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The seven deadly sins: Images of pride and transience¹

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to look at the works of William Shakespeare and the seven deadly sins from the perspective of painting. The seven deadly sins include pride, greed, wrath, envy, lust, gluttony and sloth. The paper presents, among others, an analysis of the painting by Hieronymus Bosch with that very title – *The Seven Deadly Things and the Four Last Things*, with reference to such works by Shakespeare as *A Comedy of Errors*, *Richard III* or *Twelfth Night*.

Keywords

seven deadly sins, William Shakespeare, images, Hieronymus Bosch, *The Seven Deadly Things and the Four Last Things*

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Siedem grzechów głównych: Obrazy dumy i przemijania

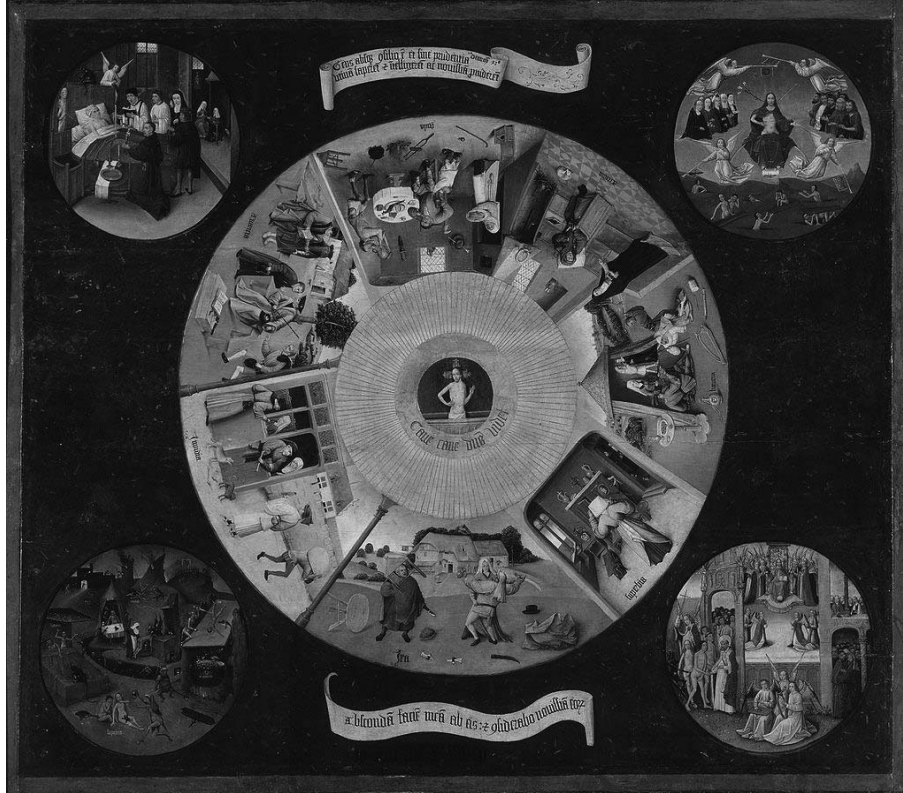
Abstrakt

Celem tego artykułu jest spojrzenie na twórczość Williama Szekspira i siedem grzechów głównych z przez pryzmat malarstwa. Owych siedem grzechów to pycha, zawiść, chciwość, gniew, rozwiązłość (nieczystość), obżarstwo (łakomstwo) i lenistwo. Artykuł przedstawia m.in. analizę obrazu Hieronima Boscha *Siedem grzechów głównych i cztery rzeczy ostateczne*, z odniesieniami do takich dzieł Szekspira jak *Komedia omyłek*, *Ryszard III* czy też *Wieczór Trzech Króli*.

Słowa kluczowe

siedem grzechów głównych, William Shakespeare, obrazy, Hieronim Bosch, *Siedem grzechów głównych i cztery rzeczy ostateczne*

One of the best known and, at the same time, intriguing works that illustrate the seven deadly sins is somewhat earlier than “our” period (from around 1500). It is the painting by Hieronymus Bosch with that very title – *The Seven Deadly Things and the Four Last Things*. The central circle of the painting is flanked by four small tondi located in the corners of the rectangular picture, which remind us of what is most important, of what threatens us if we give way to sins, for those remain with us after death until the Final Judgment itself. Those are the “Last Things”. The tondo on the lower left-hand side is a summation of the seven sins, shown in hell. Each of the sins is designated as such by the artist, so that there be no doubt. Beginning from the top and moving in a clockwise direction, we see there: envy, anger, greed, pride, lust, and gluttony; however, the artist places sloth – as if it were the sun for all the others – in the centre of this miniature. Higher, on the left-hand side, in another rosette, we see the death of a human being, to whom the last rites are being administered.



The Seven Deadly Things and the Four Last Things
by Hieronymus Bosch, www.museodelprado.es, Public Domain

Death has come for him, as one can see on the left, while an angel and a demon – visible by the bedhead – wait for his soul. Members of the family sit in the next room and play cards. They are like Roman soldiers playing dice in medieval and Renaissance pictures showing the Crucifixion. In medieval painting, the moment of death is also depicted, the moment when the soul departs from the person. The soul is usually in the shape of a miniature of a naked human body. In the Renaissance this image is almost completely absent.

On the opposite side, at the top, is a scene of resurrection, presided over by Christ. Angels blow triumphal horns. Seated on a throne, Christ shows the wounds from the nails in his hands. He suffered for us. At his sides sit saints and prophets.

Below, the naked souls of the resurrected emerge from their graves. Below, there is the scene of the Last Judgment. The heavenly music of the angels plays; to the left, the arisen souls stand in a queue to enter Heaven, but several are borne off by a visible black demon. In Shakespeare's *A Comedy of Errors*, Dromio, too, speaks of Satan who carries off souls to hell. The Lord God sits on a throne surrounded by angels; His legs are supported on the globe of this world. To the right stand the Fathers of the Church and prophets.

The central picture is made up of seven panels in which the painter has placed the seven deadly sins in a somewhat different sequence (they will be discussed in later chapters of this study). The circular shape in the centre of the painting refers to the middle of a shield, or to the rosette or the Eye of God; right at the centre, we see Him, as He emerges from the grave, as He is resurrected. Under this shape is the inscription *Cave cave d[omi]n[u]s videt* (Beware, beware, the Lord sees). All the moralists of the epoch recall this. God sees and, as it becomes necessary, He intervenes in human affairs, sending down warnings or punishments (for example, floods or plagues). "I have seen thine adulteries, and thy neighings, the lewdness of thy whoredom, and thine abominations on the hills in the fields" (Jeremiah 13.27). In Shakespeare's *Richard III*, mention is made of "All-seeing heaven" and God is named "All-seer". We must therefore recall the Last Judgment, since without such mindfulness, eternal damnation awaits us. On the scrolls above and below, on phylacteries, we find biblical *sententiae* from Deuteronomy (32.28-29): "For they are a nation void of counsel, Neither is there any understanding in them," and "O that they were wise, that they understood this, That they would consider their latter end!" The suspicion arises that, according to the artist, the sins of people, or, more broadly, of humanity, result from a lack of prudence, and perhaps more commonly from folly. In many works of art and literature, it is, in fact, folly that is marked as the source of pride, envy, anger, and the other deadly sins and that, thus, leads us on to eternal damnation. "Foolery, sir, does walk about the orb like the sun; it shines everywhere,"

declares Feste, the Fool, in *Twelfth Night*. In a broader context, along with greed, it often leads us to the cataclysms of war.

