

# GLASS IN PAINTINGS

# Dutch, Flemish and German still life

*by Sofia Jennifer Teodori*

Simon Luttichuys,  
oils on wood,  
1650-1660



*The period ranging between the beginning of the seventeenth and the end of the eighteenth centuries can be considered the “golden era” for paintings featuring everyday objects, vases, flowers, fruit... in other words, still life. This term was born around the*



*end of the seventeenth century to give a name to a new means of figurative expression which was mainly developed in the Netherlands, where artists were commissioned to paint tableware and splendid vases by the nobility. Here we look into some of the most beautiful pieces by Dutch, Flemish and German artists of that period. It is notable how glass has a special place in many paintings, and how often the mastery of the painters could be judged by the way they managed to catch the lightness, transparency and fragility of the glass objects.*

## **Introduction**

Three cultural areas are quite similar from a stylistic point of view, and these include the southern and northern regions of the Netherlands and the German areas that were mostly influenced by Flemish and Dutch art.

The refined style of Flemish and Dutch painters is characterized by the intensity of the visual stimulus, the richness of effects, the ability to capture and express the sophisticated colours and plays of light on models. Dutch and Flemish masters also influenced the work of German artists, and court

**Jan Davidz.  
de Heem, oils  
on wood,  
1640-1645**

painters. Many of the latter, commonly believed to be German, were in actual fact Flemish, and for religious motives were refugees, whilst others were their immediate descendants (Binoit, Soreau, Marrel, Mignon). Others had come into direct contact with Flemish travelling painters





**Matthaeus Whitmans, oils on wood, 1670 - 1680**

or had studied in Holland.

But let's consider the origins of this kind of painting. Why would artists want to paint still life? A text by Bergström says that various artists slowly started to extract common, everyday symbolic objects that used to (and still do) accompany religious functions, to give these articles a self-sufficient role, as symbolic still life. However, in late medieval times, artists were forced to follow certain theological themes, such as for frescoes and altars: the still life they painted was always consistent with the religious topic in question.

Slowly, many artists started turning away from religious subjects and, on commission, began to create more decorative pieces, which were intended for homes. Glass objects such as vases, glasses and carafes were among these. A large number of painters dedicated their entire lives to the art of still life.

Great artists such as Snyder, de Heem, Pieter Claesz and Kalf were often copied by their pupils, and through the centuries many paintings which had been considered original were then revealed as mere reproductions made by skillful students. But when closely examined and compared to the originals, the difference in texture, the use of light and

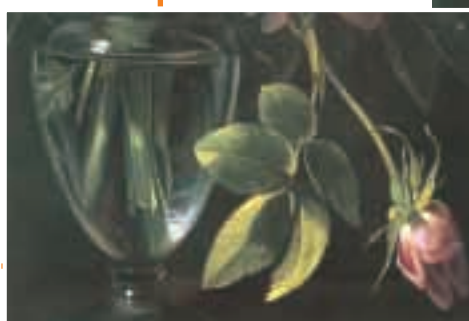
colours and the overall effect are such that it is impossible not to see the superiority of the real masters. Often, confusion arises due to the fact that pupils were actually encouraged to copy their teachers, so as to learn their style and technique: at times, the hand of the master can be recognized only in certain details of the paintings, where he corrected his student or helped him resolve a feature of the work.

Details. The real secret lies here. The master's brush picks out the contrast between the various elements with great fluidity (see painting by Matthaeus Wytmans - note the style of the extremely wide-rimmed goblet), and the coming together of the various single elements which make up the painting into a sole suggestive whole makes it possible to feel the immediacy and real intention of the work. This is what distinguishes the original from the copy - just like in music the composer's original score should be perceived in all

its pureness and compositional freshness, so in painting, the originals show the full expressive ability of the artist, with a much stronger effect than a copy could ever achieve. And this is true although centuries may divide us from the production of these masterpieces, and time may have withered the canvas and faded the colours. The author's message still comes through to us.

Some relatively unknown painters are also mentioned here, especially those who reached considerable results in painting glass objects, such as Simon Luttichuys, with his still life painted in oils on wood, produced between 1650 and 1660: a superb example of glass in painting.

