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Figure 11. Hendrik van der Borcht, *Still Life with Antiquities*, mid-seventeenth century. Diam: 34.5 cm. Hermitage, St. Petersburg. Photo: Courtesy of Hermitage, St. Petersburg.

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Making sense of things

On the motives of Dutch still life

ELIZABETH ALICE HONIG

Some time between 1615 and 1620, a young man from a good family—a family that had been involved in the arts and was now in a position of political power—sat down to write a treatise concerning material objects and their proper role in the life of the civilized man. This was a matter of concern in his society, particularly at his level of that society. His nation was becoming integrated into a world economic system, and a wide choice of goods was available to a broad segment of people—an economy, and a lifestyle, focused on commodities. Things were imported, things were crafted, things were traded. And so the relationship between the made things of the material world and the social order of the human world needed to be arranged, understood, and articulated in a way useful to its literate inhabitants. Hence his book. It contained twelve chapters, including one on flowers, one on vessels and utensils, one on paintings, one on the general placement of objects within the lived environment, one on vegetables and fruits, and one on things smoked and imbibed for pleasure. The book treated both the aesthetic judgment of individual objects—that is, the formation of "taste"—and the functions of objects within the rituals of social life—that is, gentlemanly behavior. When the author published this text, he entitled it "A Treatise on Superfluous Things."[1]

It is not surprising that, in historical circumstances like those I have described, people were interested in a book that explicated the mysteries of a rapidly developing material culture and drew its artifacts into what they recognized as proper social forms, endowing them with an aesthetic of distinction that would also play a social role. What might be more surprising to scholars of European culture is that the author of this text, Wen Zhenheng, was writing in Ming China; and his was one of a number of material culture treatises produced there in this period. Early modern Europe did not produce texts that dealt in such a way with its material culture. Even in books where we might expect to find this sort of commentary—works on household *oeconomia*, for instance, or treatises on cultivating a gentlemanly self—there is a distinct coyness about treating directly and descriptively the actual objects with which the ideal householder or gentleman should be surrounded.[2]

What early modern Europe did produce was a *visual* discourse around its own material culture. In almost every part of western Europe, from Spain and Italy in the south to Germany and the Netherlands in the north, there arose at roughly the same time, around 1600, a strong and enduring practice of the pictorial representation of objects. Scholars throughout the twentieth century have tried to explain why this should have occurred, but their narratives nearly always have the flaw of privileging one locale of genesis above all others and then positing other forms of still life as secondary. Hence, writers who favor Italy will call upon antiquity, intarsia, and forms of perspectival illusionism to justify the artistic turn to objects; while Northernists point to illuminated manuscripts, disguised symbolism, and mimetic naturalism.[3] All of these accounts have

This article represents a preliminary gathering of thoughts for a projected study of Dutch and Flemish still life and its relationship to collecting practices. A version was presented as a talk at the Rijksuniversiteit te Leiden in March 1997 at the invitation of Dr. Eric Jan Sluijter. I thank Machteld Löwensteyn for her valuable comments on that talk; Antien Knaap for a lively discussion of the Hainz painting at the Historisch Museum; Florike Egmond for thoughts about her work on classification paradigms; and the students in my fall 1996 seminar at Berkeley for sharing with me their thoughts about still life. My particular thanks to Alan Chong, at whose instigation I embarked upon this project and whose study-day on still life (New York, May 1996) raised many of the questions this essay begins to answer.

1. My account of this book is based on Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things. Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (London: Polity Press, 1991).

2. This is pointed out also by Clunas, ibid., pp. 37, 51, 170. He accuses the writers of being "obsessed with idealist generalizations" (p. 170), in contrast to the descriptive specificity of contemporary object-painters. I do not know of any significant exceptions to this rule about written texts and material culture, although there was at the same time increasing discussion about taste and judgment in works of art; see my "The Beholder as Work of Art: A Study in the Relocation of Value in 17th-Century Flemish Painting," *Beeld en zelfbeeld in de Nederlandse kunst 1550–1750*, special issue of *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* (1995):253–297.

3. Some of the works that have attempted to locate still life's "origins" are: Charles Sterling, *Still Life Painting. From Antiquity to the Twentieth Century* (1952; reprint, New York: Harper & Row, 1981);

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merit, yet none really succeeds in explaining the simultaneous efflorescence of an extraordinary range of object representations in so many places, almost simultaneously and with only a few concrete instances of influence. And even influence would not explain the immediate popularity of a new aesthetic practice in cultures distanced in geographical terms, and different in artistic, social, political and economic cultures.

The present article does not pretend to provide a neat solution to what is, in the end, probably an unanswerable question. But any discussion of the motives for still life must, I think, concern itself with two separate issues before it can satisfactorily account for their meeting in this curious genre—curious in that it is so particular to Europe, unlike other basic representational concerns (the body, landscape, narrative) that are shared by numerous societies. First, such a discussion must explain the broader cultural interests in, or concerns with, objects in the world; and second, it must find aesthetic imperatives of pictorial representation that would promote a *visual* expression of those interests. In China, for instance, there was clearly concern with objects, with their aesthetic values and their social meanings. And yet within China's visual tradition there was no place for representing objects pictorially. Even the material culture treatises were unillustrated, although book illustration was otherwise widespread.[4]

Among recent writers on Dutch still life, a new narrative about the motives for the picturing of objects has been proposed; although more fully articulated by some writers than others, it has produced a set of assumptions that now underlie much thinking on the subject.[5] It goes something like this. The Dutch Republic was a mercantilist and protocapitalist culture in which commodities played an immense role in the cultural consciousness. Its lived world was filled with material goods to an unprecedented extent, and the interest of these objects lay in their status as commodities. The goal of a broad spectrum of society was to acquire and possess luxury objects by means of commercial exchange. These objects then functioned as symbols of wealth and status, while imported wares from distant cultures added a resonance of imperial mastery to the Dutch world of goods.

