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Vanitas – on borrowed time

MEDICINE AND ART

ERLEND HEM

erlend.hem@lefo.no
Erlend Hem, head of the Institute for Studies of the Medical Profession, professor at the University of Oslo and chairman of the Health History Forum
The author has completed the ICMJE form and declares no conflicts of interest.

Skulls in art remind us that nothing lasts forever.

The Netherlands' national museum, *Rijksmuseum*, in Amsterdam (1) is home to several dozen works featuring the skull as a motif (2). For doctors, the skull is primarily an anatomical object: the bony structure that protects the brain and shapes the face. In culture and symbolism, however, it carries many other meanings (3), as classically expressed in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Among the many skull motifs, one stands out in particular: the *Vanitas Still Life* painting by Aelbert Jansz. van der Schoor (c. 1603–72) (Figure 1). As the title suggests, the painting belongs to the *vanitas* genre, a theme that became widespread in early modern Dutch art.

Figure 1 Vanitas Still Life by Aelbert Jansz. van der Schoor (c. 1603–72), c. 1660–65, is a masterpiece from the Dutch Golden Age of painting. Photo: Public domain

Vanitas and memento mori

Vanitas is a recurring theme in European art and literature. It expresses the idea that all earthly things are transient (4). In the 17th century in the Netherlands, vanitas still life offered the most powerful visual articulation of this concept, with skulls and everyday objects used as symbols of life's impermanence.

Vanitas is closely related to paintings in the *memento mori* genre: 'remember you must die', which frequently features skulls and extinguished candles, but it also uses symbols that point to human vanity and the pursuit of earthly pleasures (5).

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The word *vanitas* originates from the Book of Ecclesiastes in the Bible: *Vanitas vanitatum, et omnia vanitas* (Vanity of vanities, all is vanity). In a modern Norwegian translation, it is rendered: '*Forgjeves, sier Forkynneren, forgjeves og forgjengelig – alt er forgjeves!*' In the New International Version of the Bible, it reads: 'Meaningless! Meaningless! says the Teacher. Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless' (6) The Norwegian text, however,

conveys both meaninglessness and transience (*forgjeves og forgjengelig*), two aspects of the Hebrew word *hevel*, which means 'breath' or 'vapour', i.e. something fleeting and without lasting substance (7). The same idea is also captured in the phrase *sic transit gloria mundi:* 'Thus passes the glory of the world'.

Fleeting goods

In the Dutch Golden Age of the 17th century, vanitas developed into a highly sophisticated artistic expression. The paintings draw the eye with their seemingly chaotic arrangements; tabletops overflowing with objects that appear to be randomly placed, but each has a symbolic meaning about the instability of the world and human mortality (5).

Vanitas stems from Protestant ethics and serves as a warning against the temptations of worldly wealth and pleasure in favour of spiritual insight. It is a branch of still life, in which inanimate everyday objects such as vases, cups, food and flowers take centre stage. The meaning lies not in the objects themselves, but in how they are used to convey ideas about time, transience and morality. In contrast to the conventional still life genre, which primarily showcases artistic skill and beauty, the aim of a vanitas painting is to communicate a moral message (5).

The most common symbols in the vanitas tradition are *wealth* (gold, jewellery, purses), *knowledge* (books, maps, pens, telescopes), *pleasure* (food, wine, textiles), and *transience* (skulls, withered flowers, extinguished candles, hourglasses). All were symbols of life's fleeting goods (5).

By the end of the Dutch Golden Age, vanitas' popularity had waned, and its moral message weakened as the fervour of the Reformation subsided (5).

Skulls on a table

On the stone table in van der Schoor's painting lie six skulls, some other bones, an almost burnt-down candle, an hourglass and two sprigs of flowers. Above the table are books and documents sealed with red wax, a reminder that neither knowledge nor power can alter the reality of life's transience. Human knowledge and power also have their limits (8).

In the painting, the artist combines moral reflection with technical precision. The realistic style and the careful depiction of light and shadow give the scene an almost tangible presence. Nothing is left to the imagination. The skulls are arranged at various angles so that the viewer sees them from different sides. The bones intersect, and there is an illusion of objects projecting over the table's edge: a technique known as *trompe-l'oeil* (5, 9).

The composition follows the iconography of the vanitas tradition – skulls, flowers, candles, books and hourglasses – but stands out due to its complex arrangement. There is no known parallel to such an extensive collection of

human skulls and bones in 17th-century Dutch artwork (2). The painting therefore functions both as a classic vanitas still life and as an anatomical study, reflecting the artist's interest in human anatomy, especially evident in the technically demanding depiction of a skull from below (2).

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Van der Schoor's use of six skulls rather than just one can be interpreted as a deliberate intensification of the message. A single skull symbolises death, while several form a 'chorus' of transience. As such, the perspective expands from the individual to humanity as a whole – death affects everyone, regardless of their wealth, knowledge or status.

The artist

Aelbert Jansz. van der Schoor is scarcely mentioned in Norwegian literature, and little is known about him. This painting, created around 1660–65, is considered his masterpiece (8).

His earliest known work, a portrait of a woman, is dated 1642, while his last dated vanitas still life is from 1662. Over the course of these two decades, he primarily painted portraits and still life. Roughly 30 paintings are currently attributed to him.

The final part of van der Schoor's life was marked by misfortune. In 1654, when he was in his fifties, he became engaged to a wealthy woman, but the engagement ended in court after she claimed he had sought marriage solely for her wealth. The scandal likely led to fewer portrait commissions, which may explain his shift toward still life painting. Toward the end of his life, he was imprisoned and later committed to a mental institution, where he probably died some time after September 1672 (8).

Vanitas in the Dutch Golden Age

Dutch art in the 17th century marks one of the most extraordinary periods in the history of art. Over the course of a few decades, a unique generation of artists emerged – all now counted among the most important figures in art history – such as Frans Hals (c. 1580–1666), Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606–69) and Johannes Vermeer (1632–75) (8, 10).

This era of artistic flourishing coincided with rapid economic growth. Wealth from trade and seafaring created a new, confident social class with a taste for art. Prosperity also brought a heightened awareness of life's transience – a paradox that helped fuel the vanitas tradition (5).

Van der Schoor's work demonstrates how technical virtuosity and personal expression can elevate a traditional motif into a masterpiece. In the painting, symbolism, aesthetics and knowledge converge. Art from this period resonates far beyond a mere depiction of human anatomy.

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