

Vanitas

Vanitas is the Latin for vanity, in the sense of emptiness or a worthless action. 'Vanity of Vanities, saith the preacher, all is vanity' (Ecclesiastes 12: 8).

The implication of these words from the Old Testament is that all human action is transient in contrast to the everlasting nature of faith.

A vanitas is a particular type of still life painting in which objects symbolically refer to such a theme. For example, in Steenwyck's 'Allegory', objects which suggest human achievements, like the book and instruments (to remind us explicitly of the vanity -in the sense of worthlessness- of worldly pleasures and goods.) are related to reminders of mortality: the lamp which has been snuffed out and the skull.



The Ambassadors , Hans Holbein the younger ,1533

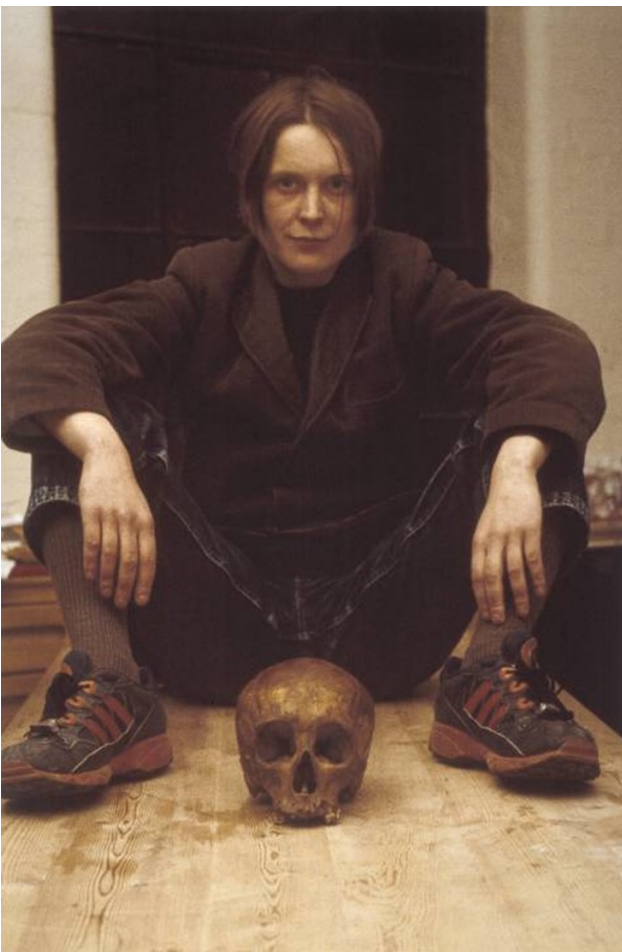
Μεμνηθ Μθτι

Memento Mori is Latin for reminder of death.

Skulls which are represented in Northern European portraits and still lifes, and South European depictions of saints, of the 16th and 17th centuries are perhaps the most obvious examples of such subjects .

Such elements are painted as a reminder that death is the great leveller, which puts an end to all worldly achievements.

Memento mori is a Latin phrase meaning 'remember you must die'. A basic memento mori painting would be a portrait with a skull but other symbols commonly found are hour glasses or clocks, extinguished or guttering candles, fruit, and flowers.



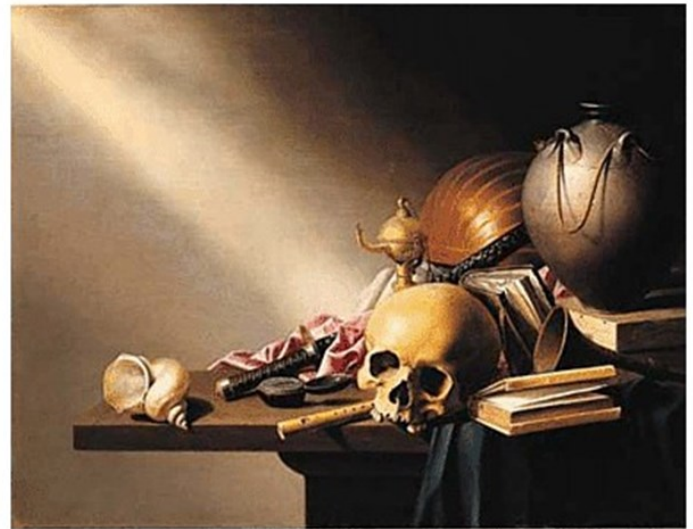
Sarah Lucas

Self Portrait with Skull 1997

Inkjet print on paper



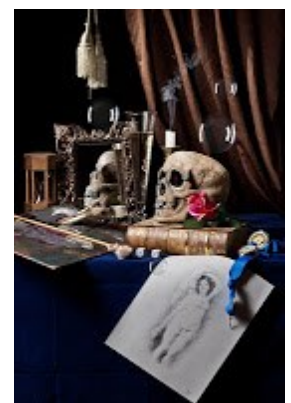
David Bailly Vanitas, 1651



Still Life: An Allegory of the Vanities of Human Life about 1640, Harmen Steenwyck