Meanwhile, painters had begun producing their works as market commodities, that is, as things of economic worth to be exchanged on the open market. They seized upon the unique valuation of objects in their culture as part of their own project: hence, still life. Dutch society was also unique relative to the rest of Europe and particularly relative to, say, China, in that here both the traders in commodities and the makers of fine craft objects were culturally celebrated.[6] The fine painter of objects rivaled both merchant and craftsman; he usurped their status and made it part of his aesthetic.[7] To round out this explanation of still life, it would also be important to note that the Dutch were the inheritors of the Van Eyckian artistic tradition, with its strong commitment to the descriptive rendering of individual things. Thus a certain value in artistic practice preceded a society's obsession with material objects and made visual art the natural site of its discourse.

Ingvar Bergström, *Dutch Still-Life Painting in the Seventeenth Century* (1956; reprint, New York: Hacker, 1983); Alberto Veca & Pietro Lorenzelli, *Forma vera. Contributi a una storia della natura morta italiana* (Bergamo: Galleria Lorenzelli, 1985); Norbert Schneider, *The Art of Still Life* (Cologne: Taschen, 1990); Barbara John, *Stilleben in Italien. Die Anfänge der Bildgattung im 14. und 15. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1991).

4. Clunas (see note 1), pp. 51–52.

5. Particularly important foundational works for this account include Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches* (New York: Knopf, 1987); id., "Perishable Commodities: Dutch Still-Life Painting and the 'Empire of Things,'" in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. John Brewer and Roy Porter (London/New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 478–488; Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked. Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion Books, 1990); Hal Foster, "The Art of Fetishism. Notes on Dutch Still Life," in *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, ed. Emily Apter and William Pietz (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 251–265. An important and detailed historical study that draws in part upon this more theoretical work is Julie Berger Hochstrasser, "Life and Still Life: A Cultural Inquiry into Seventeenth-Century Dutch Still-Life Painting" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1995); I thank Julie Hochstrasser for allowing me to read this unpublished work.

6. On the value of craftsmanship in seventeenth-century Holland, see Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); on merchants, see L. Kooijmans, "De koopman," in *Gestalten van de gouden eeuw*, ed. H. M. Beliën, A. Th. van Deursen, and G. J. van Setten (Amsterdam: Bakker, 1995), pp. 65–92, esp. 87–88; J. G. van Dillen, *Van rijkdom en regenten* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1970), pp. 284–290. On the social aversion to both artisans and merchants in China, see Clunas (see note 1), pp. 141–142.

7. See Celeste Brusati, "Stilled Lives: Self-Portraiture and Self-Reflection in Seventeenth-Century Netherlandish Still-Life Painting." *Simiolus* 20, no. 2/3 (1990–1991):168–182; for a broader discussion of the aesthetics of Dutch art related to still life, see id., "Natural Artifice and Material Values in Dutch Still Life," in *Looking at Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art. Realism Reconsidered*, ed. Wayne Franits (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 144–157.

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Figure 1. Abraham van Beyeren, *Luxury Still Life*, second half of seventeenth century. 75.5 x 96 cm. Private collection. Photograph: Courtesy of Sotheby's, London.

Following logically from this narrative, the quintessential Dutch still life would be a *pronkstilleven*, or "luxury still life" (fig. 1); and indeed almost any still life would be interpreted as if it were, covertly, "really" about the display and overabundance of luxury goods. This indeed frequently does happen.

The theory of still life is next modified by the suggestion that Dutch Calvinist society was greatly morally troubled by its own material wealth. Although Simon Schama extended this notion into a general interpretation of Dutch culture, it had already been implicit in many iconographic studies of Dutch art and particularly of still life.[8] The conclusion then is that still-life painting tries to deal with social unease about the economic, either by "castigating" the material appetite (which might be the route taken in iconography)[9] or by "negotiating" the invasion of market values into common, domestic existence (which is more the line taken by a certain kind of cultural criticism).[10] Following logically from this narrative, the quintessential Dutch still life would be a *vanitas*; and indeed, almost any still life would be interpreted as if it were, covertly, "really" about the mortification of the flesh via the eye. This indeed frequently does happen. Thus, the vanitas *pronkstilleven* would be the most perfect expression of this troubled culture and its castigating or negotiating aesthetic (fig. 2). Its message is to warn us that wealth, power, fame, and in particular all the fine goods of the world that signify and embody those things will perish before the onslaught of death.

This interpretive route is attractive because it works with broader issues of twentieth-century historical and social analysis. First, it binds the production of one cultural form—still-life painting—to two major viewpoints about the formation of capitalist society. Is capitalism Protestantly ascetic and driven by investment in production, or is it based on greedy consumer demand for luxury commodities?[11] We project this disagreement back to the moment of its subject and give still life a central role in mediating the dispute. This appeals, in turn, to a standpoint that links European modernity to a materialism of which it is highly

8. Schama (see note 5). For a well-balanced look at iconography and still life, see E. de Jongh, "The Interpretation of Still-Life Paintings: Possibilities and Limits," in *Still-Life in the Age of Rembrandt*, ed. E. de Jongh (Auckland: Auckland City Art Gallery, 1982), pp. 27–37.

9. This is still, in essence, the line followed by Bryson (see note 5).

10. See particularly Foster (see note 5).

11. Classic texts in this debate are Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904–1905) and Werner Sombart, *Luxury and Capitalism* (1912).

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Figure 2. Pieter Claesz, *Vanitas Pronkstilleven*, 1634. Westfälisches Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kunturgeschichte, Münster.

disparaging: the historical subject can only be redeemed if shown to have been suitably unhappy about accumulation and consumption, and still life is a symptom of this saving attitude. But I began my essay with Chinese "superfluous things" in part so we could bear in mind that Europe was not alone in having a rich material culture that bore social meaning. It was only alone in producing images of it.

It would be easy to move on from here to marshal evidence against there having been a huge embarrassment about riches in the Dutch Republic. But that would keep the terms of this interpretive structure in place, and we would be left claiming that still-life painting was a *celebration* of luxury rather than its condemnation. I would prefer, however, to find a way of avoiding the "conspicuous consumption" or "luxury" trope altogether. These are terms that demand judgment, at least as twentieth-century thinking has defined them. They are not terms used by seventeenth-century people when talking about their art. The word "*pronkstilleven*" is a modern invention: in the seventeenth century, a painting of silver vessels was called a painting of silver vessels.[12]

Who, after all, decides what is or is not a luxury? One man's indulgence is another's necessity, while a third is wholly unconcerned about that object's economic status. Still-life painting typically mixes the ordinary with the extraordinary: a plain glass and a gold goblet, rare flowers and common fruits, a nautilus cup and a bunch of grapes. These images do not, or at least do not obviously, ask us to judge the relative values of the things they contain.

