flowers found in the watercolor sketch. This piece shows a niche with a green curtain at the top that has been pulled aside to show the flowers that are bursting out of the niche. Jacques de Gheyn's choice to include a pulled aside green curtain that has been pulled aside could be and most likely is, a direct reference to the story of Zeuxis and Parrhasius. Parrhasius is the painter who fooled other artists with his realistic rendition of a curtain. The flowers are full of life and color as Jacques de Gheyn II takes great care to depict every detail of the flowers.

Ambrosius Bosschaert focused on painting flowers throughout his life. His collection of works includes *A Still Life of Flowers in a Wan-Li Vase on a Ledge with further Flowers, Shells and a Butterfly* (fig. 7) which was painted from 1609-10 and depicts an assortment of flowers in a gold trimmed ceramic vase. The vase has an image of a bird perched on a tree branch. The

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<sup>15</sup> Boom, Florence. "An Early Flower Piece by Jacques de Gheyn II." *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 8, 4. (1975-1976): 197.

flowers are of different species, colors, and sizes. At the top of the arrangement are three fully bloomed white lilies that could reference purity. On the table around the vase is two pink flowers, a butterfly, flower pedals, and shells. The background is dark and contrasts nicely with the bright and vibrant flowers. Bosschaert chose an interesting technique for painting her flowers. Flowers only last for so long forcing painters to come up with new techniques to capture their beauty quickly before it fades and dies. Bosschaert was one of these innovators. His technique was to create pieces with the use of multiple independent studies. In his piece, the flowers were used as more of a pattern.<sup>16</sup> His works were used as inspiration for other Dutch artists.

Artist Jacob Vosmaer was another floral still-life painter that like Bosschaert, had to find a technique that allowed him to capture the flowers in a proper time frame. He is known for his oil on wood painting *A Vase of Flowers* (fig. 9). This painting was created in 1613 and shows a vase of flowers with colors of orange, pink, purple, and blue. Throughout the painting there are multiple butterflies and other insects. To create this painting Vosmaer did multiple different sittings throughout the year meaning in one arrangement, there are different flowers from different seasons. The use of flowers from different seasons show a passage of time.<sup>17</sup> Some of the flowers show different Christian symbols. The Iris is a symbol for the virgin. The rose and

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<sup>16</sup> Seymour, Slive. *Dutch Painting*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press: Pelican History of Art, 1995, 279.

<sup>17</sup> Dorothy, Mahon. "A New Look at a Seventeenth-Century Dutch Still Life." *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 51, 3. (Winter, 1993-1994), 33.

peony, with their red coloring, are symbols of the passion of Christ. Butterflies and Lizards also show symbolism in Christianity. The butterfly symbolizes the soul and or resurrection and the lizard is depicted as a reminder of the devil and serpent that was in the Garden of Eden.<sup>18</sup>

Willem van Aelst created many works that focused on flowers. His works were grand flower paintings, one of them being *Still Life with Flowers* (fig. 10) of 1665. This eye-catching array of colors is accentuated by the dark black background. There is little being illuminated by the light source, helping to create a darker space. The setting is so dark the table the vase is placed on is only partially visible with the light. The flowers shown are bright red, orange, white, and pink. The bright warm colors appear as if they are jumping off the page. Insects have also been included though they are harder to find.<sup>19</sup> Aelst was a teacher of his trade to accomplished artist Maria van Oosterwijck who drew much influence from his work.

Maria van Oosterwijck's still-life paintings are part of the second half of the Golden Age and her works even became part of the royal collection.<sup>20</sup> She became one of the most accomplished female painters of her time. Her work was greatly influenced by her teacher Willem van Aelst.<sup>21</sup> In her lifetime, Oosterwijck created a multitude of compact flower

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<sup>18</sup> Dorothy, Mahon. "A New Look at a Seventeenth-Century Dutch Still Life." *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 51, 3. (Winter, 1993-1994), 36.

<sup>19</sup> "Willem van Aelst." *Wikimedia Commons*. (April, 2018) Accessed December 9, 2018 from [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Willem\\_van\\_Aelst\\_-\\_Bloementuil.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Willem_van_Aelst_-_Bloementuil.jpg)

<sup>20</sup> Vermaert, Konstschilderesse. "Biography: Maria van Oosterwijck: Still Life Painting." *Maria van Oosterwijck*. (2007-2018). Accessed December 9, 2018 from <https://mariavanoosterwijck.nl/en/biography>

<sup>21</sup> Vermaert, Konstschilderesse. "Biography: Maria van Oosterwijck: Still Life Painting." *Maria van Oosterwijck*. (2007-2018). Accessed December 9, 2018 from <https://mariavanoosterwijck.nl/en/biography>

paintings. To create these grand flower paintings, Oosterwijck used sketches of the flowers and life studies. Similar to Vosmaer, the flowers in the paintings consist of flowers from different seasons. Maria van Oosterwijck created *Flower Still Life* (fig. 11) and *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase* (fig. 12). The *Flower Still Life* (fig. 11) was painted in 1669. The composition is similar to that of Van Aelst's *Still Life with Flowers* (fig. 10) where the black background being used to enhance the colors of the flowers. In Oosterwijck's creation however, the colors seem even more enhanced and saturated. Multiple butterflies of a variety of colors, are seen throughout this painting. The viewer's eyes are drawn to the long blades of grass that extend out of the arrangement onto the table. The eyes continue to the grass out to the dragonfly and down to a dark butterfly. Of the flowers, there are tulips came to the Netherlands prior to 1600. At the time they were considered to be a prized possession.<sup>22</sup> This arrangement is of a smaller size compared to her painting *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase* (fig. 12). *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase* (fig. 12) was created in 1670. This assortment of flowers is larger, but similar to the paintings previously mentioned, this painting has a dark background that brings out the colors of the flowers, though they are less saturated in this rendition. What makes *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase* (fig. 12) interesting is the tall sunflower that extends to the top of the canvas. The way the vines of the

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<sup>22</sup>“Flower Still Life: Maria van Oosterwijck.” *Google Arts and Culture*. Accessed December 9, 2018 from <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/flower-still-life/9AGJbyvgOLIRRG>

sunflower stem curl has the viewer's eyes following through to the end of the sunflower and on to the cluster of flowers seen in the arrangement.<sup>23</sup>