Let us now pass to the Golden Age and to a picture by Edward Collier, a Dutch painter of the second half of the seventeenth century. It is a good example not just of a baroque still-life, but also of an encoding of meanings that go beyond what is obvious. It is true that it has already been discussed and described by art historians, but placing it in literary and theatrical contexts throws – I would argue – new light on it, and along with that I would like to suggest a new understanding of the time when the picture was created, of the causes of its creation, and of the newly forged relations with its receiver. Both fields, art and literature (and theatre too), mutually illuminate each other, and, thus, produce a new quality of understanding. From the start, I would like to make the reservation that in my descriptions of works of art I do not concentrate on their purely painterly values, but rather on their anecdotal and allegorical message, and on the rules governing their various encodings. Art of this period advances the contexts and codes for its own interpretation, and like the prompter in the theatre it whispers how it wishes to be read, and its message is often close to the themes touched on in contemporary literature and emblem creation. The prompter also indicates certain features that – as I have already mentioned – entitle us to speak of its theatricality. An accumulation of *vanitas*-centred elements, which emphasize the futility and transience of life, is also contrasted with its fixing in the picture (within the picture), a fixing that extends life or at least offers hope for its extension. The illusory impression may be that the burning candle in the picture will not go out, in contrast to the candle in the foreground, “outside the picture,” as it were, which ultimately will burn down. Once a person is dead, only objects remain, but also the memory recorded in them. In various compositional configurations, these elements are repeated in numerous pictures of the time, including those of Collier. Thanks to him some moment in time “lives” on, if there is someone who is able to interpret these records of memory, and who can enter into a dialogue with them. Later, when even memory vanishes,

the objects remain, of course dead and still themselves, torn from their original meanings. This strengthens a feeling of the futility and pathos of existence. But in still-life, it is not a matter of the fate of the individual.

In its own way, the Polish term for still-life “*martwa natura*” (literally, dead nature), adopted from the French *nature morte*, appears internally inconsistent: for example, flowers, as long as they do not wilt, cannot be called “*martwe*” (dead). The English term “still-life,” taken from the Dutch *stil-leven*, is not completely satisfactory either: it means a “frozen/motionless life,” as if the objects were still alive, captured before death (that would fit better with a human portrait). This can be explained in yet another way: the objects presented are “frozen,” since they are not in movement. But then why does one not say of portraits that they are “*martwe*” (dead)? A “dead portrait” sounds completely rational. Perhaps because a portrait, in an even more obvious way than a still-life, wishes to come alive, to become our interlocutor, longs to initiate a dialogue: usually, it looks at us in the expectation that there will be contact between us. It wants to say something about itself. It counts on an alignment of times, a revival of life, a record in someone’s memory. In this sense, it is not “*martwe*” (dead); it comes alive in our reception of it. Hence the need for a heightened degree of mimesis in the portrait in the period of which we are writing. It is supposed to be “as if alive”. It is an actor who – like a character in medieval morality plays – introduces him/herself and speak his/her monologue. The figure in the portrait speaks of the happiness of love or the bitterness of old age, of grief at the loss of a loved one and of maternal happiness. But the figure does not give a soliloquy, which an actor speaks in isolation (like Hamlet), when there is no one onstage, but rather a monologue, which always has an addressee. And it is even more different: when Hamlet gives a soliloquy, we are dealing with a theatrical convention. We understand that the prince is not necessarily in the habit of speaking aloud to himself and that his words are not a sign of speech in the created, fictional world; there is silence there and that is why no one hears them, even if other actors

accompany him onstage. The actor speaks, not the character. The words indicate thought processes and not verbal utterances. That is why other characters cannot hear them, ontologically separate as they are, and distant in time from the actor. The words, which only we, the spectators, hear, become thereby (and via a convention that we know) a sign of a state of mind, of emotional tensions, and not a real utterance. Thus, the denoted time is not that of the actor's utterance: if the utterance lasts, let us say, a minute, that may mean a sleepless night in the created, fictional world. It also becomes quite clear that the addressee of this type of utterance is not some other fictional character, but the spectator alone. By employing this convention Shakespeare signals that it is not Hamlet who is speaking to us, but – through the actor – he himself. In this way he enters into a direct dialogue with us.

In the Harry Potter films, portraits have the ability to speak, to conduct a dialogue with living beings: this is shown in a literal way. It is possible through magic. In the case of painting, works also speak, but differently, soundlessly, because their phonic qualities are held in pigment. However, they do not need magic to speak. But in a portrait we do not see an actor who would play a character, but the character him/herself, transferred into another dimension. Instead of the time of a living actor on the stage (which is a permanent feature of theatre), we have the time of the picture as a material object, time that accords with the time our watches and calendars show (for example, forty years). And in this picture, the time of which runs at its own pace, a figure from the past is shown, a figure who signals that he/she wishes to be read in our present, that he/she has something to say of him/herself and the world. And in this way, two times come together, deepening the effect of theatricality. Indeed, often the words of the figure are inscribed on the canvas or on the frame, as, for example, in the portrait of Margaret, the wife of Jan van Eyck, where we read: "My husband Johannes completed me [the portrait] in the year 1439 on 17 June, at the age of thirty-three". (We can also see a note from the painter – "As I can".) Margaret looks straight at the spectator.



Portrait of Margaret van Eyck by Jan van Eyck,
Groeningemuseum, Bruges, Public Domain

It is different in paintings in which the figures shown do not signal an awareness that someone is looking at them. In this, they are similar to actors who in this way let us know that the figures they play are in a different space and at a different time. This analogy increases the theatricality of the painting. We observe figures caught in private situations, often ones full of tension and threat (scenes of violence or murder), and even in intimate ones. Scenes of childhood and scenes of death. Brawls and

drunkenness. Battles and slaughters of the innocents. But someone shows us these: as in the theatre we are aware (leaving aside the naïve spectator) that someone is exhibiting this to us on the stage, the space of which is marked by the frame of the picture. The painter also wishes us to receive this two-dimensional scene as a three-dimensional one, just, indeed, as in the theatre. Hence the tendency towards mimetic representation, *trompe l'œil*, and linear perspective (also called painterly perspective) that creates the illusion of depth (the picture's frame may support that depth). Painters reveal that it is possible to speak of human beings without representing them, without their visible participation, by "set-design" alone and by accessories, just as in the forms of the current "teatr plastyczny" (theatre of visual form), which takes place without actors. Painterly set-design, known as still-life, makes it possible to create meaning that goes far beyond "what is visible". They do not apply to any concrete individual, but to the generality – they are universal.