There are, in fact, instances in the genesis of European still life when its originating motive did lie in the economic status of its objects; for example, Antwerp between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[13] Here, attention to representing objects in easel painting began with the work of Pieter Aertsen. In images of market stalls and of farmers with their saleable wares, he promoted an aesthetic of the alluring commodity, thereby providing painting with a critical role in mediating questions about value and desire, which

12. Pointed out by Hochstrasser (see note 5), pp. 365–366. This makes all the more peculiar the fact that the most sustained study on *pronkstillevens* begins with a discussion of the negative implications of the term "pronk" as if this justifies interpreting such paintings as condemnations of the accumulation of luxury goods. Sam Segal, *A Prosperous Past. The Sumptuous Still Life in the Netherlands, 1600–1700* (The Hague: SDU, 1988), p. 15.

13. The argument of the following two paragraphs is presented extensively in my book *Painting and the Market* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

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Figure 3. Pieter Aertsen, *The Meat Stall*, 1551. 123 x 167 cm. Art Collections of Uppsala University, Sweden.

vexed his increasingly commercial society (fig. 3). His nephew, Joachim Beuckelaer, also produced images of urban marketplaces for Antwerp's mercantile elite; again, these were works that engaged serious questions of moral judgment, temptation, self-definition, and individual responsibility, which confronted those who operated within a world of economic allure and exchange. The picture as object, and the object pictured, were accepted as critical sites of discourse about the role of commodities in society.

But the still-life painting, which developed out of these market scenes in the seventeenth century, particularly in the work of Frans Snyders and his followers, represented an alteration, or even a reversal, of this acceptance. Snyders executed both market stalls and independent still lifes, but in both types of image the objects are presented not as commodities, but simply as nature's abundance (figs. 4–5). At rural market stalls, whose site evokes production rather than consumption, attractive sellers offer presents of figs—symbols of fecundity—to passing hunters, or to the beholder. In the pure still lifes, the objects piled on tables seem to have appeared there without human intervention. They are never readied for consumption, but instead present *themselves* to the viewer as nature's benevolent offering. These pictures work to mask the character of things as purchasable wares and instead naturalize their potential to be possessed.[14] Exchange becomes display; the commodity, a gift. In other words, Snyders's still lifes are indeed about objects as possessions. But they are possessions that have been removed from their status as commodities. His paintings are certainly engaged with abundance, even with superfluous things. To call them images of "luxury" would in some sense be accurate, but to wield that word in modern judgmental terms would be to ignore the antieconomic work these pictures actually perform in making superfluity into a state of nature.

In Antwerp, then, still life represents the historical afterlife of economic objects. In other places in Europe, there is even less of a direct link between the genesis of the genre and a pictorial concern with the commercial status of things. Not that an interest in representing commerce didn't exist elsewhere; but in the Northern Netherlands, for instance, market imagery develops primarily in the graphic arts, its generic ties being with

14. This transition is discussed in detail in ibid., chap. 5; for a related discussion, see Christian Klemm, "Weltdeutung—Allegorien und Symbole in Stilleben," in *Stilleben in Europa*, ed. G. Langemeyer and H. A. Peters (Münster: Landschaftsverband Westfallen-Lippe, 1979), pp. 140–170.

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Figure 4. Frans Snyders, *Produce Stall with Hunter*, circa 1620s. 201 x 333 cm. Munich, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen.

topography rather than with still life. What seems to have interested Dutch artists about the market was not the visual and alluring qualities of commodities, but the civic space and social environment within which they circulated.[15] I find this fact very revealing and will return to it later. My point now is, however, that no easy art historical connection exists to link Dutch imagery of things to their status as objects of commercial exchange and value, as does exist (if negatively) in the art of Antwerp. This is certainly not to say that one cannot interpret things in Dutch still lifes as being commodities, but it does suggest that other qualities of objects might be of equal or even greater interest to this culture.

Of course, every object *can* be a commodity, that is, a thing that has economic value and can be exchanged. Equally, however, every object can *not* be a commodity. Objects have lives, they have biographies.[16] They pass into and out of a state of commodity-hood. Things never intended as commodities—a seashell, a letter from a famous person—can become ones. Conversely, things created to be commodities can be removed from that state and placed into situations in which their exchangeability ceases to be their most relevant feature. So historians have been right to look at Dutch still lifes and say "these things are commodities;" but it would be more pertinent to ask, is the moment, the circumstance in which these things are depicted, one in which their economic value is the most interesting thing about them? Usually, I think, the answer would be no. In fact, I would say that Dutch still life is very largely concerned to depict things that are, in biographical terms, either noncommodities (that is, they have never had a commodity moment) or else ex-commodities (that is, they were once commodities but have been reframed out of that state). I would like to suggest three alternative ways of accounting for objects, modes of interest, and motives for depiction, which might be useful in interpreting the development of Dutch still life. Some

15. Linda Stone-Ferrier, "Gabriel Metsu's *Vegetable Market at Amsterdam*: 17th-Century Dutch Market Paintings and Horticulture," *The Art Bulletin* 71, no. 3 (September 1989):436–442; Elizabeth Alice Honig, "Commerce and Commercial Life" in *Encyclopedia of Dutch Art*, ed. Sheila Muller (New York: Garland, 1997); id., *Market/Fair/Kermis* (Amsterdam: Amsterdams Historisch Museum, forthcoming).

16. On this concept, see Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process" in *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 64–91; also Appadurai's introduction to the same volume, "Commodities and the Politics of Value."

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Figure 5. Frans Snyders, *Still Life with Game, Birds, Lobster and Produce,* 1630s. 99 x 156 cm. Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum. Photo: Courtesy of Rheinisches Bildarchiv Köln.

are shared broadly within European culture, while at least one is peculiar to the Dutch Republic. I will then go on to explore further two of these object frameworks and their aesthetic implications.