She also created *Flower Piece with Ornamental Vase* (fig. 13) from 1670-1675. This painting depicts many flowers including a lily, sunflowers, peonies, poppies, and more. The viewer's eyes are drawn to the middle of the painting where the lily resides. It's pure white color pulls the viewer in with the chiaroscuro effect that is used to contrast its dark setting. Extending from behind the lily is a bright peony that faces a sunflower. This peony could be a symbol of a Christian looking the Lord (the sunflower), their true savior. Around the bouquet rest butterflies that were used to symbolize the transience of life as well as the resurrection of the soul.<sup>24</sup> The flowers are coming out of a ceramic vase that depicts a scene that of Putti playing with goats in a vineyard: association of wine and goats is standard in renaissance.<sup>25</sup> Next to the vase is a statuette of a woman who is kneeling, regarding the vase with a concerned look. The statuette is part of the lid of the vase. This woman has been identified as Venus whose troubling expression signifies the necessity of consummating love before it's too late.<sup>26</sup> This plays into the theme and symbolism of the transience of life. Oosterwijck also created *vanitas* paintings.

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<sup>23</sup> "Maria van Oosterwijck." *Wikimedia Commons*. (February, 2017). Accessed December 9, 2018 from [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Maria\\_van\\_Oosterwyck\\_-\\_Bouquet\\_of\\_Flowers\\_in\\_a\\_Vase\\_-\\_Google\\_Art\\_Project.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Maria_van_Oosterwyck_-_Bouquet_of_Flowers_in_a_Vase_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg)

<sup>24</sup> Taylor, Paul. *Dutch Flower Painting: 1600-1720*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University, 1995, 75.

<sup>25</sup> Taylor, Paul. *Dutch Flower Painting: 1600-1720*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University, 1995, 49.

<sup>26</sup> Taylor, Paul. *Dutch Flower Painting: 1600-1720*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University, 1995, 49.

Maria van Oosterwijck created two *vanitas* paintings which she incorporated her renowned flowers in. *Vanitas Still-Life* (fig. 14) and *Vanitas-Stilleben* (fig. 15) both include multiple symbols of *vanitas*. *Vanitas Still-Life* (fig. 14) was created in 1668 with many objects that are sprawled out on the table: glass of alcohol, corn, musical instrument, skull, bouquet of flowers, literature, a butterfly, a globe, ink, hour glass, and coins. Similar to her flower paintings, *Vanitas-Still Life* (fig. 14) has a black background and an unknown light source that illuminates the table. The colors of the objects are dull and of earthly tones. The flowers contrast with their bright reds and pinks which add life to the painting.

*Vanitas-Stilleben* (fig. 15) has a similar layout, but different objects are depicted. From left to right: box of coins, flowers, full orange, half eaten orange, skull, book, pocket watch, tombstone and sunflower. The vase of flowers and skull are positioned in the same way as seen in her *Vanitas-Still Life* (fig. 14). Wrapped around its head, the skull has a wreath of morning-glories as well as irises. The skull and the tombstone show that death is inevitable. Despite this negative fact, the vase of flowers, seen in the center, sunflower draped over the tombstone in the corner add a positive, beautiful element to the painting. The wreath of morning-glories and irises that is placed around the skull makes death seem peaceful and less scary.<sup>27</sup> Maria van Oosterwijck's work, with her use of flowers and her arrangement of objects, would eventually inspire modern artist Audrey Flack.

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<sup>27</sup>*Artnet*. (2018). Accessed December 9, 2018 from <http://www.artnet.com/artists/maria-van-oosterwyck/roses-tulips-irises-and-other-flowers-in-a-vase-aa-hHuCZotnurWSqt7Iekl6kQ2>

Another artist, Rachel Ruysch renowned for her flower still-life paintings, dabbled in the *vanitas* theme. Not only is she considered the most successful flower painter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but she also was instrumental in changing the Golden Age manner entirely while ushering in a new era in floral still life.<sup>28</sup> Unlike de Gheyn and Oosterwijck, Ruysch moved away from symbolism and created work with objects that were available to her. Rachel Ruysch's father was a botanist, meaning he studied plants, which provided his daughter, access to many different species and settings with flowers, especially after trade provided new and exciting species. In her earlier years of painting, she studied with Willam van Aelst, but her technique only mirrored his for the first couple of years to which she changed to a technique entirely based on glaze.<sup>29</sup> In 1683, *Forest Floor* (fig. 16) was painted, with this still life being different from those previously mentioned, as the title suggests, the setting is a forest floor. The focus is set on an opium flower that writhes upward from the mossy bank. The scene is dimly lit with a chiaroscuro effect that brings attention to the details of the flowers in the foreground. While each leaf is thought through meticulously and Taylor explains that this, “creates a wonderful kracht when seen against the darkened trunk in the background.”<sup>30</sup> Why is this piece worth mentioning? Though forest floors were not Ruysch's typical focus, this painting gives another perspective on what a

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<sup>28</sup> Taylor, Paul. *Dutch Flower Painting: 1600-1720*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University, 1995, 184.

<sup>29</sup> Taylor, Paul. *Dutch Flower Painting: 1600-1720*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University, 1995, 184.

<sup>30</sup> Taylor, Paul. *Dutch Flower Painting: 1600-1720*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University, 1995, 184.

floral still-life can look like and how it is not necessary that it is placed on a table in vase bundled in a bouquet.

Margaretha Haverman is another Dutch painter that used flowers as her muse. In 1716, she completed the painting *A Vase of Flowers* (fig. 17). This grand painting is one of two surviving works by Haverman. The painting shows a tall collection of flowers in a vase that is occupying a gray stone niche.<sup>31</sup> The colors of the flowers are yellow, red, pink, and white with green foliage all around. Next to the vase lay two bunches of grapes and a peach. The green and purple grapes are covered with moisture and are attracting ants.<sup>32</sup> It is as if you can reach in and grab them. The flowers include carnations, roses, irises, hollyhocks, passionflowers, marigolds, poppies, primulas, and tulips. At the top is a striped tulip with a fly, moth, and water drops as well as a snail and butterfly. Author Liedtke described the painting as, “On the whole, the still life is masterful in design and description, but a bit stale and uniform in execution when compared with similar works by Van Huysum.”<sup>33</sup> Liedtke further explained the stale composition is due to an unequal balance of light, atmosphere, and volume. He equated the staleness of the painting to being artificial. He says, “The bluish color of some leaves, which

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<sup>31</sup> Walter, Liedtke. “Dutch Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.” *Metropolitan Museum of Art* 1-2. (2007), 308.