From life: as I have remarked, in the objects that we leave behind us, memory is inscribed, a kind of personal code, one known to family, friends, those close to us, but that memory fades. On my desk, I keep my father's spoon from his time as a partisan in the War, made out of the wing of a shot-down Messerschmitt. My father still remembered who made it, when, and under what circumstances, who shot down the plane, but when he died, the memory died too. If this spoon were placed today in a picture, it would after some time become just shape and colour, chiaroscuro, drained of the meanings that I have mentioned. But in the remaining composition it may – in relation to the other components of the picture – take on new meanings that it never had before. It might be, for example, a spoon from the Last Supper, or from Marian Kołodziej's concentration camp drawings, or one in the "kitchen" still-lives of Kiejstut Bereźnicki. The chair that I sit in as I write these words comes from my father's bachelor days. I know nothing more about it. If only objects survive, as a meaningful shade or a reflection of someone's life, even so the meaning drains from them at some point.

Unless they turn up in a glass case in a museum and are appropriately described there.

At a recent exhibition in the USA, a restored picture entitled *The Paston Treasure* from around 1665 was shown (more about this painting later), which is mainly a still-life. That may sound whimsical, but that is what the picture is like: besides many objects, it contains human figures, and thus is not a traditional still-life. In addition, in the exhibition several of the surviving original objects from the family collection were exhibited, precisely those that centuries ago the painter put on the canvas. One can see them preserved on canvas and in their actual shape almost 400 years later. Two ontologies and two times continually tempt the viewer's gaze. Paradoxically, this real object and this painted one are, in fact, contemporary. But they age differently and mean something different (their contexts are different); the real ones have a history of their own. The confrontation is interesting: the real object that exists here and now, and its image fixed on canvas.

In any event, in Collier's painting we see a multitude of objects, via which the painter talks to us, configuring his utterance in the composition. Exploiting the objects, he attempts to give them new meanings, awakening their mutual relations, in which one defines the other. So that we may perceive these relations, he hints to us (by perspective) where we are to stand in order that our perception be the fullest; he directs our gaze through intensity of light, colours, and shapes. He creates equivalence among objects. This is like in the theatre – creators of a performance wish to direct our perception, and suggest to us what in a given image we are to pay attention to: to this end, they apply changing intensities of light and other techniques of showing. Of course, these only achieve their aim on condition that someone perceives those suggestions, and also knows the meaning that is encoded in them. Light can have various sources: natural ones (the sun coming through a window), artificial ones (candles, torches), and heavenly ones (the sign of Christ, treated as *lux mundi*: for example, the self-illuminating cradle in Bethlehem in a painting by Rembrandt).

The painter constructs his/her utterances without words; at most printed or hand-written words are, in reality, painted. But the exhortations of contemporary connoisseurs to painters that they “paint words” are well-known, in the sense of words articulated phonically. In the miniature painting of the great philosopher Francis Bacon, a Latin inscription is to be seen: *Si tabula daretur digna animum mallem* (It would be preferable if a worthy painting could present his mind). An attempt at such pre-coding can be called transmutation, thanks to which the picture “speaks”. That is possible because of the composition. It is the composition and selection of figures and objects that mean that all the objects and figures in the picture enter into closer or more distant relations to one another, and this creates meaning. This also reveals the rules of the art of painting, just as every artistically refined presentation in the theatre is also a demonstration of the rules of the theatre. The esthetics of the work is contained in this, that is, in the exposure of rules that justify its emergence in its given shape. If we cannot find and understand these rules, the work ceases to be art for us, and becomes rather a mere daub, kitsch, a misunderstanding. This principle applies to all types of art (although it may cease to obtain in a “post-esthetic” epoch). In the case of Collier’s painting, we are dealing with a composition the meanings of which relate to human ontological issues, as well as to axiology and eschatology. The great poet and playwright Ben Jonson, friend of Shakespeare, calls theatrical sets, already changeable in the court theatre, “speaking pictures”.

A lack of composition, that is, of mutual clear relations of elements that can be seen, a lack of the organization of materials according to the rules of art, leads to a situation in which objects are not capable of creating new meanings and the old ones have lost theirs. Without compositional links, they cannot go beyond literalness. They remain objects in themselves, but in their configuration chaos and chance predominate. One can demonstrate the difference by looking at an amateur painting or a still-life in which there is no message, or one that is incomplete, imperfect: in it there are, indeed, numerous objects “in

themselves,” with recognizable functional uses, but compositionally they do not enter into meaningful relations, although a skilled painter could successfully place them in such a composition. That he/she does not do so, attests to clumsiness or to the fact that the artist had another task: let us assume that he/she had received a commission to show an inventory. For example, in somewhat later English painting of the eighteenth-century, we encounter pictures showing nouveau-riche families, grown-ups and children, festively attired, sitting on the grass before a splendid, palace-like family home, and before them we see proudly laid out on blankets on the grass silver plates and cutlery. A composition like this aims to show what can be seen: achieved success, goods, and wealth. Pride is reflected in the family silver. Often the proud owner of the estate lays out works of art on the grass: he wishes to show himself to be a connoisseur of art, an educated person of refined taste. Of course, we can interpret this as a condemnation of the sin of pride and greed, but for certain that was not the intention of the artist and his/her patrons.



The Paston Treasure, Public Domain

A quite different example is offered by the weirdly composed *Paston Treasure* (1665), which I mentioned above. It shows a small part of a collection of exotic and valuable objects belonging to the English family of Sir Robert Paston (the artist is an anonymous Dutch painter).

The painter indeed did all he could to give the inventory the features of work that says something in addition to that, but the entirety rather recalls a stall at a flea-market. Spike Bucklow argues that Sir Robert personally supervised the process of the painting's creation – hence the whimsical nature of its composition in conjunction with the perfection of painterly technique. It was not the painter who determined the arrangement. There is also a suggestion that the Black servant on the left-hand side is arranging the objects: he holds yet another one in his hand. It is as if, as Shakespeare said, the objects shown here are words without “order,” that is, without rules; Bucklow himself, author of a book about this one picture, acknowledges that they look like a collection of objects cast ashore from a shipwreck, exhibited, in addition, in contradictory relations in terms of dimensions (compare the giant lute with seated girl and the lobster behind her). Several objects are repeated (four nautilus shells!). Even if we see there objects from which one could build a *vanitas*-focused still-life – a globe, a clock, nautilus shells, a lute, musical instruments, an hourglass, symbolic flowers, fruits, a curtain, and an extinguished candle – the painter has not made out of these a coherent composition that signifies this. The objects stand, one behind the other, on a rectangular table; they are seen somewhat from above. They appear like the scattered words of a sonnet. The curtain does not reveal the picture, but is its background. The light is scattered evenly over all the objects, which seem to be together, but are, in fact, separate. A further example of chaos in the composition of figural painting can be seen in the painting by Cornelis (son) and Herman (father) Saftleven depicting the family of Godard van Reede van Nederhorst. The picture shows Godard's first wife, who died in childbirth, along with the child who also died, and, at the same time, his new wife, surviving children, and relatives. The principle behind the picture was to show grief for the dead. The

mourners stand in various poses, while two children in the foreground are at play. But some whimsical features of the picture are striking. For example the dead new-born baby has clearly grown, and the women in the painting's third plane look like giantesses. The shaking of temporal unity, of perspective, of proportion, and of overall dimensions indicates that – despite mimetic features – this is not a picture “taken from nature,” but rather testimony to recollection, imagination, and emotion (the dead child has “grown,” since it would have been like that if it had lived at the time the picture was painted).

