

# Rachel ruysch's still life

[Art & Culture](#), [Painting](#)



Rachel Ruysch's work must be seen against the backdrop of the rapidly changing social, cultural and economic prospects of the Netherlands in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. The Netherlands was realising the benefits of new independence from Spain in 1648, with worldwide maritime trade, the expansion of Dutch colonialism, particularly in East Indies and Indonesia, and a flourishing capitalist economy. Increasingly international, prosperous and influential in the world, The Netherlands was becoming more confident in its international stature.

Both the economic prosperity and international links promoted a thriving culture. The growth and commerce of the Protestant church, resulting from Dutch Calvinism and the Protestant Reformation, increased literacy and widespread political and religious tolerance. As a society in flux, a revolution in scientific thought instigated great advances in the natural sciences, supplanting long-established traditions with new means of understanding.

Without the dominance of a monarchy or the Catholic church for patronage, a new affluent middle class generated a new form of patronage, desiring paintings to adorn their homes. The newly competitive open market encouraged artists to specialise, with still life being particularly popular. Coined around 1650, still life describes 'a composition of motionless objects, painted by the artist from life' and separate genres within still life developed, including flower painting; the most highly esteemed of the still life genres.

Achieving international status as a flower painter, Ruysch (1664-1750) was one of the highest paid artists of her time, and the most expensive artist at auction for the first two decades of the eighteenth century. The popularity of

Ruysch's paintings may be explained by her ambitious, asymmetrical, spiralling compositions and striking verisimilitude, unmatched by her contemporaries. Several scholars, however, dismiss such superficial interpretations of her work, instead suggesting that the choice of flowers and arrangements hold moral, symbolic or spiritual significance. An infrequent interpretation of Ruysch's work is that it contains moralising representations of signs of the transient nature of life and vanity of worldly assets, in line with the Vanitas concept. It is, however, recognised that the significance of Ruysch's flower paintings is uncertain and as noted by Jongh, still lifes generally leave symbolism to speculation, and the search for a single meaning is cautioned.

This study explores various interpretations of Ruysch's paintings. Employing iconological and social art historical methods, her work is examined considering the Vanitas concept and other possible moralising statements. It will also consider scientific implications and patronage to ultimately argue that the boundaries between the genres of Dutch still life painting are not as fixed as commonly acknowledged and that Ruysch's works should be not only classified as purely flower paintings, but as somewhat symbolic

Analysis revolves around a number of key paintings by Rachel Ruysch which represent the breadth of styles and techniques she used and are typical examples of her work.. Readily available in UK Galleries which, aside from representing breadth etc, are available for study in uk collections

Vanitas

Vanitas compromised a separate genre within still life painting and aims to encourage contemplation on the inevitability of death and the vanity of earthly goods. Vanitas, or 'emptiness' derives from the sentiment of Ecclesiastes 12: 8, thus has strong religious motivations, typically appointing religious meanings to the objects portrayed. From a secular slant, some scholars interpreted fine objects as warnings about the evils of luxury and the emptiness of worldly existence. Such symbolic objects are described as memento mori; reminders of death, which function to deliver the Vanitas concept of the emptiness of worldly existence.

According to Ruysch's contemporary, Gerard de Lairesse (1640-1711), Vanitas paintings consist of 'all kinds of precious things'. A great variety of objects could be used as memento mori and to express the Vanitas concept. Delicate, fine materials such as shells, ceramics, glass and jewellery are said to reference the fragility of human life and the fleeting nature of material possessions, while skulls bones, clocks and hourglasses act as reminders of the inevitability of death. De Lairesse highlights 'the famous Kalf who left many excellent and outstanding examples'. It is interesting that Lairesse classifies Willem Kalf as a Vanitas painter, since very rarely do his compositions contain the most obvious memento mori; the skull. There is scholarly debate over whether skulls are an iconographical necessary in Vanitas paintings, however it is now generally accepted that although skulls are the standard Vanitas motif, they are not essential, providing the overarching theme of the painting promotes meditation on death.

Several scholars have suggested that Ruysch's flower paintings express the Vanitas concept. Commonly included in Vanitas paintings due to their status as memento mori, the fragility and transient nature of flowers has been perceived as a reminder of the futility of mortal existence. This, in tandem with the presence of other symbolic objects, has driven interpretations of Ruysch's work as Vanitas.

Looking at 'A Vase of Flowers' from an iconological perspective, there is evidence of objects imbued with symbolism. Set in a field of unarticulated colour, which pushes the arrangement parallel to the picture plane and flattens pictorial space, such emphasis is placed on the items that it seems unlikely, considering the remarkably detailed rendering, that the objects were chosen purely with aesthetic motives. The insects are clearly significant, as an oversized winged-insect draws attention in the lower centre of the composition, emphasised by the horizontal axis of the table drawing the eye across towards it. They punctuate the composition and are thought of as destructive, stressing the imminence of death and decay. The overripe fruit, highlighted by the raking light eerily illuminating the composition, may also indicate to the impermanence of the display. Flowers are depicted at all stages of life, some still buds, others in full bloom, some withering and rotting; perhaps referencing the transitory nature of life, in line with memento mori.

The poisonous Cuckoopint, whose leaves have already rotted away, would have been recognised by amateur botanists and flower-enthusiasts: Ruysch's probable audience considering the sweeping craze of botanical interest

across the Netherlands in the seventeenth century. This perilous plant amongst inoffensive flowers may act as a memento mori. The fully ripened berries of the Cuckoopint above the peaches contrast to the one diseased, decaying and withered on the spiralling compositional axis. It is this juxtaposition of life and death, stressing the brevity of life, that underscores the concept of Vanitas. It is doubtful, however, whether Ruysch's paintings, lacking obvious references to the theme or explicit texts, were meant to hold the same sentiments, as individual motifs have multiple ambiguous associations.

From a social art history standpoint, both Ruysch and her audience would almost certainly have been aware of the Vanitas concept. Whether viewers made such moralistic associations is debated. Dutch Calvinism and the Protestant Reformation nurtured a protestant, literate population, and since the metaphor of flowers for the fleeting nature of life is used three times in the Old Testament and two times in the New; it is highly probable that this was a well-known association in seventeenth-century Netherlands. All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: the grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. This biblical passage must have been familiar to people of every religious persuasion.