<sup>32</sup> Walter, Liedtke. “Dutch Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.” *Metropolitan Museum of Art* 1-2. (2007), 308.

<sup>33</sup> Walter, Liedtke. “Dutch Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.” *Metropolitan Museum of Art* 1-2. (2007), 310.

makes an artificial impression, was probably toned down originally by yellow lake.”<sup>34</sup> The dull appearance of style and execution can potentially be attributed to the passage of time.

## Food

Following the use of bubbles and flowers in still-life paintings, artists started to focus on painting their dinner tables. The way we look at food has changed greatly over the years. During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the types of foods painted were considered to be a luxury foods.<sup>35</sup> Including fish like lobster and ducks that were paired with silver objects and goblets. Similar to flowers, fish were an important part to Dutch culture and economy.<sup>36</sup> Fish like cod and herring were commonly found in Dutch marketplaces. Around 1640, paintings of hunting trophies started to appear. Hunting was considered a privilege that was only allowed for the aristocracy that were allowed to hunt duck, hare, rabbit, grouse, pheasant, but they needed a special permit to hunt deer. It became common mid-century to use birds as muses for still-lives.<sup>37</sup> Though the paintings only depicted a sport for nobility, Slive explained that, “hunting trophy pictures could help lesser

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<sup>34</sup> Walter, Liedtke. “Dutch Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.” *Metropolitan Museum of Art* 1-2. (2007), 310.

<sup>35</sup> Seymour, Slive. *Dutch Painting*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press: Pelican History of Art, 1995, 287.

<sup>36</sup> Seymour, Slive. *Dutch Painting*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press: Pelican History of Art, 1995, 287.

<sup>37</sup> Seymour, Slive. *Dutch Painting*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press: Pelican History of Art, 1995, 288.

people in society feel “associated with the nobility” as well as “prestige association with the sport”.<sup>38</sup> The luxuries seen in these paintings are linked to the luxuries found in *vanitas*.

### Other Objects

Other objects included are a skull and inscriptions like memento mori (remember thy end) and contemptus mundi (contempt of the world). The skull was not the only object typically found in *vanitas* paintings. These other objects included candles, hourglass, clock, books, globe, music, and items of wealth. The candles, flowers, and food were all used as a symbol of passing time. Eventually the candle will run out of wax, the flowers will wilt and die, and the food will rot leaving nothing behind. The books and globe symbolize earthly knowledge and a universal use of this theme.<sup>39</sup> The rest of the objects mentioned depict wealth. To sum it up, these emblems are “symbols of earthly existence, including the three subgroups, the symbols of all the arts and sciences, of wealth and power, and of various tastes and pleasures, secondly, symbols of human mortality, and finally symbols of resurrection.”<sup>40</sup> The underlying lesson thought to be learned is to not focus on these vain pleasures of life because eventually death will come and none of the material things will matter.

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<sup>38</sup> Seymour, Slive. *Dutch Painting*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press: Pelican History of Art, 1995, 289.

<sup>39</sup> Coley, C. “A “Vanitas” Still-Life by Petrus Schotanus.” *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts*, 38, 4. (1958-1959), 84.

<sup>40</sup> David, Merrill, “The “Vanitas” of Jacques de Gheyn.” *Yale University Art Gallery* 25, 3. (March 1960), 13.

## Vanitas

These paintings of bubbles and flowers help to set the path for the creation of *vanitas*. Jacques de Gheyn II (1565-1629) is considered one of the founders of the *vanitas* theme. There are about a dozen paintings by him that are known today. Unlike most Dutch painters of his time, de Gheyn was an independent creator. In other words “his circumstances never forced him to produce a series from one type of picture”.<sup>41</sup> What made his images unique was his idea of conception and his immense attention to detail to every object that rendered them in a version that was personal while also creating traditional iconography like that seen in real life..<sup>42</sup> His attention to detail can be seen in Jacques de Gheyn II’s great *Vanitas Still Life* (fig. 18). This oil on wood painting was done in 1603.<sup>43</sup> Depicted is a skull set on a stone niche. Above the skull is a large bubble and next to the bubble are two figures and an inscription that has been carved into the stone. To the left of the skull is a vase with a red tulip. To the right there are puffs of smoke coming out of a vase. Below the skull are coins and two medals. There are many of levels to this painting. What do all of these details mean?

The skull is a symbol for death. We all will die. The bubble is a symbol for a man’s fragility in life.<sup>44</sup> The figures who have books at their feet are Democritus and Heraclitus.

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<sup>41</sup> Bergstrom, Ingvar. “De Gheyn as a “Vanitas” Painter.” *Oud Holland* 85, 3. (1970): 156.

<sup>42</sup> Bergstrom, Ingvar. “De Gheyn as a “Vanitas” Painter.” *Oud Holland* 85, 3. (1970): 156.

<sup>43</sup> Bergstrom, Ingvar. “De Gheyn as a “Vanitas” Painter.” *Oud Holland* 85, 3. (1970): 143.

Democritus, one on the left, gestures to the bubble with a smile. Heraclitos, the figure on the right, is mourning and melancholy.<sup>45</sup> Life can be full of laughs and tears. The presence of these figures also shows the message that worldly activities and riches are vain and that man is doomed to sickness and death.<sup>46</sup> At the top of the painting is the inscription: *MORS SCEPTRA LIGONIBUS AEQUAT* meaning “death levels spade and scepter” or death levels those of wealth and poverty and forming the key note to the allegory.<sup>47</sup> Another allegory that surfaces is the theological cycle of the original sin, Resurrection, and Redemption through the passion of Christ: Fall of Man, Crucifixion, and The Last Judgement.<sup>48</sup> The colors in this painting consist of dulled earthly tones with the most vibrant object being the flower. This tulip is the only living object with colors of reds and flaming yellows. Life is full of color. Similar to *Vase of Flowers with a Curtain*, de Gheyn made multiple preparatory drawings for his *vanitas* still-life<sup>49</sup> To the right of the skull is a vase that once held a candle, but all that remains of the candle are now only wisps of smoke. This symbolized time passing and fading. Below the skull are coins and medals that are present to show the interest of the master (the skull) in such objects.<sup>50</sup> This painting and

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<sup>44</sup> Emmer, Michele. “Soap Bubbles in Art and Science: From the Past to the Future of Math Art.” *Leonardo* 20, 4. (1987): 328.