**Daniel Seghers, oils on copper, before 1637**



## Flemish masters

What is surprising about the works of Flemish masters - and amongst the first we find Pier Paul Rubens, one of the greatest baroque artists of all time (who, however, found his main inspiration in portraits and religious themes), Jordaens, Snyders and Fyt - is their spontaneity, and the freshness of their pictorial style. What's notable in their paintings is the chromatic disposition of the brush-strokes and the fluidity of the oil paints; these are almost self-sufficient elements. The apparent casualness of a light shining from the side and a streaked brush-stroke give the composition a sense of motion, and create a great sense of spontaneity. The usually low, close perspective, and the accentuated contrasts strengthen the general impression of transience, of casualness.



Starting around the end of the 1500s, in the Flanders there was a growing interest in collecting works featuring flower compositions arranged in vases, animals, seashells; in short, in representations of nature. The subjects were grouped together in series, according to the kind of objects

represented, the seasons or other criteria. There started to be numerous requests from courts and nobility for this kind of painting, which was continued in the 1600s by many Flemish masters who made detailed reproductions of the natural world. As mentioned before, the painting of tableware, fruit, flowers, etc. began in religious settings; in the same


painting featuring a Madonna and angels, at a certain point objects of everyday use, or decorative elements began to appear. Many studios would simultaneously be working for churches and for private collectors. The latter would hang the masterpieces in their dining rooms to be admired by their guests, and to give a sense of festivity to their reunions.

On the previous



**Ambrosius Bosschaert the Young, oils on wood, 1635-1640**

**Gerrit Willemsz, oils on wood, 1644**

page, we can see a masterpiece painted on copper by a member of the Jesuit Order, Daniel Seghers, who was a pupil of the famous Jan Brueghel the Old. The painting is signed, and is estimated to have been produced before 1637. This painting was copied by Willem van Haecht, and is an excellent example of the importance of details. The simplicity of the glass vase is made precious by the way the author catches the light reflections with tiny brushstrokes (see close-up). The clean transparency of the vase reveals the stillness of the water and the different hues of green in the stems and leaves. The chromatic gradations of the flowers are enhanced by the very dark background, a recurring characteristic of this artist's paintings. Authors such as Veerendael, Ykense and de Heem followed Seghers' models, with very decorative works of various kinds, which gradually give up any symbolic references to theology or cosmology, to be transformed into sumptuous signs of festivity, with prevailing aesthetic themes. We can appreciate how 



Gillit Jacobsz van  
Hulsdonck, oils  
on wood,  
1645 - 1650



de Heem captures the beauty and delicacy of the wine glass, the painting on page 137, which is an example of the tableware style in vogue in the Flanders between 1640-1645. The same kind of translucent light dances off the multicoloured grapes.

Other sources of inspiration for still life painting were game,

Floris Claesz  
van Dyck, oils  
on wood,  
1613



hunting scenes, great, elaborate plates of food, marketplaces and kitchens. A growing number of painters specialized in these themes, since they were more and more requested by princes and the nobility; many of their private collections have reached us. In these works, we find a systematic order of the represented animals and fruit, always shown in some sort of cycle. For example, the animals were grouped according to species, such as fish, birds or terrestrial creatures. It is thus very clear

why still life painting was so popular: princes and courts received hundreds of guests at a time, and liked to show off their splendour and power not only through their generosity at the table, but also with the beauty of their surroundings, which had to reflect their everyday lifestyle. The paintings of still life were not only meant for big dining rooms, though; they were commissioned for galleries and long, illuminated castle corridors.

Another feature which emerges in the seventeenth century is that of incomplete objects at the margins of paintings, where the imagination of the onlooker is put to work. Frames do not bring a particular moment in time to a stop anymore, but suggest a spatial continuity that goes

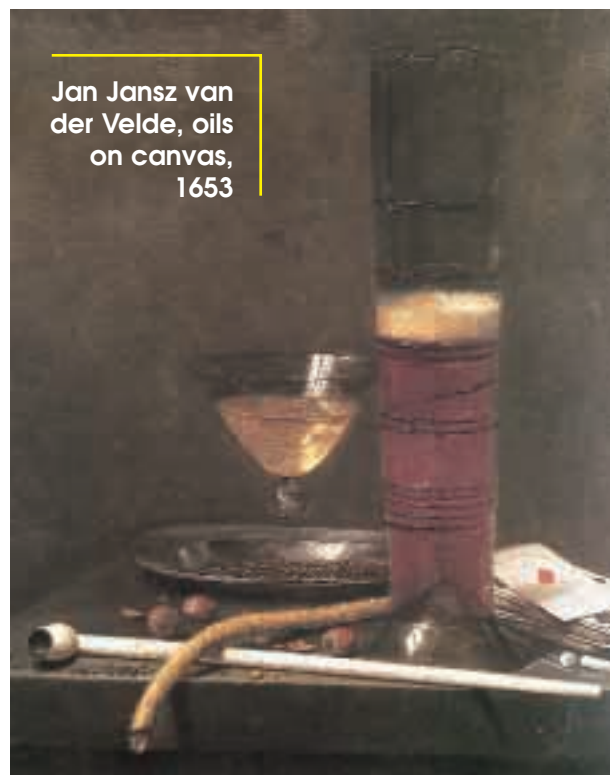
beyond the frame itself, showing the limits of visual experience. We can only imagine what lies beyond the frame line.

