

# A Conveyance of Rationality or a Connection to an Irrational World?

How *Flowers in a Glass Vase* Offers Access to a Supernatural Space



From skulls to hourglasses, from flowers with seemingly short lives to banquets whose once-sumptuous contents will inevitably rot; the sense of ticking time permeated seventeenth century Flemish still-lives. These painted reminders of mortality, called vanitas paintings, also foreshadowed Enlightenment theorists, who believed death negated the joys of human existence, which was just as fleeting and fragile as flowers'. Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder's *Flowers in a Glass Vase*, painted in 1615, however, deviates from the Enlightenment-fueled disenchantment with life that ominous vanitas paintings preview. These otherwise naturally evanescent flowers, in Bosschaert's hands, become not only immortal but also a bridge through which viewers can escape their own rationality- and disillusionment-filled world and cross into Bosschaert's colorful, vivacious, and generally otherworldly pictorial space.

Though vanitas paintings emerged in the Netherlands, painters throughout Europe explored and expanded the genre; despite these different variations, though, the message of vanitas paintings- that time is inescapable- remained untouched. As Fred G. Meijer, senior curator at the Netherlands Institute for Art History writes, vanitas paintings were "painted images of prominent skulls often composed in composition with other objects denoting the inevitable passing of time and brevity of life".<sup>1</sup> To convey that message, painters utilized symbols called *momento mori*; skulls particularly were an "iconographical necessity" because they, like corpses, were neither objects nor persons.<sup>2</sup> Timepieces, bones, snuffed candles, fruit, and even flowers also denoted the "invisible passage of time"; time, after all, would vanquish candles' light, spoil fruit, wilt flowers, and led to death- and the end of all earthly pleasures- for humans.<sup>3</sup> Harmen

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<sup>1</sup> Fred G. Meijer, "Vanitas and Banquet Still Lifes," in *The Magic of Things: Still-Life Painting, 1500-1800*, ed. Jochen Sander. (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2008), 149.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase "iconographical necessity" was quoted from Wouter Kloek, "The Magic of Still Life," in *Still Life Paintings from the Netherlands, 1550-1720*, ed. Alan Chong and Wouter Kloek. (Zwolle: Waanders Publishers, 1999), 42. The idea that skulls are not quite objects nor people was found in Meijer, "Vanitas and Banquet Still Lifes," 149.

<sup>3</sup> Meijer, "Vanitas and Banquet Still Lifes," 149.

Steenwyck's *Vanitas* (Figure 1) embodies this inescapability of passing time. Meijer delineates the message of *Vanitas*:

At one time or another we all must die and everything in this world is only temporary. Joys of life such as music and smoking a pipe, worldly knowledge of matters like geometry, recorded in books and manuscripts, are of no consequence anymore when only a skull and bones is all that remains of us.<sup>4</sup>

The prominently placed skull emphasizes Meijer's analysis; it clamps its bony jaw over an instrument, as if the



Figure 1: Harmen Steenwyck, *Vanitas*, ca. 1612-1656, oil on panel, Kunstmuseum Basel, Basel.

golden flute, along with the geometry books, cascading red cloth, and even the skull's jaunty beret, are meaningless and powerless against death.

Focused on science and rationality, the Enlightenment, which lasted from the late seventeenth century to the early eighteenth century, furthered this same message: that death renders inconsequential all successes in life, such as acquiring "worldly knowledge" and enjoying pleasures such as "music and smoking a pipe". Louis Dupré, Catholic phenomenologist and religious philosopher, has argued that, during the Enlightenment, "science was flourishing, philosophy was reaching one of its greatest periods. But as life was losing its mystery, many, even among the pioneers of the intellectual revolution, felt as though it was losing its depth".<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Louis Dupré, *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 229. These ideas are also echoed in Amir R. Alexander, *Duel at Dawn: Heroes, Martyrs, and the Rise of Modern Mathematics: New Histories of Science Technology, and Medicine*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 160 and Sharon A. Stanley, "Enlightenment as Disillusionment" in *The French*

Vanitas painters therefore anticipated the ideologies of Enlightenment thinkers. To both, the scientific knowledge that all living things, like humans, will be only skulls and bones in the future caused both life to lose its “joy”, “depth”, and general otherworldliness and individuals, including intellectual pioneers, to feel subsequently disillusioned.

Bosschaert’s *Flowers in a Glass Vase* predates and counters these beliefs first by repurposing flowers, a common vanitas symbol (Figure 2). Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder (1573-1621) started his career in Antwerp but spend most of it in Middelburg; there, he became a master of Middelburg’s Guild of Saint Luke. Credited as the first flower portrait painter, Bosschaert depicted numerous pictures of this genre, including *Flowers in a Glass Vase*, which reimaged flowers as a symbol of life; according to Meijer, the whole bouquet in *Flowers in a Glass Vase* does not constitute the same reminder of death as would sparse blossoms in a vanitas painting. Bosschaert subsequently supersedes the then-popular notion that flowers were only another *momenti mori*.<sup>6</sup>



Figure 2: Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder, *Flowers in a Glass Vase*, ca. 1615, oil on panel, 54 x 39.5 cm, Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University, Stanford.