<sup>45</sup> Bergstrom, Ingvar. “De Gheyn as a “Vanitas” Painter.” *Oud Holland* 85, 3. (1970): 144.

<sup>46</sup> Bergstrom, Ingvar. “De Gheyn as a “Vanitas” Painter.” *Oud Holland* 85, 3. (1970): 149.

<sup>47</sup> Bergstrom, Ingvar. “De Gheyn as a “Vanitas” Painter.” *Oud Holland* 85, 3. (1970): 149-150.

<sup>48</sup> Bergstrom, Ingvar. “De Gheyn as a “Vanitas” Painter.” *Oud Holland* 85, 3. (1970): 149.

<sup>49</sup> Bergstrom, Ingvar. “De Gheyn as a “Vanitas” Painter.” *Oud Holland* 85, 3. (1970): 149.

<sup>50</sup> Bergstrom, Ingvar. “De Gheyn as a “Vanitas” Painter.” *Oud Holland* 85, 3. (1970): 149.

its symbols set the standard for what *vanitas* should be, the story they should tell, and the lesson to be learned.

Pieter Claesz (1597-1661) followed Jacques de Gheyn's standards and created *vanitas* paintings of his own. His work is known for the groupings of small objects together to create a still life. Claesz was interested in the effect of light on the objects, whether it was created by candlelight or daylight, it did not matter.<sup>51</sup> His 1628, *vanitas* painting *Still Life with a Skull and Writing Quill* (fig. 19) was no exception to the properties of his previous works. Being depicted is a tabletop with a skull set on a book and papers that are curling due to multiple uses. Leaning against the skull is drinking glass that is flipped so the rim is resting on the tabletop. In front of the book and papers lies a quill that is resting on both the book and an inkwell that is on its side. To the left in the background is an earthenware oil lamp that has a faint last spark of life that is casting out a vague trail of smoke. Being reflected in the glass are windows. This coupled with the fall of the light implies this table exists in a large room. As viewers, our eyes are resting on something that is too significant or too disturbing to be ignored.<sup>52</sup> Compared to the skull in de Gheyn's rendition of a *vanitas*, Claesz's skull is more eye catching with its "position of absolute authority". In *Still Life with a Skull and Writing Quill* the skull was rendered in a "more realistic, as though the force of nature has taken its course beyond human control."<sup>53</sup> To any museum

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<sup>51</sup> Liedtke, Walter. "Dutch Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art." *Metropolitan Museum of Art* 1-2. (2007): 126.

<sup>52</sup> Liedtke, Walter. "Dutch Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art." *Metropolitan Museum of Art* 1-2. (2007): 128.

viewer, this painting would come across as just a still life with a skull. The only symbolic understanding a passing viewer might have is that death is somehow related to the painting. It is with further research that art historians like Walter Liedtke can interpret pieces like this as showing, “one of many variations on the theme of worldly accomplishments-writing, learning, dabbling in the arts-that ultimately come to nothing; all is vanity.”<sup>54</sup> Like all *vanitas* paintings, this one shows how art and literature was seen as a folly in life.

Another still life painter, previously mentioned, that not only dabbled in creating *vanitas*, but also in creating flower still-lives was Maria van Oosterwijck. Compared to the previous pieces mentioned, Oosterwijck’s *Vanitas Still Life* (fig. 14) contained more objects to create her rendition of a *vanitas*. These objects include a wine glass, books, a mouse, a vase of flowers with butterflies, a skull, ink and quill, an hourglass, and a large globe. Unlike the previous *vanitas* mentioned, there is not one specific object that draws the viewer’s eye. Another difference is the skull in Maria van Oosterwijck’s rendition that is tucked under the flowers that are bursting out of their vase. In de Gheyn and Claesz’s *vanitas*, the skull is the main focus of the painting. They both emphasize the idea of death, but Oosterwijck’s subtly references death by tucking away the skull. Oosterwijck also uses an alternate way of depicting the passage of time. She includes an hourglass that has run out of time. This idea of time running out goes with the skull that is included in this painting as time has run out for that being. Two other aspects that

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<sup>53</sup> Liedtke, Walter. “Dutch Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.” *Metropolitan Museum of Art* 1-2. (2007): 128.

<sup>54</sup> Liedtke, Walter. “Dutch Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.” *Metropolitan Museum of Art* 1-2. (2007): 128.

put this painting aside from the others is the globe and full bouquet of flowers. The globe is a reference to the sciences as well as earthly knowledge and how this theme was used universally.<sup>55</sup> The full bouquet of flowers is not only the typical reference to the transience of life, but they are also a reference to Oosterwijck's key focus: flowers.

Edwaert Collier (1640-1707) is yet another traditional 17<sup>th</sup> century *vanitas* painter. In 1662, he created *Vanitas Still Life* (fig. 20). There is a lot to take in with the painting that shows an array of objects on a table. These objects include a globe, a rosary, earthenware oil lamp, moneybag, books, a violin, a compass, coins, quill, silver tazza, green-glass roemer, sheet music, another instrument, and a skull. The background is interesting in this painting as a curtain rod appears to have fallen onto the table. This curtain could be a reference to the story of Zeuxis and Parrhasius. What is interesting is the curtain has not been pulled aside, it has fallen. This could be referencing that art is a fallen idea in society. Unlike previous paintings mentioned the skull is not the prominent. The skull has been tucked behind a book in the bottom right edge of the table. It is possible that Collier did this to make death a subtle part of this story. The globe as well as the open book are the two largest objects that draw in the viewers attention. The white pages of the book bring in the viewers eye as if tempting him or her to read the book to focus on the literature. The rosary adds to the understand that *vanitas* were initially created with a religious purpose. Nothing else was supposed to matter besides God. These are the follies in life.

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<sup>55</sup> Coley, C. "A "Vanitas" Still-Life by Petrus Schotanus." *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts*, 38, 4. (1958-1959), 84.

A Violin string has snapped, further explains that hobbies and vanities will eventually only exist “as wiffs of smoke”.<sup>56</sup> This painting is considered one of Colliers greatest works. Edwaert Collier used a vast array of objects that were meticulously placed on a table. Audrey Flack would have been interested in how he managed to make this collection of items work.