Here is a list of common objects found in "Vanitas" paintings and their meaning:

- **Skull:** Death, this is a clear *memento mori* message or the transience of life, a universally recognized symbol of death.
- **Watch or hourglass:** time is limited and is passing, therefore, use it wisely. See a typical one-handle XVII century watch at the lower right of the photo.
- **Books:** Human knowledge and its temporary nature.
- **Artist's instruments** e.g. Palette, brushes, easel: Indulgence in the arts, very few could afford to be painters let alone patronize the arts.
- **Shell:** they were normally exotic ones not commonly available in the Netherlands. They were a symbol of the vanity that comes with wealth, as these were exotic items at the time, only a very wealthy person would have one of those.
- **Insects, decaying flowers:** transience of life. They were inserted in paintings depicting expensive objects as a reminder that life is temporary and moral considerations deserved more attention than material things.
- **Broken or tipped over glassware:** transience of life or life is fleeting.
- **Musical instruments:** indulgence of the senses as a luxury. Sometimes they are present as artistic inspiration, as music would inspire artists.
- **Silk or velvet tablecloths:** vanity, as these were expensive things. Silk being the ultimate fabric material and purple the most expensive dye, hence the Roman emperors wore purple tunics.
- **Oriental rugs or carpets:** These were prohibitively expensive items, carpets were placed on tables to avoid stepping on them and causing decay in their colours or integrity. They were a symbol of wealth but also a sign of pride as they were items brought into the United Provinces through trade and commerce.
- **Jewellery, clothes or mirrors:** remember the temporary nature of beauty, wealth and wisdom. Earthly riches are temporary and therefore life should be carried out according to the modesty traditions that were in place at the time.
- **Mirror:** a clear symbol of the vanity that should be avoided.
- **Jars:** Stoneware or porcelain were used for water or oil, both substance sustain life at the time.

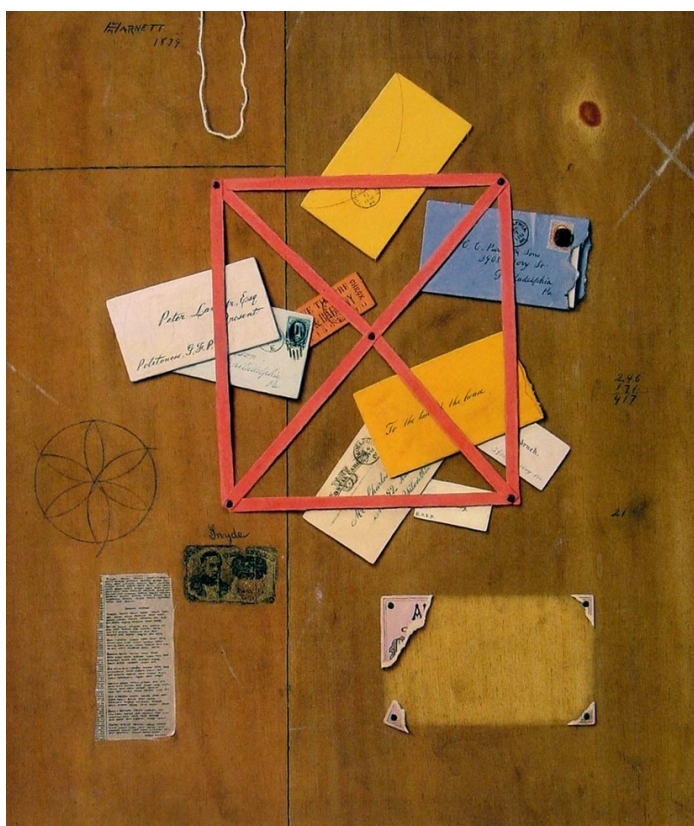




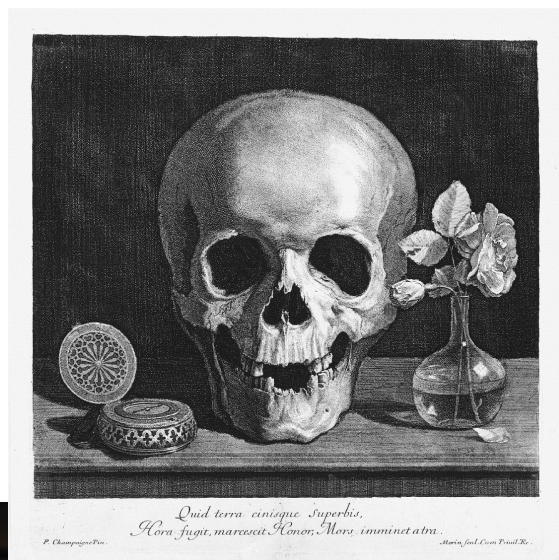
Edward Collier
Still Life with a Volume of Wither's 'Emblemes' 1696