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*Enlightenment and the Emergence of Modern Cynicism*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 38.

<sup>6</sup> Meijer, “Vanitas and Banquet Still Lifes,” 150.

<sup>7</sup> David Roberts, “*Art and Enlightenment: Aesthetic Theory After Adorno*”. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 10.

<sup>8</sup> Kloek, “The Magic of Still Life,” 42.

*Flowers in a Glass Vase* similarly deviates from burgeoning Enlightenment rationality by reminding viewers that their lives are irrational and mystic. Bosschaert's societal status as an artist, according to Monash University professor David Roberts, allowed him to act outside the "given contents and forms" of his world, which was starting to embrace scientific rationality.<sup>7</sup> Kloek expands this idea; he argues that being a still-life painter gave Bosschaert "complete liberty" to freeze a scene, and, consequently, freeze time:

[Still life] artists... were at almost complete liberty to arrange all manner of objects. A flower painter did not paint an aspect of nature as a bouquet as he found it, but could compose that bouquet as he saw fit. In flower pieces, almost everything is in bloom, simultaneously, regardless of season, and the painter always seems to have managed to complete the picture before the flowers faded.<sup>8</sup>

Bosschaert's freedom to "compose" his bouquet allowed him both to group flowers could not be naturally found together, much less in bloom at the same time, and to defy the Enlightenment ideals. As a still-life painter, Bosschaert was not confined to reality; rather he could convey certain objects however (ir)rationality he chose, such as arrangements that "no gardener could have garnered" because flowers could not naturally exist in those formations.<sup>9</sup>

The otherworldly, illogical, and imaginative "melding of beautiful flowers from different seasons of the year" of *Flowers in a Glass Vase* thus deviates from the upcoming rationality and disillusionment. To highlight visually this digression from the scientifically possible, Bosschaert

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<sup>9</sup> Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder (Antwerp 1573- The Hague 1621)" in *The Golden Age of Dutch and Flemish Painting*. (Houston/the Hague: The Museum of Fine Arts/Mauritshuis, 2000), 20.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> John Loughman, "The Market for Netherlandish Still Lifes, 1600-1720," in *Still-Life Paintings from the Netherlands, 1550-1720*, ed. Alan Chong and Wouter Kloek. (Zwolle: Waanders Publishers, 1999), 88.

painted each inexplicably blooming flower in vivid colors, ranging from the pale pink carnation to the red and orange tulip to the electric blue forget-me-nots.<sup>10</sup> Even the table itself is alive with color; a white carnation and an icy-blue bud border the vase while a golden dragonfly occupies the lower right of the canvas. The rounded dabs of color and light of dragonfly's spine (Figure 3) mimic those forming the vase's rim (Figure 4), a twinning that suggests that the life of the dragonfly is just as permanent as that of the crystal vase. Even Federico Borromeo, cardinal of Milan, exalted the stability and durability the colorful flowers and jeweled dragonfly convey.<sup>11</sup> By portraying dragonfly's life as infinite and the flowers as perpetually blooming at the same time, resplendent in color and life, Bosschaert conveys a permanence that defies the natural existence of both.



Figure 3: Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder, *Flowers in a Glass Vase* (dragonfly close-up) ca. 1615, oil on panel, 54 x 39.5 cm, Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University, Stanford.



Figure 4: Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder, *Flowers in a Glass Vase* (vase close-up) ca. 1615, oil on panel, 54 x 39.5 cm, Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University, Stanford.

That Bosschaert's pictorial space is entirely unrealistic and unearthly underlines his painting's departure from a science-based reality. Even his choice to utilize a vertical axis causes *Flowers in a Glass Vase* to represent transcendence; to Alexander Nemerov, Professor of Art History at Stanford University, "the vertical world is the supernatural world".<sup>12</sup> The table itself is

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<sup>12</sup> Lecture, 11/3/14.

<sup>13</sup> Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, *Still Life: A History*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1999), 97

an object of this “supernatural world”. The way Bosschaert painted his tabletop is not unique; most early table still-lives, such as Frans Snyders (?), *Still Life: Fruit, Vegetables and Game on a Table*, oil on canvas, 89 x 122 cm, Towner, England (Figure 5) or Jan Brueghel the Elder, *Flowers in a Glass Vase*, ca. 1608, oil on wood, 42.9 x 33.7 cm, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana, Milan, Italy (Figure 6), depict a tabletop from this same low angle, extended beyond the frame on either side.<sup>13</sup> In *Flowers in a Glass Vase*, however, the table only supplements the otherworldliness of this painted space because it “looks entirely unreal...it seems to float in space and certainly does not invite us to draw up a chair”.<sup>14</sup> The dark, depthless background focuses the viewer’s eye on the table’s contents: the flowers, which are divinely lit because no rational source of light exists in the picture, and which are voluminous compared to the depthless background.