Another artist that set the stage for Audrey Flack was Herman Henstenburgh (1667-1726). He created an interesting spin on a *vanitas*. His *Vanitas Still Life* (fig. 21) depicts a skull with a crown of flowers that extends to the front of the skull, a bone, a candle that is barely lit with smoke, an hourglass, an instrument, and sheet music. All of these items point to the brevity of life.<sup>57</sup> It is unknown when this painting was created. The crown of flowers and coloring of the painting is what sets this *vanitas* aside from the rest. A skull with a floral crown is not your typical *vanitas* depiction. The painting is almost welcoming to the viewer despite the imminent death that is being shown. The coloring is also welcoming to the viewer. Unlike most paintings where the viewers eyes are drawn to the lightest source, in this case they are drawn to the color that is contrasted by the muted white background and all the muted white objects. All of the objects except the flowers have this muted white coloring that brings out the enhanced shades of the flowers. Audrey Flack takes notice of this color play and enhances colors in her painting to make them more vibrant and eye catching.

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<sup>56</sup> Liedtke, Walter. “Dutch Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.” *Metropolitan Museum of Art* 1-2. (2007): 132.

<sup>57</sup> Adlin, Jane, et al. *Recent Acquisitions, a Selection: 2002-2003: The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 61, 2. 23.

The style *vanitas* was a universal scene that was found even in Italy. Italian artist Jacopo Ligozzi (1547-1627) created a *vanitas* that truly was set apart from the rest. In 1604, he created *Memento Mori* (fig. 22) which greatly grabs the viewer's attention, but instead of depicting a typical skull, he chose to depict decaying human heads. This painting is very graphic and strongly emphasizes the idea of death and decay. Art Historian Edith Hoffmann adds another sense to this painting other than sight. She said, "Here one could almost perceive a smell-not of flowers, but of rotting flesh."<sup>58</sup> In front of the head that has been set on a pedestal, lay pearls and other jewelry as well as the skull of another animal, a lamp, and a ceramic jar that has a red liquid. This red liquid is so thick, it is similar to the red thickness of blood. Behind the head is the skeleton of an animal, possibly a cat. What makes this piece particularly interesting is how the animal skeleton is peering into the mirror. The left side of the decaying face is the only part that is seen in the mirror. Even in death the dead are concerned with their appearance. This is significant because it is referencing the idea that as humans, we put such an emphasis on our appearance, so much so, that it transcends even death.

The universal theme of *vanitas* made its way to America with artist William Michael Harnett who created his take on a *vanitas* still-life *Mortality and Immortality* (fig. 23) in 1876. Author Barbara Groseclose explains that the objects seen in this painting (as well as objects seen in other *vanitas* paintings) were not usual for American still-lives.<sup>59</sup> The main, attention grabbing

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<sup>58</sup> Hoffmann, Edith. "Italian Still Lifes." *The Burlington Magazine* 107, 746. (May, 1965)" 169.

<sup>59</sup> Groseclose, B. "Vanity and the Artist: Some Still-Life Paintings by William Michael Harnett." *The American Art Journal* 19, 1. (Winter, 1987): 53.

part of this painting is the skull that sits on a pile of books with a white flower laying on the table. Hanging off the table is an open book with pages hanging in the air as if the reader has just stepped away from the book. It is possible that this book is the Bible with its red silk page marker and two column page set up. Next to the suspected Bible is a violin that is laying on sheet music that also hangs off the table. The message being conveyed is the violin player has left his instrument in our keep possibly due to death as the skull is a symbol of death.<sup>60</sup> The positioning of the skull commands the painting and its meaning. The empty orbits look deep into the viewer in almost an uncomfortable way. It also is the lighter object that draws the viewer's attention over and over again. It also has been placed on a pile of books implying how death devours literature and how man's accomplishments end with nothing.<sup>61</sup> Why is Harnett important? He, as well as artists previously mentioned, helps set the stage for American artist Audrey Flack to create her works.

Audrey Flack is a major artist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her work is focused on photorealism and abstraction. Though her focus was not on *vanitas*, she created works that not only stunned viewers, but also changed a way of thinking and looking at *vanitas* paintings. Author Henry Abrams explains how, "Flack adds a sense of time to the space she creates in her paintings."<sup>62</sup> Abstract artists look at space in two different ways: through the unity of the end-product (the

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<sup>60</sup> Groseclose, B. "Vanity and the Artist: Some Still-Life Paintings by William Michael Harnett." *The American Art Journal* 19, 1. (Winter, 1987): 5

<sup>61</sup> Groseclose, B. "Vanity and the Artist: Some Still-Life Paintings by William Michael Harnett." *The American Art Journal* 19, 1. (Winter, 1987): 54.

<sup>62</sup> Abrams, H. *Audrey Flack on Painting*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, INC., 1981, 14.

work in which everything fits) or as a metaphor of an artist's absorption in the present moment of the creative art (the responsive field of the painting).<sup>63</sup> Mediated images change the way we view the world. There is either the simulated photograph or iconographical quotation to which Flack's work uses both.<sup>64</sup> Photography plays a critical role in the paintings that Flack creates. It is explained by Flack that "The camera is used not to set up any criterion of visual appearances but as the means of access to a social reality of which she could not otherwise take hold."<sup>65</sup> For example, *World War II* (fig. 24) and *Marilyn* (fig. 25), are two pieces that Flack would not be able to fully create if it wasn't for the use of photographs. Where did she get her inspiration from or more importantly who? It was from Maria van Oosterwijck's 1668 *Vanitas*. Though *vanitas* were not her focus, Flack created four paintings that have become some of her greatest works: *World War II* (fig. 24), *Marilyn* (fig. 25), *Wheel of Fortune* (fig. 26), and *Time to Save* (fig. 27).

What drew Audrey Flack to *vanitas*? Yes it was from Oosterwijck, but it was also from the way *vanitas* get viewers to stop and think about life. Creating her renditions of *vanitas* was her way of telling her perspective, her ideas of *vanitas* and the idea of life.<sup>66</sup> While trying to tell her story, to give her take on 17<sup>th</sup> century ideas, she realized this need for a communication with the unconscious and conscious. She was trying to separate from some symbols in the 17<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>63</sup> Abrams, H. *Audrey Flack on Painting*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, INC., 1981, 14.