As opposed to this, the picture by Collier discussed above is a thought-out composition. Even if we cannot reproduce from the picture who left behind these selected objects (one can doubt, in fact, if they belonged to one person), we recognize universal motifs: a reminder of transience, the fragility of life, of the inevitable. Expectantly, the painter looks at us from the miniature at the foot of the picture. As John Donne, the great poet of the period (and a preacher too) said, even if the objects that accompany us through life are not moveable, unfortunately, in relation to them, we ourselves are “moveables”; nothing in life is stable or eternal (from his sermon in honour of the deceased Sir William Cockayne, 1626). However, let us begin our entry into the painting from the drawn curtain on the left-hand side, which in this case has primarily a compositional function; it “diverts” the light, making it fall on the objects that the artist wishes to show us (in painting the curtain appears from the mid-sixteenth century). We see light reflected in several places. This achieves a theatrical effect, as if the curtain revealed to us a scene from life, or perhaps, in fact, from the prop-room of life, where – as Shakespeare says – we play out our brief part, full of sound and fury, and then no one hears of us afterwards. The “poor player” has left the stage, removes his make-up, and we are looking at the set. The curtain appears in many pictures of the time, including the largest, by Rembrandt or Vermeer: after having been drawn back, it exposes, as in the theatre, a scene from someone's life, or what is left behind afterwards.

In several cases it is a small curtain hung before the picture on display, which was a custom in Dutch homes. The picture was protected in this way from light and dust. It was looked at on special occasions. However, if a curtain appears in a painting, the effect is somewhat different than in the theatre, for we are dealing with a picture within a picture, but the observer may have the impression that the picture is just canvas behind an opened curtain, as in Rembrandt's famous *Holy Family*. What is outside and in front becomes somehow more real, as if belonging to the receiver's reality. Among other reasons, this happens because along with figures in the foreground, we simultaneously look at the picture "from within". This creates the illusion of simultaneity, the alignment of our presents. We also see a picture with a curtain in *Woman Reading a Letter* by Gabriel Mets and in *The Eavesdropper* by Nicolaes Maes (Rembrandt's pupil), in which practically the entire picture is the "interior," except perhaps for the frame and part of a chair and some tall closet with a jug to the right. The artist's joke is that that jug is identical with the one in the picture "within," behind the curtain, where it is part of a small still-life arrangement. In this way, the same object appears to exist simultaneously in two ontologies. This is also signaled by the temporal hiatus between the foreground and the second "interior" level (which on the surface must be earlier). This increases the theatricality of what we see even more. The same is true of the Pastons' picture discussed above and the real objects "taken from the canvas" that accompanied the exhibition. Let us also note that the very frame of a painting, besides its ability to define the picture, has the function of a "window," suggesting that we are observing a fragment of the real world which extends beyond it. This is often emphasized by a "cut" part of a figure, piece of furniture, or landscape depicted at the side of a work (Wright 2019). Often Renaissance frames were painted, creating the illusion of a real one, which emphasized its inseparability.

One also comes across a “portrait in a portrait,” in which the person depicted opens a curtain to reveal the portrait of someone else. This also implies a doubling of time (the portrait in the portrait is “earlier”). These were betrothal or posthumous images, the latter showing the departure of the loved one from the real world (in which the person in the foreground remains) into another ontological level, from the time of life to a timelessness fixed in colour, or to put it differently, a transition from the three dimensions of the living person – for that is how the figure in the portrait wishes to be read – to the two dimensions of the portrait. Let us notice, however, that in the picture presented here, the foreground figure, too, is behind the drawn curtain. That figure looks at us, not at the portrait in the portrait, that is, he notices our presence and the fact that we are looking at him. The woman in the “interior” portrait also seems to look at us. If she too “is alive,” then we have a “betrothal” picture and not a posthumous one. The man’s pose indicates this, his arm resting on his hip and his stuck-out elbow were a general sign of pride and even of conceit. It signals that the man is proud of the woman, whom he has acquired for himself. That is why he places her in the Facebook of those times. Let us note that two painted figures belonging – it is implied – to a different time and space, regard us simultaneously, penetrating our present. This creates a fictional situation in which our gazes can meet in a present time that is also fictional. This is also possible only in the theatre. Thus, as a side effect, a theatricality emerges through the picture.

However, no actors are to be seen on the stage of still-lives; all that remains of them are stage sets, or parts of them, to be precise, props, sometimes parts of costumes. In this theatrical props store of life, there remain the objects that gave life sense: they filled it out with material content; they imparted pleasure, satisfaction; they were a source of pride and even of conceit. They led into temptation or they reminded people of eternal life. They were witnesses of important events in a person’s or a family’s life, in other words, to those belonging to *kairos*, the Greek name for a fortunate time (distinguished from *chronos*). Thus,

a still-life is literally dead, since the owner or the user of the accumulated objects is absent, and for certain no longer walks the earth. What is left of him or her is, in its way, a will, inventory, or testimony to the meanings that the person ascribed to life. It constitutes a form of memory of a person, whose history is inscribed in objects, old décor, although we are no longer in a position to decipher that history. It is also a record of the painter's memory and sensitivity. On the surface, it is the artist's utterance, and not a precise recreation of the history of someone's life. Perhaps it is even a proof of the impossibility of that recreation, which disposes one to allegorical interpretations of human fate, of Everyman. It also constitutes a form of the record of memory, but here we mean of the artist's memory. Perhaps a more certain form than the chipped base of the column that can be seen centrally in the painting's background. It holds up the invisible architrave of an invisible building. It is a synecdoche of what cannot be seen. It is possible that it is a fragment of a columbarium or a temple. In painting, the column is usually a symbol of loyalty and power. It can also be a symbol of antiquity, of the passage of time. As in the theatre, it implies the continuation of the presented fragment of life outside the frame of "the eye". It wants to be a metonymy of it. WHITHER?