One that has already been discussed in the literature on still life is the notion of the object as container of knowledge or subject of inquiry, with pictorial representation posited as a means of carrying out that investigation. This way of looking at still life has become more popular as interest grows in links between art and science, and between both of those and European expansion and exploration. First promulgated as an explanation for specific forms of still life, particularly the depiction of naturalia, the notion of things as containers of knowledge can also be seen as a more general aesthetic motive in Dutch object-imagery.[17] It is not my primary concern in this article, but I will have cause to mention it again below.

A second motive for Dutch still life is an interest in the object within a social setting; that is, things operating in shared rituals of consumption. This is most obviously at work in the ubiquitous meal pieces, referred to in their own day as *"banketjes"* (little banquets) or even *"ontbijtjes"* (little breakfasts) (fig. 6).[18] I find this framework intriguing because it motivates a way of rendering objects that is almost unique to the Northern Netherlands, at least in the seventeenth century; and yet, because the images are so familiar, art historians seldom consider their unusual character within a broader European context. To see what I mean, compare the Dutch painting back to Snyders's Flemish

17. An important early look at this question was Marjorie Lee Hendrix, "Joris Hoefnagel and the "Four Elements": A Study in Sixteenth-Century Nature Painting" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1984). See also Gisela Luther, "Naturerscheinung, Bild-Erfindung und Ausführung" in *Stilleben in Europa,* ed. G. Langemeyer and H. A. Peters (Münster: Landschaftsverband Westfallen-Lippe, 1979), pp. 46–58; David Freedberg, "Science, Commerce, and Art," in *Art in History, History in Art,* ed. David Freedberg and Jan de Vries (Santa Monica: Getty Center, 1991), pp. 377–428; Beatrijs Brenninkmeijer-de Rooij, *Roots of Seventeenth-Century Flower Painting. Miniatures, Plant Books, Paintings,* ed. R. E. O. Ekkart, trans. Ruth Koenig (Leiden: Primavera Press, 1996). For picturing and scientific inquiry in general, see Alpers (see note 6). The subject has, since that publication, been studied as much by historians of science as by art historians: see, for example, Edward G. Ruestow, *The Microscope in the Dutch Republic: The Shaping of Discovery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); but see also the essays collected in *Word and Image* 11, no. 4 (1995).

18. The standard study of these paintings is N. R. A. Vroom, *A Modest Message as Intimated by the Painters of the 'Monochrome Banketje,'* 2 vols., rev. ed., trans. Peter Gidman (Schiedam: Interbook International, 1980).

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Figure 6. Willem Claesz. Heda, *Table with Pie, Lemon, and Nautilus Cup*, 1640. 57.5 x 76 cm. Private collection. Photo: Courtesy of Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorisch Documentatie, The Hague.

still life, dating from about the same time (fig. 5). Things there were gathered under the rubric of "nature," and the fiction that governed their presentation was that they were, in some sense, untouched by prior human hands and therefore imminently available for a singular, personal possession by the beholder. There was no communal life to that table. In the Dutch painting, the suggestion of a meal in progress denies the potential for individual possession and instead invites us gradually to consider a whole range of prior presences: the hands that made the pie and those that cut it; the gestures that crafted the silver cup and the one that tipped it over. Our visual relation to the image is just one in a series of human interventions in these objects' lives.

Take too Spanish still lifes of food and table (fig. 7). In these elegant arrangements, one human presence has intensely preceded ours—that of the artist. While the artifice of Dutch meal pieces is often commented upon, in fact it does not intrude to anything like the chilling degree that Spanish painters' intervention does. The placement of objects there is often more sacral than social. Composed with uncanny exactitude, these tables ask not to be disturbed: their visualized formal rituals prohibit the interruption of secondary participation. But the Dutch table still life is a space of temporalized circulation of objects among different people—and in that sense it is indeed like Dutch market scenes, where what is of most interest is the movement of things between individuals and the social exchanges that they occasion and mark.

This second paradigm of object contextualization is an echo, but a corrected one, of Roland Barthes's famous comment about pictures like these: "what are they," he asked, "but ways of lubricating man's gaze amid his domain, facilitators of his daily business among objects whose riddle is dissolved and which are no longer anything but easy surfaces?"[19] What I would correct is Barthes's critical tone about a way of life perceived, a world inhabited, in terms, as he says, of easy surfaces. If we adopt the attitude that surfaces are inevitably easy, that to attend to the visible nature of inanimate things is to live without human depth, we are prevented from taking seriously any kind of discourse of material culture. But as in Ming China, so too in

19. Roland Barthes, "The World as Object" in *Critical Essays* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), p. 4. Simon Schama's article "Perishable Commodities" (see note 5) is also in part a critique of Barthes's formulation; but Schama's point is to refute Barthes's idea that the Dutch were morally indifferent before their material accumulation, substituting instead his own notion of their "embarrassment."

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Figure 7. Thomas Yepes, *Table with Sweets.* Formerly London, Matthiesen Fine Art Ltd. Photo: Courtesy of Matthiesen Fine Art Ltd.

contemporary Holland was it important to articulate the characters and situations of objects within their social settings: this is not in itself an abnormal or shallow cultural desire.

In cultures that are in a state of material and social transition, goods may play critical roles in creating and carrying social messages.[20] This is especially true if the social transition involves a relative loosening of group formations in favor of a greater degree of individualism and personal autonomy, as occurred in most economically advanced urban centers in early modern Europe. In this situation, material things are used to communicate, but those who interact with them must know their language. Then objects may be used to gather and to synthesize information about a changing social world. This, at least, is an anthropologist's formulation; but art historians looking at Heda's painting (see fig. 6) might think it not very useful here. For what sort of social "information" can these objects be said to convey? Most such images do not seem either particularly *de*scriptive or *pre*scriptive of actual usages: they are not the pictured analogs of Chinese "treatises on superfluous things." While Julie Hochstrasser has shown that many meal paintings do depict food combinations advised in literary sources,[21] one is too often faced with anomalies. The items shown do not add up to a credible meal, or a silver *tazza* intrudes into the midst of a humble table—sometimes the juxtaposition is more forceful than in this example.