### 17th century paintings in northern Holland

Slowly, painters started to become more independent, and did not work only on commission anymore, or on particular themes which were set into a "cycle" pattern. Yet, for many years, artists in the North of the Netherlands had a marked preference for the representation of vases of flowers or banquets, for instance. This was especially due to the fact that buyers were mostly interested in this kind of art. Often, the interest of the people buying the paintings was restricted to a single subject, a sole figurative element.

The contemporaries of artists such as Jan Brueghel and

Jan Jansz van  
der Velde, oils  
on canvas,  
1653



Ambrosius Bosschaert the Young weren't very concerned with the content of their paintings - they were more preoccupied with the form and the actual realistic reproduction of objects - something today we can easily obtain with photographs. This is a totally different approach to that which we find nowadays; now the "reproduction" aspect is almost totally ignored. An example of Ambrosius Bosschaert's work shows the "real", natural world of fruit together with "real", everyday tableware, and yet, the painter endows this masterpiece with a surreal atmosphere which is enhanced by the grey-brown background. The chromatism is quite limited, whereas the single objects stand out clearly, like the melon with its golden light and the glass, where the reflections are so bright you can almost "see" the windows (and imagine what lies beyond them, in that seventeenth century world) which illuminate the models. It is remarkable how the very pureness of the glass itself, more

than half-filled with white wine, seems tangible, touchable in its simplicity and clear hardness. The holes and signs left by worms on the pears and apples, and the flies, are typical features of Bosschaert's school. It is interesting to note that the split walnut, with its hard shell and soft inside, is a reference to Christ: "soft meat on hard wood".

It took a long time for the specialization in drawing objects of everyday life to be considered as self-sufficient. It took even longer for it to be known as still life. In fact, this term was used for the first time in the Netherlands in 1650, whilst in that same century it does not appear in any Flemish documentation. The flowers, fruit and other objects were at first painted on small or medium-sized wooden panels, then on copper, and later on, more and more often on canvas.

On page 139, we can view a masterpiece by Gerrit Willemsz Heda in which glass has a very important role. There is a great



**Willem Claesz Heda, oils on wood, 1648**

**Clara Peeters, oils on wood, 1611**

difference in the style of the two glasses; on the left, the painter depicts a typical, early seventeenth century cut with precious, jewel-like decorations in relief on the stem. This is a recurring style, to be found in a great number of paintings of the period. In contrast, on the right, a tall, slim and elegant design in more subdued tints. This painting seems to reveal the vainness and transience of sensuality and human pleasures. The painting by Gillis Jacobsz van Hulsdonck, on page 140, shows two glasses in a similar style to that on the left of Heda's work - note the way the stems are worked, and the concave bottom of the glass resting on its side. In a detail of a painting by Floris Claesz van Dyck, dated 1613 (see previous page), we can view another typical wine glass which the artist studies very carefully through the use of different tonalities; unfortunately, some parts





**Georg Flegel,  
oils on wood,  
1610 - 1620**

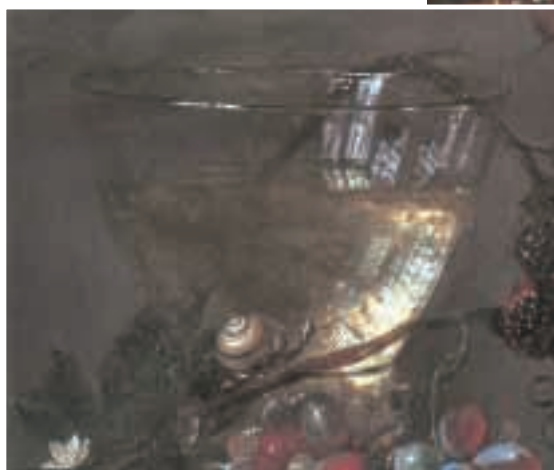
**Jacob Van  
Es, oils on  
copper,  
1640 - 1650**

of the painting, including the glass, were restored by an inexperienced hand, taking away some of its spontaneity.