In the art of the early modern period we have more theatrical elements. Alongside the curtain, other illusion-creating devices appear, including *trompe-l'œil*. The technique became possible thanks to the introduction of oil paints; Jan van Eyck, already in the fifteenth century, is usually seen as the first to use them. In the creation of illusion, painters achieved such perfection that they began to play with technique: for example, Cornelius Norbertus Gijsbrechts paints "the other side of the picture" (around 1670), where we see the monochromatic reverse of frame, stretcher, and canvas, even with a number written on a scrap of paper affixed, as if it were giving the order of sale in an auction. The viewer wishes to turn the frame round to see what the picture actually presents. But it presents only the other side, not the front at all. The curtain was painted too in

antiquity: the rivalry in illusion of Parrhasius and Zeuxis was famous. One of them painted a curtain so realistically that the other was deceived and tried to open it to see the picture that was behind. In the seventeenth century, Adriaen van den Venne painted a veristic fly that seems to have settled on his *Fishing for Souls* (the fly implies another time and another space, and is, thus, a metonymy), while Rembrandt's pupils painted gold coins on the floor, which the master himself attempted to pick up, believing them to be real. But in antiquity – it appears – the curtain itself did not bring in a high degree of theatricality, since there were simply none in contemporary theatres. Here in Collier's painting, the curtain is drawn to one side and shows the viewer the space of the "stage" on which – as if it were a set design – a composition of objects appears. The picture becomes a sign of worlds that are not present in it (a distinct space, past time), but, at the same time, it exists in our (the receivers') present. This is just like in the theatre, where the substance of the performance is really real, since the bodies of the living actors constitute that substance, along with real objects, words, light, music, and so on, but they are only bearers of signs of a fictional created world, a world that is not on the stage and cannot be there, since it belongs to past time (or rarely, to future time). One can also come across pictures in which the drawn curtain shows the interior of a theatre, where spectators watch a performance (for example, Abraham Bosse's *Une comédie au Château de Grosbois* from 1644). The "deceit" here is double, since, first, the picture shows theatre within theatre, and, second, because it implies, that audience and spectators do not belong to the world of fiction and its time (past already), but rather they constitute a reality placed in another space and another time (our time, that is that of the "spectators"). That is how the painter would have us read the painting. The invisible prompter whispers to us strategies of reception. Together with the figures in the foreground we watch the performance.

Let us recall, too, that at that time curtains in theatres (in public theatres like "The Globe," there were no curtains) were often painted, sometimes – as in the Court theatre – "for one

time only,” integrated with the plot or the allegory of a given performance, whereby one picture revealed and defined a second. Alongside an ability to create illusion, there is even more theatricality in painting: for example, the figure of the “intermediary,” who points to the element in the composition to which we should pay attention. The figure’s gaze may also be in the nature of ostention: if the figure looks at us, that may signal an implied consciousness of our presence, a desire to start a dialogue. It also signals the consciousness of the given figure of participating in a concrete scene, the capacity for independent movement, gesture. Let us note that the addressee of the ostensive gesture in the picture is not another painted figure; that means that we, the spectators, are the addressees, and, thereby, a consciousness of our existence is contained within the gesture. It is like an utterance on the part of an actor through which he/she establishes direct contact with the audience. Thus, a painted figure is similar to an actor who by means of ostention does not only do what the creators of the production want us to pay attention to, but also marks out the space of theatrical semiosis, in which everything ceases to be itself and becomes a sign of what is absent. It is the same in painting, where the dominant ostensive function is performed by light: differentiated intensities of light direct our gaze. What is most important or is unusual is customarily lit to a greater degree. Colour or *chiaroscuro* plays a similar function in creating equivalences. It also creates relations among individual elements of the composition, even ones that are spatially distant from each other. One must also remember that both the picture’s frame and the stage’s frame (the proscenium arch) could be (and, indeed, were) meaningful: it is through their prism that what is framed is seen and interpreted. Further, as in the theatre, objects on canvas cease to mean exclusively themselves, but they become signs of something, something that in a material sense is absent from the picture: in accordance with cultural codes, a skull becomes a sign of death; a cello becomes a woman’s body; and an oyster becomes her private parts. A mortar and pestle is a common sign of sexual intercourse. A pouch with coins or jewellery –

either is a sign of the sin of avarice; and wealth in the face of inevitable death becomes a sign of vanity. Soap bubbles mean life's fragility, butterflies are flying souls, ivy is their immortality, and the anemone is death (since it grew from the blood of the dying Adonis).

Theatre has the capacity to bestow meanings on objects, ones that they did not have previously. Including oysters, if we are to stick to the example given above. But they can mean something completely different. In the moving scene in *King Lear* in which Gloucester is blinded, as directed by Robert Ciulli, Gloucester sits with his back to the audience, in front of a refrigerator. Regan opens the refrigerator and takes out champagne and . . . oysters. She stabs one with a fork (Gloucester shudders slightly), and then she swallows it drinking down the juice. One eye is gone. A mouthful of champagne. Then the actions are repeated. And the second eye is swallowed (Gloucester shudders again). Champagne. Shocking and, at the same time, theatrical. Let us pay attention to the scenic power of this sequence of actions: oysters, which we eat alive, become the sign of human eyes, and their consumption becomes a sign of human cruelty and suffering. Champagne becomes a sign of the torturer's callousness. Fabular meaning is created exclusively by the objects and the actors' gestures.

In painting, too, a change in the semantics of an object is possible. On one hand, the painter draws on cultural codes, for example, from emblem literature, which at that time was, in general, a frequent point of reference for art (also for poetry and drama). On the other hand, however, by virtue of the fact that objects become elements of a composition, they enter into mutual, meaning-generating relations. Through painterly ostentation, objects draw near to each other, wander, strike cords with each other, often packed, for example, into a cornucopia, and their spatial relations constitute an important element in building new meanings (let us call these index-relations, resulting from cause-and-effect sequences or spatial proximity). Further, a painting may present a scene of some "history," one known to the receiver from mythology or literature; it builds a story. It is,

of course, one moment captured, as it were, in a camera snapshot (shown mimetically “like in a photograph”), but it frequently has the ability to suggest what has happened and what follows. This is also an index-relation. An unfinished meal, with scraps of food left on plates, unfinished wine in two glasses, in the company of suitably selected objects, the smoking wick of a newly extinguished candle (“out brief candle,” Macbeth says), may signify that the persons now no longer visible have certainly gone off to bed, but not to sleep. If one of the glasses is on its side or not emptied, we understand that the persons involved did so in some haste. In a story-related sense, in the theatre we also have a fragment of some history, and what happened before the play begins and what follows when it is over, are only partly designated, left to the viewer’s imagination. Of course, in medieval painting, pictures would show in one visual field several such scenes, next to one another, proceeding by leaps, separated in story terms in time and space, which – as in a comic book – the receiver had to link together in order to create a whole.

The introduction of perspective in painting imposed an axis of chronological time, which made this kind of presentation difficult or even quite impossible. Henceforward, cause-and-effect sequence became obligatory, placed along a time axis and in accordance with spatial proximity, in a composition concordant with the scientific rules of perspective. If in a set design by Inigo Jones, a section of ancient Rome is shown in the foreground, and in the distance we see a miniature panorama of London from the Palace of Whitehall, then we are dealing with a metaphor that exploits the rules of perspective in painting: England becomes the heir of the ancient Empire, and Rome is transformed into London, which, thus, becomes a continuation of the values of that ancient Empire – honour, law, valour, culture. Exceptions, however, do occur: for example, seventeenth-century painters were vexed that they could not show an entire story or its fundamental framework. (An example is Titian’s *Death of Actaeon* in which Diana is drawing her bow-string and the arrow has already flown.) This means that often a com-

position is, as it were, dismembered into the main picture, which is central, and, surrounding it, lesser scenes, which show various events from the story told. An example is seen in *The Story of the Prodigal Son* by Frans Francken the Younger (1581-1642). Frequently the cause of an event is signaled or the cause of the behavior of the person in a painting. For example, in Gabriel Metsu's *Woman Reading a Letter*, which was mentioned earlier, we see a housewife, who shortly before was busy with household tasks.