The old cupboard door by William Michael Harnett 1889



The Artist's Letter Rack by William Michael Harnett 1879



Richard Janson
Memento Mori I
C type gloss photo
45 x 60 cm
2012





Pablo Picasso
Goat's Skull, Bottle and Candle 1952



"Viva la Vida - Coyoacán 1954 Mexico Frida Kahlo



New Vanitas Acedia 01, MarkScheider 2012-2015

What modern images could you use?

Facebook, Twitter, Google?

How time flies when you're on the internet.

What happens when you sit down and turn on TV programmes like 'Homes under the hammer'?

Think about how Marks & Spencer's adverts sell you the life style not just the (sustaining) food.



New Vanitas Acedia 02 , MarkScheider 2013-2015

Damien Hirst, For the Love of God
2007. Platinum, diamonds and human teeth



Hare on a Table, John Craxton, 1944–1946



Dead Deer, Gustave Courbet, 1857.



A Dead Soldier by Italian School



Jan Weenix , 1640/1649 – 1719



Dressing the dead girl, Gustave Courbet



Death and the Maiden British (English) School c.1570

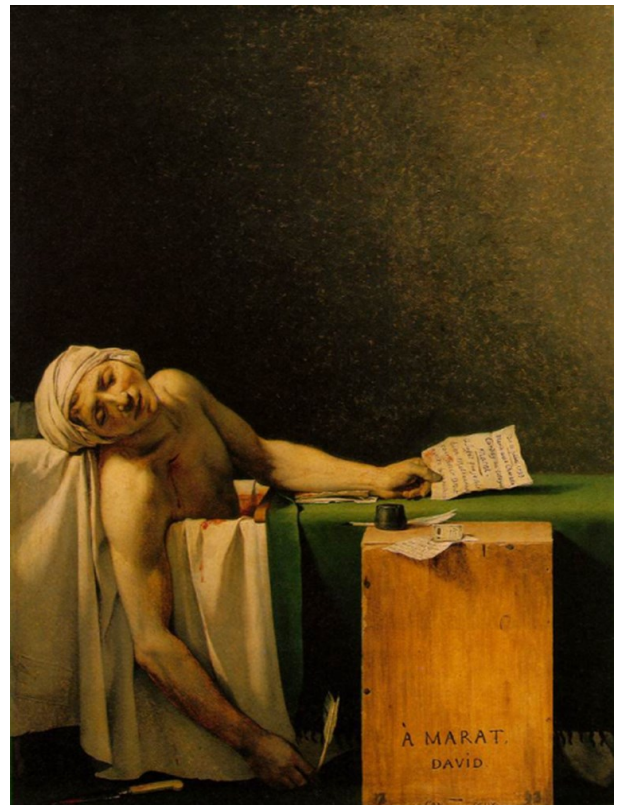
'Ophelia' (1852) John Everett Millais.



Andrew Weyth *Christina's World* (1948)



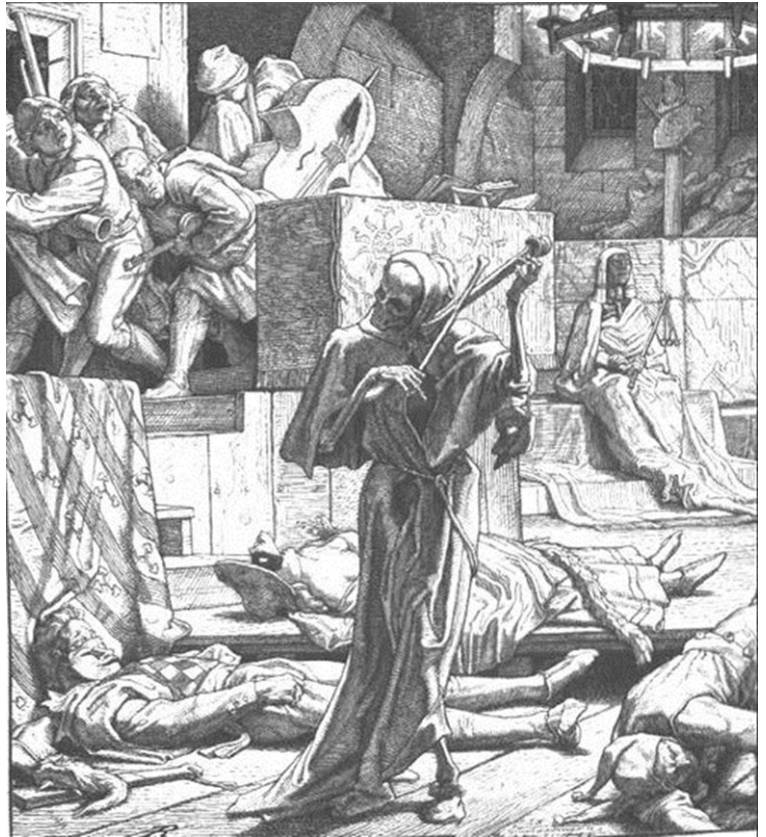
FRIDA KAHLO
'Self Portrait with the Portrait of Doctor Farill', 1951