In fact, one could construct a sort of continuum of table still lifes in which the grouping of things moved from the reasonably plausible, as in the Heda, to the entirely implausible, as in a painting by Osaias Beert (fig. 8). Faced with such a collection of oddities, one is reduced to guessing, helplessly, "well, perhaps they are all luxuries, except of course the bread which is simple and wholesome . . ." And we have circled back to making economic value the center of our reading and then juggling around degrees of luxury like we had to juggle around degrees of correct meal arrangement. Both of these are equally unrewarding historical maneuvers. Clearly something is missing, and that something has to do with the third of my suggestions about motives for the picturing of objects. It could be described, grandiosely and anachronistically, as "the

20. The following formulations are based on Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods. Towards an Anthropology of Consumption* (London/New York: Routledge, 1979).

21. Hochstrasser (see note 5).

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Figure 8. Osaias Beert, *Table with Sweets, Nautilus Cup and Lobster*, circa 1620. Brussels, Musée des Beaux Arts. Photo: Copyright IRPA-KIK, Brussels.

painting as museum"; what it essentially involves is a link between still life and the mentality of collecting.

Of all the motives I have given, this one is the most pervasive. It informs the assemblage and imagery of objects in every European culture, as the impulse to collect things was similarly widespread: numerous Spanish and Flemish still lifes take "the collection" as their primary conceptual purpose (fig. 9).[22] But collecting as a more general and more problematic aspect of still life first struck me when looking at Dutch paintings. This was perhaps because in that tradition we are inclined to expect a certain sort of "realism," one condition of which would be, in the case of still life, a rational coherence of the grouped objects. As we expect a Dutch interior to make sense as a potential lived environment, so we expect the things in a still life to have a reason for being together. And we look for those reasons within modern means of categorization: if the objects do not belong to the same class of thing, then they must have a shared economic value or a shared social use, for example. But still lifes constantly confound our expectations of taxonomy. In them, the ordinary meets the extraordinary, the natural meets the artificial. Common foods are displayed alongside, or resting within, exotic porcelain containers; rare flowers blossom beside familiar fruits. This resistance to classification is more acute in Dutch than in other forms of still life: in the Flemish painting illustrated here, for instance, the objects can be categorized as "things to be collected," which begs many other questions but at least has a certain logic. In Dutch paintings, the logic of the collection is more pervasive but more subtle: it surfaces in individual moments of "illogic," which are actually eruptions of the mentality and aesthetic of collecting.

The collection is a peculiar form of accumulating objects.[23] The things brought into it are removed, to varying degrees, from their normal contexts. Individual items are loosed from their origins, their histories, and biographies and take on new meanings according to what other items now surround them—which is a matter determined by the mind of the collector. In this sense,

22. The links between still life and collecting have been discussed—along different lines than the one I am pursuing here—by Gisela Luther, "Stilleben als Bilder der Sammelleidenschaft" in *Stilleben in Europa*, ed. G. Langemeyer and H. A. Peters (Münster: Landschaftsverband Westfallen-Lippe, 1979), pp. 88–128 and Victor Stoichita, *L'Instauration du tableau. Métapeinture à l'aube des temps modernes* (Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck, 1993).

23. A thought-provoking attempt to theorize the meaning and function of collections is Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins, 1984). I also found very useful

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Figure 9. Frans Francken, *Collection Still Life*, circa 1610–1620. London, Royal Collection. Reproduced by permission of Her Majesty the Queen.

the collection is entirely opposed to another early modern way of looking at and depicting things, antiquarianism.[24] Consider, as an artistic example of the latter, the work of Andrea Mantegna (fig. 10).[25] To Mantegna as antiquarian, the object seen, recorded, and rendered crucially carries along with it the full implications of its origin: it is the self-contained embodiment of its own singular history and brings that narrative with it into the narrative world of Mantegna's painting.

Mantegna's deployment of the object stands in sharp contrast to a group of antiquities depicted by Hendrik van der Borcht (fig. 11). This work is a rare instance in Dutch art of objects gathered because they *do* cohere around the notion of a particular category of collection.[26] But what is of interest about these objects now is not the ramifications of their distinct pasts, but their relationships to one another in a present grouping. To suggest those possible relationships involves a form of creativity on the part of the collector, in this case a role taken by the painter Van der Borcht; to uncover those relationships equally demands a form of creativity on the part of the beholder. The relationships may involve various qualities that we would loosely describe as "formal": quirks of size and scale, variations of material and workmanship, echoes of shape across dissimilar objects. I want to emphasize that these qualities of the objects are not inherent in them: they exist only insofar as each object has been situated as part of this particular collection.

Susan M. Pearce, *On Collecting. An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition* (London/New York: Routledge, 1995), and an unpublished lecture by Marina Bianchi, "Collecting as a Paradigm of Consumption: Unifying and Discriminating Strategies in Consumer Choice" (forthcoming in *Journal of Cultural Economics*). My thanks to Dr. Bianchi for allowing me to read and cite this essay.

24. Stewart (see note 23), p. 153.

25. On the implications of Mantegna's antiquarianism, see Jack M. Greenstein, *Mantegna and Painting as Historical Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); on the painting illustrated here, see pp. 71–85.

26. I know of only one painting that portrays—at least in part—an actually extant object collection: *The Yarmouth Collection*, a huge work painted in the 1660s by an unknown Dutch artist for the Paston family of Norfolk, England, and now in the Norwich Castle Museum. Even in that portrait of a collection, the artist works in various standard and familiar elements of ordinary still life among the valuables and exotica: foods, flowers, a pipe, and timepieces. See Martin Kemp, "'Wrought by No Artist's Hand': The Natural, the Artificial, the Exotic and the Scientific in some Artifacts from the Renaissance" in *Reframing the Renaissance*, ed. Claire Farago (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 177–196.