The Story of the Prodigal Son
by Frans Francken the Younger,
www.rijksmuseum.nl, Public Domain



Woman Reading a Letter by Gabriel Metsu,
www.rijksmuseum.nl, Public Domain

The sudden entry of a maid bringing a letter means that the tasks have been immediately cast aside, the housewife has leapt up, seized the letter, and immersed herself in reading it. However, we do not see the moment of the servant's entrance or the housewife's leaping up. The picture is steeped in peace. That a moment earlier an abrupt event took place is indicated by the housewife's shoe lying on the floor and the thimble that no one has picked up. This defines the woman's emotional state. We guess that she was clearly waiting for some news from her beloved, who is on a sea voyage. The servant – perhaps at her mistress's request, or perhaps out of curiosity – uncovers a painting on which we can see a ship on a stormy sea. Now she has understood what this picture means to her mistress. But she has not come here to uncover the painting but to sweep, since under her arm she holds a bucket on her hip. She is receiving no instructions and so she does what she wants for the moment: she takes a look at the picture, which creates an equivalence between that and the letter read by her mistress. Thus we imagine that on the sudden entrance of the servant (taken away from other activities) with the letter, the housewife suddenly leaps up, losing one shoe and a thimble, but she does not bother to pick them up as the letter is the most important thing. The servant holds a second letter in her hand, but this one is addressed, as is visible in the painting – and this is a joke on the part of the artist – to the painter himself. This signals his reality in the time and space occupied by the women, who are aware of his presence. It increases the impression that we are witnessing actual events.

One can add that in the period under discussion, a mannerism arose of inscribing a painting in a setting with buildings, for example from the perspective of narrow streets in a city, often recalling Andrea Palladio's *Teatro Olimpico* (built in 1586) in Vicenza or the set designs of other architects of the period. There are also artists' games with anamorphic perspective (which Shakespeare knew – see *Richard II*). One of the most prominent is Holbein's *The Ambassadors*. Other examples include “perspective boxes” – a combination of “peepshow” and *camera*

obscura, and perhaps also a child's model theatre - which one looks into (from two sides) through a small opening like a keyhole, in order to see the mimetically painted interior of a house. Masters in this type of artwork were Samuel van Hoogstraten and Pieter Janssens Elinga. Thanks to knowledge from the field of optics, of perspective in painting, of the structure of the eye, and of the principles of perception - as well as thanks to utter mastery of painting technique - the illusion was complete; the viewer had the impression that he/she was looking at a real interior through a keyhole. The artists were quite aware of the theatrical effect. For example, in Hoogstraten's work, theatricality is deepened by the demonstrable reaction of a painted dog and cat which clearly perceive the observer (in a box in the collection of the National Gallery in London). The painted illusion provokes amazement and delight to the present day.

We find a globe in many paintings by Collier (and not just in his work), and in the still-life discussed above, one is clearly visible at the back in front of the column. This is to make us realize that the picture does not just relate to the history of an individual, but is of a universal nature; it applies to all people of different cultures. The globe, as a sign of planet Earth, of the "world" conquered by the Netherlands, is also the sign and the name of the "Globe" Theatre in London (built in 1599). It is there that the *teatrum mundi* is played out, where we all play various roles, although they lead - either in comedy or in tragedy - to an end that is the same for each of us. The globe also embodies the topos of *contemptus mundi* (disdain of the world), which functions as a reminder of the vanity of all human desires, deeds, and achievements.

Next to the globe, we see a set of musical pipes; this is a very frequent phallic motif in the iconography of the time (for example, in Frans Hals's *Merrymakers at Shrovetide*, which will be discussed in detail in the chapter on the sin of gluttony). The flaccid bag, the lowered mouth piece, may also indicate impotence, the inevitable indisposition of age. Here it may suggest nostalgically recalled delights of the flesh. To the side, there is a barrel organ with a crank, decorated with a carnation design,

the Latin name for a carnation being “dianthus” or the “flower of God”. Thus, there is a reference to Christ and His Passion. In religious paintings, the Mother of God often holds a carnation in her hand. In the Protestant England of Shakespeare’s day the Marian associations disappeared, but, in place of that, carnations were often a motif in needlework. According to one medieval legend, the Virgin Mary’s teardrops, shed during the Crucifixion, having fallen to the earth, grew in the form of beautiful carnations. Further, in Italian the carnation was referred to as “chiodino” (which gives the Polish “goździk”), which also contains a reference to Our Lord’s Sufferings. A somewhat different meaning was given to the flower in northern Europe, where carnations were linked to hopes for marriage and for love. In Collier’s painting there is no living flower, but only its “reflection” in the form of ornamentation (a sign of love that has passed?) on a wooden box (a sign of a coffin?); there remain silence and the hope of eternal life. But even if a “living” flower were in the picture, that “life” would be a matter of convention. There is no living human being either – only a “reflection” of the person in objects, in the mirror to life, in that property store. Alongside the carnations on the box of the barrel organ, dandelions are also visible – a symbol of the power of endurance, joy of life, fulfilment of dreams, but also of Our Lord’s Sufferings and the Resurrection. On the left-hand side, we see some ivy growing out of and over the composition – the sign of eternal life, the immortality of the soul. Earthly memory is replaced by a sign of eternity, and perhaps of timelessness. The ivy of the cemetery will cover everything. Sound will pass into silence. However, the time of a painting flows differently from that of human life. In *vanitas* paintings we often see clocks that have stopped. At that time, they were luxury items, but basking in wealth has its limit too. We pass from the sphere of life, where time is calibrated, into a timeless eternity. In Shakespeare’s play, Henry VI reflects on the time of life as on the periods marked out by a sundial made of a stick.

To carve out dials quaintly, point by point,
Thereby to see the minutes how they run,
How many make the hour full complete;
How many hours bring about the day;
How many days will finish up the year;
How many years a mortal man may live.
(*Henry VI*, Part III, II.v)

Richard II reflects on time in a similar way (V.i). So belief in eternal life remains. To enter it, it is necessary to follow His teachings. Alas, on our road there stand – as Thomas Dekker declares, seven monsters – the deadly sins. Because of that, we cannot seize the fleeting fortunate moment, *kairos* itself, at the right time. Afterwards it is too late. Despite Saint Paul's injunctions to lead a moderate life, maintaining a distance to the temporal.

²⁹ But this I say, brethren, the time is short: it remaineth, that both they that have wives be as though they had none;
³⁰ And they that weep, as though they wept not; and they that rejoice, as though they rejoiced not; and they that buy, as though they possessed not;
³¹ And they that use this world, as not abusing it: for the fashion of this world passeth away. (1 Corinthians 7: 29-31)

The purse at the base of the globe reminds us of the vanity and futility of wealth, which does not protect us against transience. This is a frequent motif in painting (on the other hand, painters delighted in imported and very expensive pigments). To the side, a casket with jewels has the same significance. It also reminds us that salvation cannot be bought. It condemns greed – one of the deadly sins. Beside the casket we see a nautilus shell, which because of its shape was associated with the human skull and, thus, with death, transience, the vanity of earthly life. It is a synecdoche of these. It also delighted people with the curves of its spiral (it is, in fact, one of the natural examples of a Fibonacci spiral). We see how the immediate proximity of objects, purse, casket with jewels, and nautilus shell, creates meaning. It

reveals the tinsel of earthly goods. The exotic nautilus shell often appears in still-lives of the period. The skull is more literal. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia declares that she would rather be married “to a death's-head with a bone in his mouth” than to the County Palatine. (In emblem literature, we often encounter skulls with a tibia and a sickle in their teeth.)