<sup>64</sup> Abrams, H. *Audrey Flack on Painting*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, INC., 1981, 16.

<sup>65</sup> Abrams, H. *Audrey Flack on Painting*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, INC., 1981, 20.

<sup>66</sup> Abrams, H. *Audrey Flack on Painting*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, INC., 1981, 76.

*vanitas*, but ultimately, unconsciously, created works with symbols from then. Flack states, “I saw the *vanitas* series as the most important paintings of my career, major works.”<sup>67</sup>

In 1977, *World War II* (fig. 24) was painted. This painting is a depiction of powerful imagery that can be uncomfortable to viewers. In the background is a photograph of Holocaust victims that stand behind a barb wired fence. This image is from Margaret Bourke-White and the moment being captured is the Liberation of Buchenwald.<sup>68</sup> Most of the victims look right at the viewers with expressions of sorrow and anger. The use of the image in black and white is to show memory receding, despair, and time passing.<sup>69</sup> In front of the image is a red candle that is burning. We know from previous *vanitas* paintings that this is a sign of time passing. The wax has fallen down the candle and dripped onto the image of the victims. This is a haunting addition as it appears as if the image is bleeding the blood of the victims. Also included in the image is red drapery, a pocket watch, a sheet of music, a blue jar, a butterfly that is resting on a tea cup and saucer, a rose, a Gold Star of David pin, a piece of literature, a plate of food, and pearls. Most of the items are used to show items of vanity as well as the passage of time. The pocket watch is one of these such items; however, it is also set to minutes before the witching hour. The red drapery is used to add fire to the painting. The blue jar to represent sorrow.<sup>70</sup> It is the butterfly that pulls interest in this painting. Butterflies, in the sense of *vanitas*, were used as a

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<sup>67</sup> Abrams, H. *Audrey Flack on Painting*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, INC., 1981, 77.

<sup>68</sup> Abrams, H. *Audrey Flack on Painting*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, INC., 1981, 78.

<sup>69</sup> Abrams, H. *Audrey Flack on Painting*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, INC., 1981, 81.

<sup>70</sup> Abrams, H. *Audrey Flack on Painting*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, INC., 1981, 81.

symbol for resurrection.<sup>71</sup> In her rendition, butterflies signify “the liberation of the soul.”<sup>72</sup>

Flack could be implying the resurrection of these victims into a more beautiful and pure existence. The quote from literature also captures the viewers attention. The quote is from Roman Vishniac’s book *Polish Jews* and reads:

“Outwardly they may have looked plagued by the misery and humiliation in which they lived, but inwardly they bore the rich sorrow of the world and the noble vision of redemption for all men and all beings. For man is not alone in the world. ‘Despair does not exist at all,’ said Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav, a Hasidic leader. ‘Do not fear dear child, God is with you, in you, around you. Even in the Nethermost Pit one can try to come closer to God.’ The word ‘bad’ never came to their lips. Disasters did not frighten them. ‘You can take everything from me-the pillow from under my head, my house-but you cannot take God from my heart.’”<sup>73</sup>

This is a powerful piece of literature that makes the viewers think of strength and of perseverance. This coupled with the symbolism of the butterfly shows a hope for a better existence in this life or the next. It endows the painting with more symbolism than just the

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<sup>71</sup> Taylor, Paul. *Dutch Flower Painting: 1600-1720*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University, 1995, 75.

<sup>72</sup> Abrams, H. *Audrey Flack on Painting*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, INC., 1981, 81.

<sup>73</sup> Abrams, H. *Audrey Flack on Painting*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, INC., 1981, 78.

transience of life. The idea of a *vanitas* as something more than this surface level of understanding became the centerpiece of interpretation for this piece.

Inspiration for this piece came from three different writings: *Dawn and Night* by Elie Wiesel, *The Survivors* by Terrence Des Pres, and *Polish Jews* by Roman Vishniac. The purpose was to tell a story that was an allegory of life and war and to tell the truth of the Nazis.<sup>74</sup> Unlike typical *vanitas* that focused on the coming of death and the transience of life, this painting looked at two very contradictory perspectives. The evil in the world and the “existence of beautiful humanity”. Audrey Flack explains her struggle to want to make the viewer feel shocked and horrified while also wanting to create a beautiful painting.<sup>75</sup> It was the quote previously stated by Roman Vishniac that gave Audrey Flack what she needed to combine these two battling ideals she. She said, “The innocence, the beauty and trust in God and humanity was overwhelming. I decided that would be a good contrast to the Bourke-White photograph, for the viewer could look at what happened to these people who could see, hear, and speak no evil.”<sup>76</sup> The use of beauty was not a mere “girly desire”. It was used as a ploy to get viewers invested enough to read the full quote.

Another contrast that was created besides horror and beauty was opulence and deprivation. This contrast was created with the use of the vanity items (pearls, lavish foods, and cobalt goblet) for opulence and the photograph of the victims for deprivation. This is the part that

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<sup>74</sup> Abrams, H. *Audrey Flack on Painting*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, INC., 1981, 78.

<sup>75</sup> Abrams, H. *Audrey Flack on Painting*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, INC., 1981, 78.

<sup>76</sup> Abrams, H. *Audrey Flack on Painting*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, INC., 1981, 78.

makes viewers uncomfortable and that was not a happy coincidence.<sup>77</sup> Similar to Ligozzi's *Memento Mori* (fig. 22), which depicts the decaying severed head, was meant to invoke feelings of discomfort. Guilt was another feeling that was to be felt by viewers, as we lucky ones were eating while people were suffering and starving. Similar to how we currently eat while people suffer.

Audrey Flack created another painting *Marilyn* (fig. 25) was painted in 1977 that focused on suffering, but unlike *World War II* (fig. 24) that focused on the suffering of many, she depicted the suffering of one: Marilyn Monroe. Many objects are being depicted in this still-life. Reading from left to right there is a blue jar with a silver necklace falling out, a mirror with Marilyn's reflection, a rose, an hourglass, a picture of Marilyn and her brother from her childhood, some fruit, a painted ceramic mug, an open book with text on the left and an image of Marilyn on the right, a calendar, a brush that is suspended in space, makeup, a rhinestone studded compact, perfume, lipstick suspended in space, and a lit candle. What makes this piece interesting is how Flack arranged her idea of "space". The lipstick and makeup brush are suspended in the air. The brush has a shadow that shows how it is raised above the other objects. In the background, to fill the negative space, is purple fabric on the top and red fabric on the bottom.