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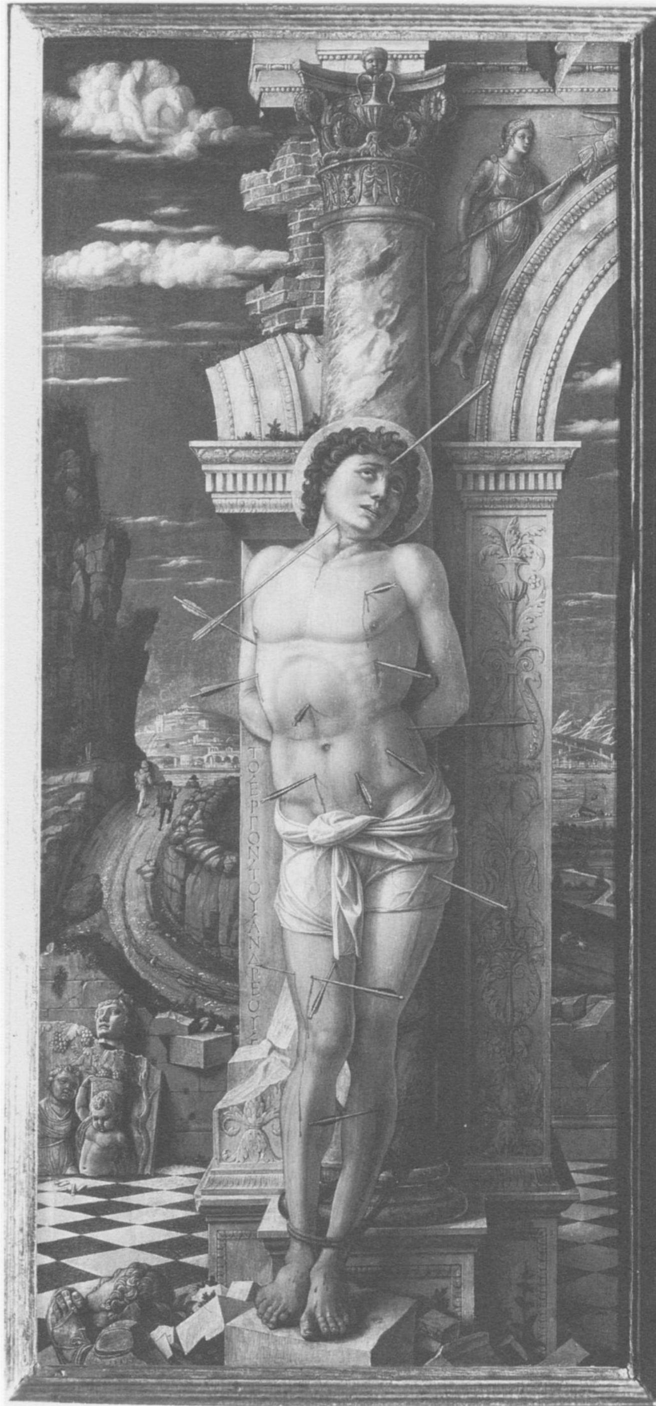

Figure 10. Andrea Mantegna, *St. Sebastian*, circa 1465–1470. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum. Photo: Kunsthistorisches Museum.

Another picture of a collection—but now, a collection less evidently based on a single rubric of classification—sets up particularly complex plays on the new situation of the objects it contains (fig. 12). The things grouped here relate to each other only through peculiar morphological chains, rather than cohering as a single rational category. Where we begin such a chain is left to our own choice; but in the spirit of still life, we might start with the human skull, an item common in *vanitas* paintings where it is said to carry a "meaning," that of the immanence of death and the transience of the things of this world (fig. 2).[27] Here the skull is a collected object, extracted not only from its own past history, but also from its capacity to bear "meaning" in a symbolic way. Its context now is serial and associative. Materially, it echoes the boniness of carved ivories around it; formally and functionally, it is connected to the two great nautilus shells, one of which is directly juxtaposed with it; and above it is stuck a jeweled hat pin that once ornamented a living head. Then, across the cabinet, the skull reappears in miniature, carved by human hands out of a tiny piece of coral. But that second skull is also related materially to the coral beads suspended at the top of the cabinet, which in turn link both formally and by aquatic origin to the strands of pearls hanging below; they relate by material back to the shells, but by value and function to the gemstones. And thence we may move to the antique gem hanging near the hat pin and bearing a human countenance and from there back to the skull's face of death. The glass vessel on the top left shelf, engraved with a scene of *Apollo and Daphne*, is both another crafted object and a narrative comment on the endless series of metamorphoses that the cabinet's objects evoke.

This way of thinking about things and their interrelationships, a way that is associative and serial, was nothing new in the seventeenth century. On the contrary, it was entirely old, and more modern methods of classification were rapidly replacing it.[28] But it seems to have endured in some types of collecting, and from there it carried over into still life's peculiar discourse of

27. Jeroen Stumpel suggested to me that the skull in this picture might be carved from ivory; such things did exist as curiosities in collections and would conform to the sense that all the things in this cabinet are in some sense crafted, the ingenuity of man adding to that of nature.

28. On changes in classification paradigms, see Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (1966; reprint, New York: Pantheon, 1970).

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material culture. In this context, it offered certain advantages that a more fixed and rigid means of taxonomy would have lacked.

One obvious advantage is the potential of this flexible, associative kind of collection to absorb and contain new items.[29] The collector can, at will, alter the precise contents of his collection, and that process is only enriching, stimulating new possible series of relationships between things (fig. 13). These associations, either between collected or painted objects, are not about anything iconographers would call "meaning." Taken together, they do not stand for a single idea; moreover, they do not add up to a single logical and coherent picture of the world nor to a classification system of all the world's objects. It is true that more exceptional seventeenth-century collections did sometimes aspire to such metonymic inclusiveness or such systematization; since these exceptional collections are the ones most often studied in detail, the literature on collecting tends to give a mistaken impression that careful organization was a general rule.[30] But more commonly, collecting was a relatively haphazard and partial business, dependent upon the collector's economic situation and his social contacts. In early modern Holland, the chance availability of objects also played a large role in determining what entered any collection: the arrival of a ship from the Indies might