Figure 5: Frans Snyders (?), *Still Life: Fruit, Vegetables and Game on a Table*, oil on canvas, 89 x 122 cm, Towner, Eastbourne.



Figure 6: Jan Brueghel the Elder, *Flowers in a Glass Vase*, 1608, oil on wood, 42.9 x 33.7 cm, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana, Milan.

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<sup>14</sup>. Kloek, “The Magic of Still Life,” 43.

The flowers too are anomalous; though they are unrealistically blooming, they are rigidly scientific, a rendering which invites viewers to scrutinize the painting to clarify that the flowers are indeed painted. Henry James, British art historian, once commented on the realism of painted objects in Dutch still-lives, such as Bosschaert's:

When you are looking at the originals, you seem to be looking at the copies; and, when you are looking at the copies, you seem to be looking at the originals... We have to put on a very particular pair of spectacles and bend our nose well over our task, and, beyond our consciousness that our gains are real gains, remain decidedly at loss how to classify them.<sup>15</sup>

The placement of still-life paintings inside seventeenth-century Netherlandish households proved that these paintings were displayed so viewers could do their “particular pair of spectacles and bend their nose well over” them. Representations of domestic interiors find that relatively small still-lives like Bosschaert's, which is only 54 x 39.5 cm, would be hung low, “inviting the spectator to stand near the wall and study them at close quarters” as Dr. John Loughman, specialist in 17th-century Dutch art, writes.<sup>16</sup> This position invited viewers to examine closely the painted world which appeared to be stretching out of the frame and into their own lives.

Viewers, as a result, must ask themselves how images “situated at the threshold between the world and our perception of it... can be considered art” according to Svetlana Alpers.<sup>17</sup> She lists features which allow paintings to bridge the gap between their own pictorial space and their viewer's world:

The absence of a prior frame... so that the image spread out on the pictorial surface appears to be an unbounded fragment

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<sup>15</sup> As quoted in Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 27.

<sup>16</sup> Loughman, “The Market for Netherlandish Still Lives,” 89.

<sup>17</sup> Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, 27.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*



of the world that continues beyond the canvas...the world staining the surface with color and light, impressing all upon it; the viewer, neither located nor characterized, perceiving all with an attentive eye but leaving no trace of his presence".<sup>18</sup>

*Flowers in a Glass Vase* embodies all of these features. Its frameless existence connects the viewers, in their soon to be rationalized pre-Enlightenment world with the mystical, magical picture space, which continues beyond the canvas, just as the painting's table does. Likewise, Bosschaert's picture is "stain[ed] with color and light", impressing his flowers upon the viewer who, in turn, is neither located nor characterized. The undefinable, depthless background makes it impossible for viewers to orient themselves or leave any trace of their presence or character. These qualities of *Flowers in a Glass Vase*, its literal position in a seventeenth-century Flemish home, and its subject matter make it an "unbounded fragment of the world that continues beyond the canvas", an escape for the viewers. Rather than duplicating viewers' rational, disillusioned setting, this painting offers a space, saturated with light, color, irrationality, and life, that extends beyond the confines of the canvas and the limits of reality and into the viewers' worlds.

The beauty, mystery, and unexplainable qualities of still-lives, like *Flowers in a Glass Vase*, caused Jan Brueghel the Elder, a contemporary of Bosschaert's, to challenge Federico Borromeo, the Cardinal of Milan, to judge for himself "whether the painted flowers were not superior to gold and jewels".<sup>19</sup> Alpers adds that seventeenth-century Flemish still-lives provide a "formidable sense of the picture as a surface (like a mirror or a map)".<sup>20</sup> Ambrosius Bosschaert

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<sup>19</sup> As quoted in Gerhard Bott, "How Netherlandish Artist Brought Still-Life Painting to the Banks of the River Main," in *The Magic of Things: Still-Life Painting, 1500-1800*, ed. Jochen Sander. (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2008), 104.

<sup>20</sup> Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*, xxv.

the Elder's *Flowers in a Glass Vase* exemplifies this idea. This painting does not remind the viewer of temporary mortality and the current disillusionment of humans, including vanitas artists and future Enlightenment intellectuals, but rather reflects and offers access, like a map, to an alternate world: an unreasonable and unrealistic but ethereal, colorful, vivacious, light-drenched, and priceless setting. This role of Bosschaert's painted flowers as a bridge, a chance to escape reality, thus makes them more valuable than tangible but wholly unremarkable gold or jewels in an environment which is ticking, just like the hands on a clock, towards simultaneous Enlightenment and disillusionment.

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