

Vanitas

ART

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Vanitas, (Latin: , “vanity”) in art, a [genre of still-life painting](#) that flourished in the Netherlands in the early 17th century. A *vanitas painting* contains collections of objects symbolic of the inevitability of death and the transience and vanity of earthly achievements and pleasures; it exhorts the viewer to consider mortality and to repent. The *vanitas* evolved from simple pictures of skulls and other symbols of death and transience frequently painted on the reverse sides of portraits during the late Renaissance. It had acquired an independent status by c. 1550 and by 1620 had become a popular genre. Its development until its decline about 1650 was centred in Leiden, in the [United Provinces of the Netherlands](#), an important seat of Calvinism, which emphasized humanity’s total depravity and advanced a rigid [moral code](#).



Still Life, oil on wood by Willem Claesz Heda, 1634; in the Museum Boijmans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam. 43 × 57 cm.
Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam

Although a few *vanitas* pictures include figures, the vast majority are pure still lifes, containing certain standard elements: symbols of arts and sciences (books, maps, and musical instruments), wealth and power (purses, jewelry, gold objects), and earthly pleasures (goblets, pipes, and playing cards); symbols of death or transience (skulls, clocks, burning candles, soap bubbles, and flowers); and, sometimes, symbols of resurrection and eternal life (usually ears of corn or sprigs of ivy or laurel). The earliest *vanitas* pictures were sombre, somewhat monochromatic [compositions of great power](#), containing only a few objects (usually books and a skull) executed with elegance and precision. As the century progressed, other elements were included, the mood lightened, and the palette became diversified. Objects were often tumbled together in disarray, suggesting the eventual overthrow of the achievements they represent. Somewhat ironically, the later *vanitas* paintings became largely a pretext for [meticulous virtuosity](#) in the rendering of varied textures and surfaces, but the artistic quality of the genre in no sense declined. Several of the greatest Dutch still-life painters, including David Bailly, [Jan Davidsz de Heem](#), [Willem Claesz Heda](#), Pieter Potter, and Harmen and Pieter van Steenwyck, were masters of the *vanitas* still life, and the influence of the genre can be seen in the iconography and technique of other contemporary painters, including [Rembrandt](#).

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Jan Davidsz de Heem, one of the greatest Baroque painters of still life in Holland. His most numerous and characteristic works are arrangements of fruits, metal dishes, and wine glasses; compositions of books and musical instruments; and examples of the popular “vanity...”

Willem Claesz Heda

Willem Claesz Heda, one of the principal Dutch Baroque still life painters. Early in his career Heda produced some figure subjects, but nearly all of his known works are still lifes, of which the earliest dated example is a “**Vanitas**” of 1621....

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