Beer, which is still the most popular drink in Holland and Germany, was drunk in tall glasses such as that in the painting by Jan Jansz van de Velde, on page 140, which has a very masculine feel and again depicts the transitory pleasures of life. In direct contrast, the delicacy of the glass carafe in a detail of a painting by Willem Claesz Heda (see previous page) is a further example of the style in vogue in the seventeenth century.

### *Not only painters*

Throughout the seventeenth century, there is a growing attention to shading, a new sense of perception. The tiniest changes in lighting, perspective and appearance of surfaces and objects are caught, the slightest nuances are captured and immortalized; the painting of still life is thus one of the best examples of how details acquire a great importance of their own. As mentioned before, it is sometimes very difficult to attribute a painting to a



particular artist because many paintings are anonymous, or unsigned, and many, instead, come from studios, meaning that they may have been produced by different hands.

Another consideration is the fact that for many, even famous artists, painting was a secondary activity, a second job, if not a hobby. For instance, one of the greatest Dutch masters, Rembrandt (who was mainly dedicated to painting portraits and landscapes), and painters like Ambrosius Bosschaert and Vermeer, were art dealers, as well as Picart, a Flemish master, and Willem Kalf, a major exponent of Dutch still life painting who was also an expert in art. Others were merchants of various sorts; some dealt in wine, others in cork, and others yet in tulips!

Other painters' "real" jobs were the most varied; some were musicians who played at weddings, some were shopkeepers, and Jan van der Heyden was actually a captain of the fire brigade.

In the Netherlands of the 1600s, for the first time some women, too, made a profession of painting, and it was still life in which they specialized. The previous page shows a painting by Clara Peeters, signed and dated 1611. As with other pieces, this work gives us an idea as to the tableware and vases then in vogue; the glass is tall and elaborately modelled, the puffed stem gilded - an example of Venetian glassware.

### *Germany's call*

Towards the end of the seventeenth century, painters of still life began to achieve international appreciation. Artists such as Rachel Ruysch and Jan van Huysum were chosen as court painters, as well





**Pieter Claesz,  
oils on wood,  
1651**

Abraham van Beyeren's masterpiece, shown below, is yet another example of the importance of glass in still life painting. The gold-rimmed, gold-stemmed goblet on the far right is an authentic, fragile jewel showing the magnificence of the style then in vogue. This piece is in direct contrast with the glass on the very edge of the table, which has a much heavier appearance. Another glass yet, with an elaborate stem, stands behind the music score and the flute (top left). The painting gives us a feel of the baroque period, where the magnificence of the tableware and food is combined with the idea of a musical background, making us taste, "hear" and breathe in a sumptuous moment of the seventeenth century. 📖

**Abraham van  
Beyeren, oils  
on canvas,  
1650-1655**

as others such as Jacob Elliger, Hendrik de Fromantiou, Frans de Hamilton, Adrien van der Spelt and Willem van Royen, who were all still life specialists and were called to Berlin by the Prince Elector of Brandenburg. Van Royen became a member of the Berliner Akademie when it was founded in 1696; in 1698 he was nominated rector of the school, and after that he was principal for five consecutive years.

The Netherlands' subtle paintings spread throughout northern Europe. This is testified by the fact that painters were called abroad to work, and by the numerous requests from German-speaking and Scandinavian areas, as well as from London. In fact, there were very few native German Länder still life painters in the seventeenth century; most of the artists were of Dutch origins and were called to work in Frankfurt and Hanau. Others were pupils of Flemish masters, such as Georg Flegel (see previous page), and Wedig, who was

born in Cologne; others yet had studied in Holland, like Hinz.

### *Glass models: virtual "jewels"*

We will mention another few masterpieces here which virtually speak for themselves. The multiple reflections on the glass in the detail of the painting by Van Es (see previous page) make the glass itself stand out in the painting when viewed as a whole. This element catches the eye in the sobriety of the overall effect, also due to the unreflecting surfaces of the zinc plate and the "perspiring" pieces of ham.

Another painting, where the glasses are important features but assume a completely different role, is one of Pieter Claesz's later masterpieces (1651) (see above). Although the various elements in the painting form strong contrasts when picked out as details, the shaded contours against the background make the single elements blend into the work harmoniously.