In *Hamlet*, the skull of Yorick the jester is an eloquent allusion to the *vanitas* motifs that are present in the painting of the time. For what, indeed, does material wealth mean in the face of the vanity of life? Hamlet says:

That skull had a tongue in it, and could sing once: how the knave jowls it to the ground, as if it were Cain's jaw-bone, that did the first murder! It might be the pate of a politician, which this ass now o'er-reaches; one that would circumvent God, might it not?

. . . .

Or of a courtier; which could say “Good morrow, sweet lord! How dost thou, good lord?” This might be my lord such-a-one, that praised my lord such-a-one's horse, when he meant to beg it; might it not?

. . . .

Why, e'en so. And now my Lady Worm's, chapless and knocked about the mazard with a sexton's spade. Here's fine revolution, an we had the trick to see't. Did these bones cost no more the breeding but to play at loggets with them? Mine ache to think on't.

. . . .

There's another. Why may not that be the skull of a lawyer? Where be his quiddities now, his quillities, his cases, his tenures, and his tricks? Why does he suffer this mad knave now to knock him about the sconce with a dirty shovel and will not tell him of his action of battery? Hum, this fellow might be in's time a great buyer of land, with his statutes, his recognizances, his fines, his double vouchers, his recoveries. Is this the fine of his fines and the recovery of his recoveries, to have his fine pate full of fine dirt? Will his vouchers vouch him no more of his purchases, and double ones too, than the length and breadth of a pair of indentures? The very conveyances of his lands will

scarcely lie in this box, and must th' inheritor himself have no more, ha? (V.i)

It is not by chance that Hamlet refers to “the first murder”: pride, envy, anger, and murder have accompanied humanity from the very start. The first cause of evil was seen to lie in Original Sin. Elsewhere in Shakespeare, Cain is called “the first male child”. In Elsinore the whole world is coming apart, and the history of a human being is evil, decay, and worms. *Hamlet* is a triumph of decay over life. The “sweet prince” presents matters thus to Claudius: “Your worm is your only emperor for diet. We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots. Your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service—two dishes but to one table. That’s the end” (IV.iii). This means that in the face of transience and death, all becomes vanity, the human being too. “What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable; in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god: the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals—and yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?” (II.ii). In the dissolution of the body, atoms were not seen, for they were not known yet, but nothingness, at best a “quintessence of dust”. In one’s lifetime, decay was syphilis.

When Hamlet learns that he holds the skull of Yorick in his hand, the companion of his youthful frolics, this leads the prince to further reflections.

Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? your gambols? Your songs? your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning? Quite chapfallen? Now get you to my lady’s chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come. (V.i)

Then he turns to Horatio with a rhetorical question. “Dost thou think Alexander looked o’ this fashion i’ th’ earth?” And then he lets his imagination fly and proves that Alexander the Great’s ashes could become a bung to plug a barrel. “Alexander died,

Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust; the dust is earth; of earth we make loam; and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer barrel?" (V.i). In *King John*, Prince Henry also sighs for his dead father, saying: "this was now a king and now is clay" (V.vii). And of women's painting their faces, Shakespeare had a well-established, very negative view; Hamlet reproaches Ophelia with "God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another" (III.i). Other writers of the time said the same.

When the skull itself had become widespread on the stage, the skeleton made its appearance in the theatre (as in the picture discussed below): for example, in *The Tragedy of Hoffman* by Henry Chettle from 1602. The skeleton is in the care of the son of a pirate whose piratical activities have led him to the scaffold. The skeleton is kept in a cave on the headland of Rozewie (*sic!*) and is meant to remind the son of the need to take vengeance. Thus, the skeleton does not so much prompt musings on the fragility of life as prefigure bloody revenge. Here we clearly see two strands of thought: an ontological one and – one might say – an axiological one (the code of honour demanded an act of vengeance if punishment could not touch the miscreant in any other way). In *The Tragedy of Hoffman*, we have a perverse situation, since both father and son are wrongdoers; nonetheless, the revenger uses the arguments of family and ethics to support his ignoble deeds.

In one of the *vanitas* paintings of the time we see a skeleton that has the features of a living person: it stands and is able to gesture, to move hands and fingers (in a symbolic gesture, it extinguishes a candle), and it can keep its balance. It even has its genitals modestly covered. It is, thus, a conventional "anatomy" of a human being, a vision of a person, as it were, in an X-ray, stripped of his/her body, who stares at a still-life, in which, besides many objects linked to human achievement, such as crown, scepter, books, banners, and weapons, but also those linked to human pleasures and at the same time to human frailty, such as playing cards and dice, musical scores and musical instruments, we have as part of the composition skulls, an

hourglass, and a clock. All this is to remind us of the fragility and the vanity of our lives, of time and the inevitability of transience, and since antiquity plucked roses have been linked with death: in ancient Rome, the “Rosalia,” the festival of roses, was associated with the cult of the dead. Cesare Ripa notes that the rose is a sign denoting the fragility of our lives, since its blossoms come last, after all other flowers, and yet dies first. That is not actually true, but this is beside the point. The skeleton becomes a sign of the passage of time: it refers to all the dimensions of time – past, present, and future. It is what remains of us. The nakedness of a skeleton, while simultaneously retaining the power of gesture belonging to a living person, places it in a conjectural future (in relation to the scene on display): we understand that the painter here showed a living person (with blood and body), one who stands before us, contemplating objects, extinguishing a candle, etc. However, the skeleton moves us forward, literally showing what remains of the living person. As the moralists remind us, what is pride and arrogance in relation to ourselves in the face of the moment that is given to us? A person lives, relishes tinsel and vanity, not thinking that he or she is given but an instant, and after that, what is sublime, beautiful, what brings pride in relation to others, become but dust, the skeleton we see before us. Towards the end of his famous monologue, Hamlet says:

Who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscovered country from whose bourn
No traveler returns. . . .
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action. (III.i)

Returning to Collier's painting, let us note that a barely visible decorative element on one shell is – as other scholars have noted – a scene showing a dog chasing a deer. Perhaps this points to the pursuit of the human soul by the forces of wickedness – a kind of “everyman” (a morality play with this title survives from around 1400). In turn, the broken strings of the violin suggests an interruption in the course of time (life), in the continuity of being, and they emphasize the fragility of human existence. The silence of the painting is eloquent. The instrument itself, besides obvious meanings (art, beauty), also possessed erotic connotations: its shape led it to be connected with the female body. The bow, in turn, was a frequent phallic symbol. For example, in *Interior with a Cavalier and a Lady* (1685) by Willem van Mieris, we see a fiddle-player has placed his bow between the spread legs of a “lady” who is drinking wine (the upturned glass means that she has already emptied it and wants more). Next to that we see a plate with oysters (vaginal in their meaning, and oysters are also aphrodisiacs). Elsewhere in Shakespeare, we find the following passage:

You are a fair viol, and your sense the strings
 Who, fingered to make man his lawful music,
 Would draw heaven down and all the gods to hearken;
 But, being played upon before your time,
 Hell only danceth at so harsh a chime.
 Good sooth, I care not for you. (*Pericles* I.i)

In this way, too, in the painting under discussion, what is literal becomes a visual pun and meanings are added that are legible only to those who know the appropriate codes. The interpretation of these creates a thread of understanding between painter and receiver. Those codes were a feature of the thinking of all of the most cosmopolitan Europeans, as a result of which an educated Czech from, let us say, the reign of Rudolf II could go to Paris, Amsterdam, Rome, or London and be able to “read” architecture and art, plans for the layout of palaces or gardens, and even court theatre performed in a foreign language. The

fashion for private collections of curiosities and art had only just begun, but was also a symptom of a new time and the appearance of “gourmets” and connoisseurs of art. One needed to know (as today, one needs to know about wines, which Jan Klata mocks in the Gdańsk performance of *H.* after Shakespeare).

Above the violin is an open volume – the description of a journey to Jerusalem, that is to a place important for both Judaism and Christianity; there is the source of everything, including hope. The strongest shaft of light falls there. The impression is that the rest is sunk in darkness and only the Book remains, since it is the metaphorical source of light, and also of the hope that not all will be swallowed up by darkness. We are invited to think about life after death. But the volume has not been read to the end, for, in any case, life is too short to see and to read all we wish on our journey through life. Death interrupts all our actions, intentions, and plans. Other books also lie on the table. They, too – as they are records of someone’s memory – are themselves recorded – as a painting – in the reader’s memory. In this way, they live as long as someone reads them. Here we can see an analogy with the picture we are discussing: it, too, is a record of someone’s memory, and at the same time it is as if in transmission to us, it is recorded in our memory. On the other side of the volume, we see an overturned lute, and behind that the upper part of an hourglass (invented [?] by the monk Luitprand of Chartres in the eighth century CE). The sand has ceased to run. This also establishes new relations and meanings. The lute, besides the obvious meanings ascribed to musical instruments, also had strong erotic connotations. The Dutch word “luite” meant both a lute and a vagina. In scenes set in brothels, prostitutes very frequently play on the lute. The visual pun is obvious here. In John Marston’s *The Dutch Courtesan* (c. 1604), the prostitute Franceschina plays on the lute and sings. In *Much Ado about Nothing* (there is an erotic pun in the title: the word “nothing” also meant female private parts), Hero says to her dance partner that “the lute should be like the case” (II.i). She is thinking about his mask and his face, but for contemporaries the *obscenum* contained in the words “lute” and “case” was

transparent. Thus, erotic games are vanity too, vanity that quickly – along with life itself – passes. In Collier's painting, the hourglass reminds us of this. The lute further recalls another deadly sin – licentiousness. We see how the proximity of appropriately chosen objects, their spatial contiguity, create new meanings. In the same way, the numbers on a clock face change their numerical value depending on whether they are next to a big or a small hand (or both together).

In Collier's painting, we have more instruments with erotic connotations: at the edge of the table-top, below the violin, there lie flutes. Just like pipes, these have phallic connotations. These instruments will play no more. To the side lies an open score; the piece was not played to the end. Overturned goblets lying at the edge of the table recall the fragility of life and transience. No one will raise them now. Art historians have established that the sheet music is that of a concrete piece from a large collection of compositions of Jacob van Eyck, *The Flute's Pleasure Garden* (1646). The score is open at the variation on the piece by Giovanni Gastold "Questa Dolce Sirena," which refers to the mythological sirens who with their wondrous song lured sailors to their doom. This creates an equivalence with Collier's painting: it recalls the seductive "siren," nature with its earthly joys and riches. The sense of hearing, the beauty of music, and the sound of words – a frequent motif in the allegorical painting of the period – are contrasted with the silence of the picture. Our noisy life passes into the silence of death. And here again we see how the compositional proximity of objects marked by allegorical and cultural connotations creates meaning. We are entering into the regions of grand conventionality, the language of art and theatre in the seventeenth century.

The richly decorated cloth and the fabric laid out over the table's surface, which like a border "supports" the entire composition (by colour too, which deviates from the palette of the whole!) – these can mean the splendour and the pride in wealth that someone has attained personally, or indeed a whole country (such as Holland, at that time the richest state in Europe, if not in the whole world). The Dutch were very proud of their

development of international trade (on the other hand, they condemned pomp and riches), of the variety of goods available in the market (moralists also spoke out against this abundance). Hence a gathering of imported objects (rich floor coverings, carpets, exotic fruits, and so on) is a frequent feature of pictures of the period. The miniature portrait of a man, which I have mentioned already, hanging from the table top, is a self-portrait of the artist (in other words a “selfie”) holding the tools of his trade, brushes and a palette. Signature and date (a novelty in Dutch painting) was not enough for the artist; he felt the need to show his face. He placed himself on the stage. Perhaps as the prompter? In that event, the miniature becomes a sign of the prompter’s box. It is also an invitation to a dialogue: “It is I who am speaking with you,” he seems to say. And what I have to say is my picture, which I give you to interpret. On the left-hand side there is a Latin inscription “Vanitas vanitatum et omnia vanitas” ([V]anity of vanities; all is vanity) (Ecclesiastes 1.2). In other pictures, we find other *sententiae*, for example, “pulvis et umbra sumus” (we are but dust and shadow) or “Vita brevis ars longa” (Life is short, art is long). Here, the painter speaks with us on the topic. This is the meaning of his work. In Shakespeare’s writing, we also have scenes as if taken from a painting. In *The Merchant of Venice*, the Prince of Morocco, who is taking part in the contest for Portia’s hand in marriage, finds in the golden casket a skull with a written scroll in its eye socket; he reads and knows that he has lost (II.vii).

The miniature I have mentioned, however, is a fairly perfidious part of the work, since it is, in principle, a picture within a picture. The invisible artist, who in a material sense is no longer there, looks at us from a counterfeit image, as we look at him painted as a figure in the painting. The painter signals a dialogue, separated by time, and yet taking place here and now. But as long as we look, we are alive, both we who are looking and he who is “eternalized,” an element in a still-life. He is recorded in our memory; he extends his life span. And so art, as a form of dialogue between someone present and someone absent (and also between a person and God), creates a mechanism

for the transmission of memory, one in which what is living becomes dead, while what is dead has the gift of becoming an event, since it is recorded in the living consciousness, imagination, and memory of the observer. It is one of the ways of avoiding “the abyss of forgetting,” the oblivion that is shown in the frontispiece of Sir Walter Raleigh’s *History of the World*. Faith and art can give sense to the emptiness of life. This is also the theme of the beautiful, medieval, and anonymous English poem *Pearl*.

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