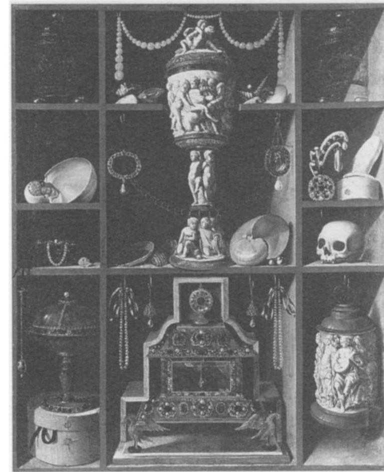

Figure 12. Johann Georg Hainz, *Cabinet of Curiosities*, circa 1666. 118 x 96 cm. Historisch Museum, Amsterdam. Photo: Courtesy of Historisch Museum, Amsterdam.

suddenly put on general offer a formerly rare product, while raffles and lotteries allowed for the acquisition of costly collectibles very much by chance (fig. 14).[31] In the average well-to-do home, things were not collected with a stable program, and it is upon common mentalities and experiences of collecting that the forms of still life draw.

This brings me to two points about collecting, and about the painting as collection, relative to the other object-contexts I have discussed. First, the collection as a unit takes its objects out of a commodity context that they may or may not have once had; but second, the process of collecting keeps those objects within their function as social circulators and bearers of messages. By the first of these points, I mean that objects in a collection may be acquired by purchase—or they may be found, or received as gifts. But once they are in the collection, they acquire a value that is reliant upon the rest of the collection and is not linked to their previous economic status. For instance, if a collector of seashells (very popular in this period) lacked one rather ordinary shell, then getting that shell would be of great importance, and once acquired, it would have value as

29. On this see Bianchi (see note 23); Russell W. Belk, *Collecting in a Consumer Society* (London/New York: Routledge, 1995).

30. For historical studies of seventeenth-century Dutch collections, see the important essays gathered in Ellinoor Bergvelt and Renée Kistemaker, eds., *De Wereld binnen handbereik. Nederlandse kunst- en rariteitenverzamelingen, 1585–1735* (Amsterdam: Amsterdams Historisch Museum, 1992) and Roelof van Gelder, "Noordnederlandse verzamelingen in de zeventiende eeuw," in *Verzamelen. Van Rariteitenkabinet tot Kunstmuseum* , ed. Ellinoor Bergvelt, Debora J. Meijers, and Mieke Rijnders (Heerlen: Open universiteit/ Gaade Uitgevers, 1993), pp. 123–142. My remarks about nonexceptional ways of collecting objects are based on published inventories in the northern and southern Netherlands; I also thank Michael Montias for discussing with me his impressions of unpublished material from Dutch archives. Also suggestive are studies of Dutch interior decoration by scholars of history and applied arts: see, for instance, C. Willemijn Fock, "Kunst en rariteiten in het Hollandse interieur," in *De Wereld binnen handbereik. Nederlandse kunst- en rariteitenverzamelingen, 1585–1735,* ed. Ellinoor Bergvelt and Renée Kistemaker (Amsterdam: Amsterdams Historisch Museum, 1992), pp. 70–91; and Thera Wijsenbeek-Olthuis, "Het Hollandse interieur in beeld en geschrift" *Theoretische Geschiedenis* 23/2 (1996):145–161.

31. See Anneke Huisman and Johan Koppenol, *Daer compt de Lotery met trommels en trompetten! Loterijen in de Nederlanden tot 1726* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1991).

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Figure 13. Johann Georg Hainz, *Cabinet of Curiosities*, mid-1660s. Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen. Photo: Courtesy of Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen.

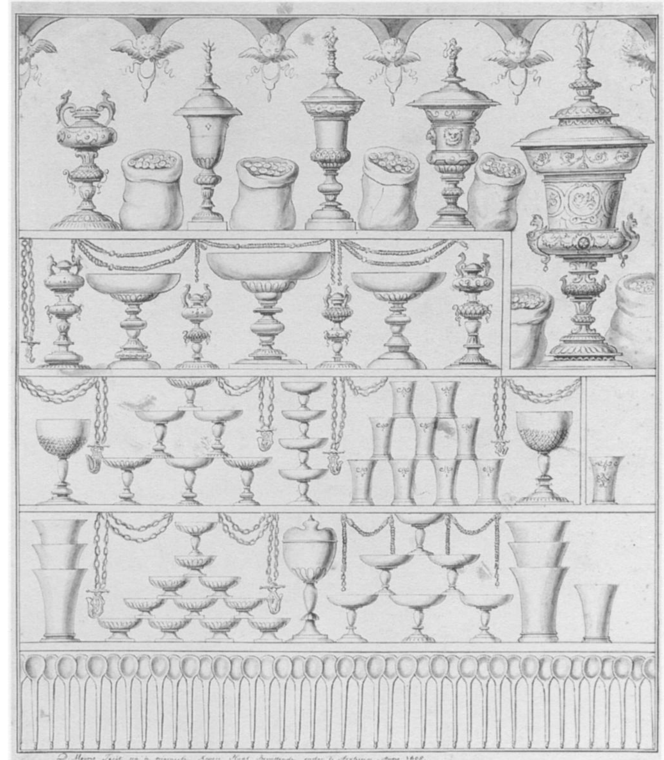

Figure 14. *Silver Prizes for a Dutch Lottery in 1604*. 41 x 34 cm. Gemeentelijke Archiefdienst, Rotterdam. Drawing: D. Moens after a printed lottery card. Photo: Courtesy of Gemeentelijke Archiefdienst, Rotterdam.

part of his collection because of its relationship to the other shells. The collection has the ability, in economic terms, to raise the common to a level "beyond price" as, in aesthetic terms, the unremarkable thing becomes fascinating by virtue of its visual placement amongst other objects.

But the process of collecting assures that precisely as things are extracted from their economic status, they keep or even increase their sociability. Acquiring objects for a collection, particularly perhaps in the seventeenth century, involved building social networks, initiating contacts, exchanging gifts, and finally establishing communities of appreciation. A rich and well-documented example of this is afforded by the botanists of Middelburg, collectors of flowering plants and bulbs whose quasiscientific interests are cited in connection with the rise of flower painting (fig. 15):[32] this is, in other words, a case in which all three of my suggested motives for still life are in some way at stake.