Every object was chosen for a reason. The images of Marilyn show the transformation of her character and the timeline of her suffering. Starting with the image of her and her brother as

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<sup>77</sup> Abrams, H. *Audrey Flack on Painting*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, INC., 1981, 78.

children, this is to be a symbol of the suffering she had during her childhood. The image chosen of Marilyn as an adult was interesting and contradictory to the artist's words. Flack explains how she chose a universal figure; however, she did not depict Marilyn in full "Marilyn" form. Norma Jean is still identifiable with the soft healthy curls with her more natural smile.<sup>78</sup> The photograph chosen is not the typical image you think of when you think Marilyn Monroe. The reflection of her that is seen in the mirror on the right shows her in her transition to fandom. The red lipstick has been placed most meticulously out of all of the objects. Flack has placed the lipstick in a way so that in the mirror's reflection, the lipstick lands right at her lips and other makeup falls around her head. Flack explains, "Like an icon she sits, the tools of her trade surrounding her. The rouge jars and powder puff form a crown around her head."<sup>79</sup> Flack makes her the icon she was looking for. The rest of the objects were chosen and placed just as meticulously as the photographs.

Flack explained how the original Timex watch she chose was too feminine, so she purchased another one that fit the setting she was trying to set up.<sup>80</sup> This watch, the hourglass, the calendar, and the burning candle, like typical *vanitas* and *World War II* (fig. 24), emphasize the passing of time. Starting with the fruit chosen, there is a peach, which was chosen after searching for the one that had the perfect pit formation that Flack was looking for. The orange

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<sup>78</sup> Abrams, H. *Audrey Flack on Painting*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, INC., 1981, 85.

<sup>79</sup> Abrams, H. *Audrey Flack on Painting*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, INC., 1981, 85.

<sup>80</sup> Abrams, H. *Audrey Flack on Painting*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, INC., 1981, 85.

was chosen due to the way “it is beginning to shrivel with the decay setting in”.<sup>81</sup> Even the white rose was changed out for a coral pink one that was to suggest love and softness. The violet satin sheet that is set at the top of the painting suggests healing. The other objects are “instruments of [Marilyn’s] will”.<sup>82</sup> Audrey Flack includes information from a book by Maurice Zolotow’s called *Marilyn* (fig. 25). This book sums up what Flack was trying accomplish.

“About four or five months after she moved into the orphanage, she fell into a depressed mood. It came on during a rainy day. Rain always made her think of her father and set up a desire to wander. On the way back from school, she slipped away from the line and fled. She didn’t know where she was running to and wandered aimlessly in the slashing rainstorm. A policeman found her and took her to a police station. She was brought back to Mrs. Dewey’s office. She was changed into dry clothes. She expected to be beaten. Instead, Mrs. Dewey took her in her arms and told her she was pretty. Then she powdered Norma Jean’s nose and chin with a powder puff.

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<sup>81</sup> Abrams, H. *Audrey Flack on Painting*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, INC., 1981, 85.

<sup>82</sup> Abrams, H. *Audrey Flack on Painting*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, INC., 1981, 86.

In 1950, Marilyn told her story of the powder puff to Sonia Wolfson, a publicity woman at 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox and then confided, “This was the first time in my life I felt loved-no one had ever noticed my face or hair or me before.”

Let us assume it even happened in some fashion. For it gives a glimpse as the powder goes on and the mirror comes up of a future artist conceiving a grand scheme in the illumination of an instant-one could paint oneself into an instrument of one’s will!”<sup>83</sup>

Not only does this give background information on Marilyn, but it also provides a connection to *vanitas*. Marilyn focuses and cares only for her appearance. It is what life taught her for survival. This way of thinking is what ultimately leads to her death. There is deep pain and deep beauty.<sup>84</sup> The idea behind *vanitas* is to not focus on looks and glory.

Another painting by Audrey Flack that focused on fortunes was *Wheel of Fortune* (fig. 26) which was painted from 1977 to 1978. The skull, being that it is the largest and lightest colored item, it takes the focus of this painting. This is a typical and common symbol of a *vanitas* that symbolizes death. Audrey Flack continues her use of reflections by showing the

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<sup>83</sup> Abrams, H. *Audrey Flack on Painting*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, INC., 1981, 86.

<sup>84</sup> Abrams, H. *Audrey Flack on Painting*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, INC., 1981, 86.

skulls reflection in the Baroque mirror. This plays on the idea that as humans, even in death, we care too much on vanity. This is similar to Ligozzi's *Memento Mori* (fig. 22) that shows the decaying skull and the cat skeleton's reflection in the mirror. There is a candle that is almost out of wax that still burns, a calendar and a red sand, embellished hourglass. As mentioned before these all show the passage of time however the hourglass is almost out of sand and the candle being almost out of wax is meant to show that time is running out which contrasts the skull that shows time has run out. There is a picture in a stitched frame in the upper corner with a young woman, red grapes, a fortune tellers card, a necklace, red lipstick, a small hand Baroque mirror, dice, a silver sphere, a red sculpture, and blue fabric. Audrey Flack poured herself physically and emotionally in this piece. Physically she is seen reflected with a tripod in the silver sphere in the upper right corner.

Emotionally, Audrey Flack felt the greatest connection with *Wheel of Fortune* (fig. 26). The title gives a hint to the deeper meaning behind this painting: *Wheel of Fortune* (fig. 26). Flack explains how, "It is hard to tell where the Wheel of Fortune will stop in our live."<sup>85</sup> This is a reminder that life can end at any moment. We need to live every day like it's our last. Audrey Flack has experienced this personally with the tragedy of her autistic daughter Melissa. This loss as well as a poem that holds great meaning for her is what creates the deeper significance for this

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<sup>85</sup> Abrams, H. *Audrey Flack on Painting*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, INC., 1981, 90.

painting comes from a poem that holds a lot of meaning to Audrey Flack.<sup>86</sup> The poem that this painting comes from is “Invictus” by William Ernest Henley reads:

Out of the night that covers me,  
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods may be  
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance  
I have not winced nor cried aloud.  
Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears  
Looms but the horror of the shade,  
And yet the menace of the years  
Finds, and shall find me, unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll,

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<sup>86</sup> Abrams, H. *Audrey Flack on Painting*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, INC., 1981, 90.

