

Jan jansz den uyl,
breakfast still life with
glass and metalwork



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FA102: Art From the Renaissance to Modern Times Paper #2—Jan Jansz den Uyl, Breakfast Still Life with Glass and Metalwork Breakfast Still Life with Glass and Metalwork is an oil on panel produced by Jan Jansz den Uyl, an artist of the Dutch Baroque period. The painting is dated around 1637-39 and measures 130.5 x 115.5cm. It depicts a disarray of objects—pewter, goblets, plates and unfinished food—strewn across the tabletop on top of a piece of rumpled white linen.

Although it may seem like an ordinary still-life painting, the artist attempts to convey a hidden message to the audience through his careful selection and arrangement of the subject matter. This essay will explore how den Uyl achieves this by presenting a formal visual analysis with emphasis placed on the painting's composition and historical context. Breakfast Still Life with Glass and Metalwork can be organized into two planes. The background consists of a wall with a niche on the right hand side; it is separated approximately down the middle by light and shadow.

In the foreground is a table covered with rumpled white linen on the right side, on top of which is a large pewter flagon, a pair of overturned glass and gold goblets, and a piece of ornate Venetian glassware framed by the niche. A gold plate hangs precariously at the side of the table facing the viewer and would have fallen off if it were not balanced by the weight of another plate stacked upon it. A spoon and a pocket watch are placed nearby. There is also an upset metal container and a porcelain plate with a morsel of stylized cheese or butter elevated on a tin can.

A long piece of black cloth covering the whole table is made visible on the right end. A plate of half-eaten pie and a silver spoon lay forgotten along with the glass half-filled with an unknown beverage. The leftovers are surrounded by a silver plate, a small knife and some bits and crumbs; a trail of black smoke is rising from the empty candlestick holder, signifying that the absent candle was not extinguished by the candlesnuffer but left to die out on its own. Continuing the traditional style of the Northern Renaissance, den Uyl presents a still life painting with extreme attention to detail.

This is evident in the depiction of the Venetian glasswork and the handle of the pewter, where the artist has included his signature. "Den Uyl" means "owl" in Dutch, which is portrayed on the pewter's handle. Small drops of water are also evident on the metallic surface, which serves to highlight the artist's skillfulness. Typical of Northern European paintings, Den Uyl also conveys the tactility of a wide range of materials. Using oil paint as medium, the artist is able to illustrate the reflection of light on metallic surfaces, a critical device for successfully differentiating metal from glass.

A close view of the painting reveals that the reflections are tiny dots of white paint that blends in naturally with the rest of the image when viewed at a distance. Den Uyl's depiction of glass also reveals a great deal of mastery, especially the half-empty glass on the right end of the table by showcasing it in three states; he illustrates the semi-transparent liquid within and contrasts the glass against the black cloth as well as the wall in the background, embodying three facets of glass in one. The sleek surfaces of these objects contrast with the pliability of the white linen, whose creases and folds are naturalistically conveyed.

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The Northern European style remains steadfast, but its pictorial content has shifted dramatically. During the 17th century, Calvinism became the dominant approach to Christian life in Northern Netherlands; as a result, little religious art were produced. Meanwhile, the Dutch economy enjoyed great prosperity due to Amsterdam's rising importance in international trade and banking. This prompted the emergence of urban middle-class merchants and manufacturers, whose newfound wealth also promised political power due to the absence of a monarchy.

These two historical conditions gave rise to vanitas paintings, where artists could express their concern for the spiritual while displaying the patron's acquired luxuries without explicitly including any religious imagery. Den Uyl has injected a memento mori in *Breakfast Still Life with Glass and Metalwork* and provides various clues to the audience in hopes of communicating his intentions. His use of earth tones appropriately constructs a somber atmosphere for this vanitas painting. The viewer is met with a disarrangement of various dining paraphernalia scattered across the table and the lack of human presence in the room elicits a sense of isconcertment, especially when utensils are in place; it is as if people simply vanished in the midst of enjoying their breakfast. The unfinished food on the table seem out of place in the absence of diners; the pie and the block of cheese/butter are cut open, exposing them to the air and quickening their decay if no cloth is provided to cover them. Against the background we notice a thin wisp of black smoke, signaling that no one has bothered with the candlesnuffer, thus the scene has remained unperturbed by any signs of life for some time.

The burned out candle and the timepiece next to the golden plates comment on the frailty and transient nature of life. This quality is echoed by the precariously balanced plates, where one of them could fall off the table's edge at any moment. The artist exacerbates his representation of the human condition through means of lighting and composition. Light shines through from the top right corner and suddenly darkens at the edge of the wall, right before the extinguished candle. The transition from white linen to black cloth also takes place around this area.

The progression of light to dark coincides with the temporality of materials, from the durable metal and glass to perishable commodities. We may also draw an analogous relationship between death and decay and the varying conditions of the leftover food. A comparison may be made with Willem Claesz Heda's *Still Life with a Silver Tazza*, a vanitas painting that also includes depictions of food. Heda's still life includes many similar objects, such as the glass and gold goblets. The plate of oysters and the peeled orange symbolizes the passing nature of pleasure but does not narrate a continuous progression of time.

In contrast, den Uyl condenses the life of man into three stages and sequentially narrates the simple storyline through food. The elevated piece of butter/cheese is the first element of a downward sloping diagonal, whose smooth surface reminds the viewer of youthful and unblemished skin. Next along our line of view is the half-eaten pie, glistening with unknown filling; upon closer inspection, the filling consists of black and pale brown bubbles with varying size and shapes. The artist could have chosen a more appetizing color, but his intentions are to remind us of the death.

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This is successfully achieved, as the filling reminds the viewer of mold or fungus, thus leading our thoughts towards disease and rotten flesh. At the end of the diagonal lies a trail of scattered crumbs, all dark colored and unidentifiable, similar to the remnants of man after death. The inclusion of so many metal and glass objects not only speaks to the wealth of the household, but the sleekness of its depiction also lends a degree of impersonality between the painter and the viewer.

Above the skeleton in Masaccio's Holy Trinity is carved: " I once was what you are, and what I am you will become. " Although there is no skull in Breakfast Still Life with Glass and Metalwork, Den Uyl conveys the same message through the display of unfinished food. All goods presented before our eyes are of no true value. They will continue to exist in this world while men die and decompose, until all that is left are dust and crumbs of what we once were.

The smooth and precise brushwork provides little evidence of the artist's hand, creating a feeling of detachment appropriate for den Uyl's message. In this case, he is stating a simple fact: death is the end of us all and there is no escaping it, therefore one should relinquish his or her worldly attachment to pleasure and luxury in order to focus on salvation in the afterlife. There is no religious imagery in this painting, but the general theme of death and warning against overindulgence is very much present through the selection of subject matter.

This work of art not only warns us against allures of the ephemera, but also speaks towards broader historical context, mainly the influence of Calvinism

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and Amsterdam's development towards becoming the commercial capital of Europe. Vanitas still life paintings were popular in the 17th century, but what differentiates Breakfast Still Life with Glass and Metalwork from other similar artworks is the analogical relationship between the human condition and the display of decomposing food.

The perishables are contrasted with the comparatively immortal nature of metal and glass, which serves to remind both wealthy Dutch merchants in the 17th century and viewers today of spiritual matters that should take priority over worldly concerns. Bibliography Museum of Fine Arts. Museum label for Jan Jansz den Uyl, Breakfast Still Life with Glass and Metalwork, Boston, 16 April 2011. Kleiner, Fred S. Gardner's Art through the Ages: The Western Perspective. Boston: Wadsworth, 2010 -----

[1]. Kleiner, 434