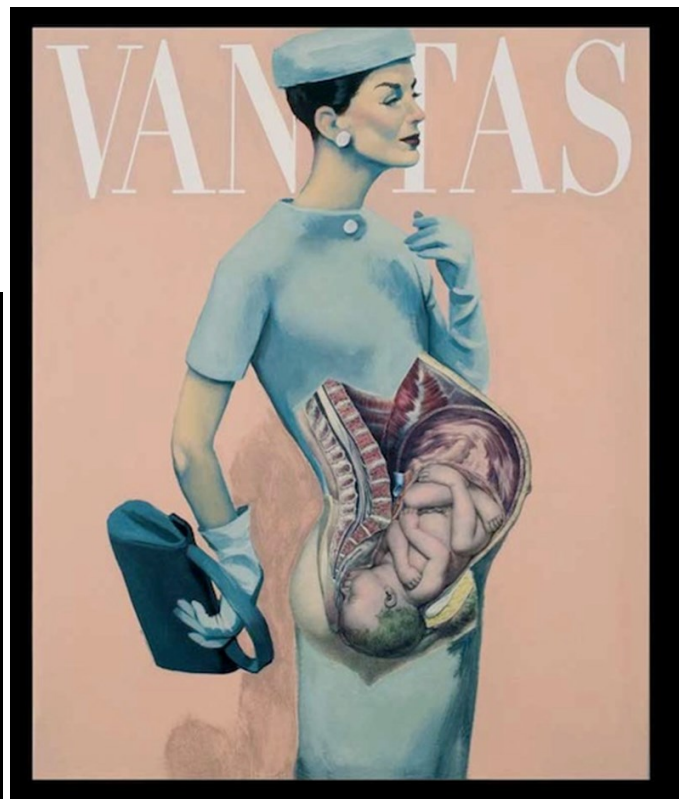
Death of Marat in 1793 Jacques Louis David



Takato Yamamoto, Memento Mori



Death as a cutthroat by Alfred Rethel, 1851. Rethel was inspired by an account of how an outbreak of cholera ravaged a masquerade during the Carnival of Paris in 1832.



Painting from the 'Vanitas' collection, Fernando Vicente





The Triumph of Death, Pieter Bruegel the Elder back in c.1562



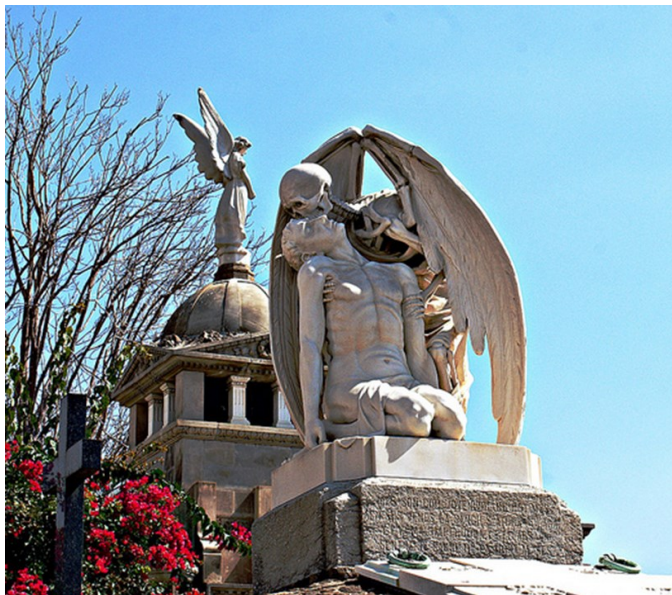
Francisco de Goya. *Saturn Devouring His Son*, 1821-23.



Gustav Klimt, *death and life*, 1916



The dying King Laomedon from Troy



The Kiss of Death (*El Petó de la Mort* in Catalan and *El beso de la muerte* in Spanish) dates back to 1930.



Victorian photographs (of the dead)