I am the master of my fate:

I am the captain of my fate.<sup>87</sup>

She explains how this poem, “was used as a source of strength to carry [Flack] through some difficult days.” To put this into the painting the line: “My head is bloody” is seen with the red wine and red lipstick that is above the skull.<sup>88</sup> The color in *Wheel of Fortune* (fig. 26) is even significant. In the reflection found in the Baroque mirror is a skull with an array of colors in the background. This rainbow collection of colors is to symbolize life beyond. The color of the grapes was specifically sought after for its name: *The Smell of Death*.<sup>89</sup> Color was also used to manipulate the realism of the fruit. For example, the green lime was initially painted naturalistic, but over time the color became more bright and acidic which created a hyper realistic fruit.<sup>90</sup> Similar to other *vanitas* created by Audrey Flack, this one has a dual meaning that focuses on life and how we are the master of our fate as well as the idea of the “Wheel of Fortune” that casts our fate.<sup>91</sup> Her works look to rethink how we look at and experience life.

The final Audrey Flack painting to discuss is *Time to Save* (fig. 27) which was painted in 1979. This is a floral *vanitas* that shows a bouquet of flowers where the foreground flowers

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<sup>87</sup> Abrams, H. *Audrey Flack on Painting*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, INC., 1981, 92.

<sup>88</sup> Abrams, H. *Audrey Flack on Painting*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, INC., 1981, 90.

<sup>89</sup> Abrams, H. *Audrey Flack on Painting*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, INC., 1981, 90.

<sup>90</sup> Abrams, H. *Audrey Flack on Painting*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, INC., 1981, 28-29.

<sup>91</sup> Abrams, H. *Audrey Flack on Painting*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, INC., 1981, 90.

are in focus and the further flowers are out of focus. There are butterflies and flies flying around and casting shadows on the gray background. The flowers are coming out of a blue and white ceramic vase. In front of the vase is a clock, dice, an hourglass, a shell, a papaya, a small skull, a fruit bowl that resembles a bird feeder, fruit, and a porcelain bird. The repetitive use of objects of time goes with the title of the painting: “Time” in *Time to Save* (fig. 27). In this instance, similar to *Wheel of Fortune* (fig. 26), the title plays a role in telling the story of the painting. Potentially unknown to viewers, the clock seen is also a bank. Flack was interested in the dual meaning. The bank adds to the idea of “Saving” in the title *Time to Save* (fig. 27). This contradicts the typical ideas of *vanitas* that talk of time that has already run out and the shortness of life.<sup>92</sup> The skull is a references the presence of death with the time running out on the hour-glass. The skull in this painting, unlike the one seen in *Wheel of Fortune* (fig. 26) is at rest.<sup>93</sup>

The artist explains how this is to invoke positive emotions with resurrection and ascension.<sup>94</sup> I, however, only see a setting that reminds me of a funeral and the sad emotions that entails the passing of a life and the need for more time. However, that is a surface understanding of the painting. When looking at each item individually, she explains how the butterfly is a liberated soul that is about to ascend and the porcelain bird is a Christian and Egyptian symbol of the soul. There is a broad scale of life and society being implied from the real and artificial

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<sup>92</sup> Abrams, H. *Audrey Flack on Painting*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, INC., 1981, 94.

<sup>93</sup> Abrams, H. *Audrey Flack on Painting*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, INC., 1981, 94.

<sup>94</sup> Abrams, H. *Audrey Flack on Painting*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, INC., 1981, 94.

objects.<sup>95</sup> Life is full of those who are real and those who are fake. Those who cherish the real things in life like love, compassion, and friendship versus those who focus on ephemeral things.

The theme of *vanitas* has changed over the years and varied from culture to culture. The 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch artists that coined this theme in painting were artists Jacques de Gheyn II (1565-1629), Pieter Claesz (1597-1661), and Maria van Oosterwijck (1630-1693). The initial use was religious based. Being placed on portable alters, it was used to remind patrons to avoid the follies of life that lead to sinning. There was no point in experiencing such things since we all die. The focus is on the transience of life which is seen with the used of bubbles and flowers. These things included music, art, literature, and items of vanity. The items used to imply these aspects of life were globes, books, instruments, jewelry, fine china, etc. Instead of dwelling on these things, the focus needs to be on God and prayer. By being on a portable alter, this gave patrons the constant reminder to avoid these things in life.

Ligozzi, the Italian *vanitas* painter, took the representation of vanity to the next level. His painting invokes feelings of discomfort. *Memento Mori* (fig. 22) has a severed and decaying head that has been put on a pedestal. The scene is uncomfortable; however, it is hard to look away. This painting focuses less on the negative impacts of art and literature. This could be due to the fact that Italy is one of the major centers for art and music. Ligozzi is conveying the decaying nature of vanity on our lives. We should just live instead of focusing on things like looks and the social hierarchy. Harnett, one of the American painters, reverted back to creating

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<sup>95</sup> Abrams, H. *Audrey Flack on Painting*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, INC., 1981, 94.

the “traditional” *vanitas*. His focus was on death consuming man’s accomplishments. It was Audrey Flack that came in and greatly altered the way we look at *vanitas* and how we apply them to our lives.

17<sup>th</sup> century *vanitas* focused on being servants to God being that he is the one that determines our fate. Audrey Flack challenges this idea with her paintings, especially *Wheel of Fortune* (fig. 26). She explains, “All of the *vanitas* paintings are a protest. They are saying: ‘Resist! Fight Back!’ We are subject to Fate, but we do have some degree of control over our lives, over our fate, however slight. Paint yourself into an “instrument of your will.”<sup>96</sup> Her paintings are filling with more meaning and symbolism than your traditional *vanitas*. It makes the theme *vanitas* something more and deeper than the focus of just death. The only thing Audrey Flack and other *vanitas* painters have in common is their focus on the moral and physical decay vanity has on our lives. There is a quote by Dylan Thomas that sums up her message: “Do not go gentle into that good night. Rage, rage, against the dying of the light.”<sup>97</sup> Audrey Flack reminds us to live and not to live our lives on autopilot.

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<sup>96</sup> Abrams, H. *Audrey Flack on Painting*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, INC., 1981, 90.

<sup>97</sup> Abrams, H. *Audrey Flack on Painting*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, INC., 1981, 90.