Getting samples of rare plants was no easy thing in seventeenth-century Middelburg. You needed to have good contacts with other people who raised plants, and with people who traveled, or with people who knew people who did both these things. One person could provide an introduction, another might mediate an acquisition, a third arrange for the complex and delicate matter of long-distance transport.[33] Among true collectors, the notion of purchase seems to have been slightly taboo; rather, favors were to be performed and gifts exchanged. Letters to Carolus Clusius, the great botanist at Leiden's famed botanical gardens, describe endless boxes of lemons, pomegranates, oranges, chestnuts, marmalade, Spanish wine, and other delicacies sent to him from Middelburg in the hopes that he would, in return, give to his admirers there some seeds and bulbs from his garden—as he indeed did. Occasionally his correspondents mention the possibility

32. See L. J. Bol, *The Bosschaert Dynasty* (Leigh-on-Sea: F. Lewis, 1960), pp. 14–18.

33. A picture of the formation and operation of these circles is provided by the letters published in F. W. T. Hunger, "Acht brieven van Middelburgers aan Carolus Clusius" *Archief van het Zeeuwsch Genootschap der Wetenschappen* (1925), pp. 110–133.

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Figure 15. Ambrosius Bosschaert II, *Flowers in a Glass Vase*, 1632. 27 x 19 cm. Private collection. Photo: Courtesy of Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorisch Documentatie, The Hague.

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Figure 16. Balthasar van der Ast, *Still Life with Fruits, Flowers and Shells*, 1623. 25 x 32 cm. Private collection. Photo: Courtesy of Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorisch Documentatie, The Hague.

of monetary payment, but very apologetically, as if it were a terrible insult and offered only because their gifts might not be good enough.[34] These complicated rites of introduction, supplication, gift giving, and acquisition are perhaps reflected in the "illogical" combinations of things in Middelburg still-life paintings, relics of an object culture in which the economics of superfluity and luxury are doubly erased by the social processes and disorderly aesthetics of collecting (fig. 16).

The still life as collection had the potential to operate directly within the more elaborate *rariteitenkammers* (chambers of rarities) being formed at this period.[35] According to a drawing from mid-century, the collection room of the Dimpfel family of Regensburg boasted high on its wall (at the left) a pair of paintings, which, it appears, were very much like those produced by the Middelburg masters (fig. 17). One might suppose that they functioned to "fill in" the Dimpfel collection, providing by means of pictorial representation types of objects that could not actually be displayed in the room. Flower paintings were particularly useful in this regard, and Flemish collection pictures sometimes play on this very fact, juxtaposing a rendering of "real" flowers with a doubly painted flower painting.[36] But in reality not very many still-life paintings could have been used in this way; I would guess that few, if any, were originally intended to be. Their content actually works against such a substitutive function, since they regularly include elements like shells or porcelain, which merely duplicate common collectable objects.

Rather, the still lifes "fit" into the Dimpfel collection because the paintings themselves share that collection's overall attitude toward objects, toward what makes them interesting, and toward how the imagination of the collector/artist creates interest from objects. By drawing upon the preclassical, serial means of associating things,

34. For instance, a first-time correspondent, after apologizing for the flaws in the gifts he is sending, requests that Clusius "share" with him various seeds and plants and offers to recompense him "tuwer E discretie ende beliefte, tzy met gelde off anderssins" ("at your discretion and pleasure, whether with money or otherwise"). Letter from Willem Jasperduyn, 27.xi.1593; cited in ibid., p. 115. On the other hand, the correspondents do send to Clusius enormous and detailed botanical wish lists, which he apparently often did fulfill. Even when the writers describe getting items from less exalted sources, cost is not mentioned as an issue; the stories are about social contacts, agreements, and, at times, misunderstandings.

35. The literature on *kunstkammers* has grown enormously in recent years, but a good overview is still Joy Kenseth, "A World of Wonders in One Closet Shut" in *The Age of the Marvelous*, ed. J. Kenseth (Hanover, New Hampshire: Hood Museum of Art, 1991), pp. 81–101.

36. This ploy was used in particular by Jan Brueghel, himself famed as a flower painter. In a number of his collection paintings, he includes both a "real" bouquet of flowers and a garland in a pictured painting in his own signature style. See, for example, his collaborative works in The Prado, Madrid, *Allegory of Sight* (inv. #1.394) and *Allegory of Sight and Smell* (inv. #1.403).

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Figure 17. Joseph Arnold, *The Dimpfel Family Collection in Regensburg*, 1668. 14.9 x 19.1 cm. Ulmer Museum, Ulm. Photo: Courtesy of Ulmer Museum.

collections allow for the limitless addition of new, strange objects into a context that also includes old familiar ones. Each addition is absorbed into the set, changes it, and permits fresh conjunctions to be formed. Likewise, paintings allow in new elements of material culture and enable them to be linked with the old. Like the collection, the painting establishes a space that isolates objects from their prior meanings and uses, and allows for their interplay with one another outside of those contexts. It is this interplay that generates surprise, interest, and what we might call "novelty"; but it also allows for making sense of novel things through their new connections. And that creative process of making sense is a shared or a social process, one that is only initiated by the one who gathers the things—collector or painter—but is collaborated in by all eventual beholders. We are thereby invited to become part of a community of interpreters of material things, but that community is paradoxically premised on the possibility of individuality.

Dutch still lifes can, then, be thought of as a society's way of managing the unusual and exciting nature of an increasingly diverse material culture; in that sense they might be called "treatises on superfluous things." But they are shot through with what would seem, from most standard material culture viewpoints, to be a thread of illogic. This illogic is rooted in the priorities, purposes, and aesthetics of the collection and is crucial to understanding still-life painting. For the painting-as-collection distinguishes the nature of its objects from whatever value or use they might have had in their previous lives. It splits apart economic priorities and normal social communication and permits the process of making sense of things to be an individual and creative one. In this way, still-life paintings are deeply opposed to how China dealt with its burgeoning material culture, for they truly neither describe nor prescribe standards and usages. In place of hierarchies and principles of taste, they offer suggestions of cognitive arrangement; where the Chinese texts close sets, Dutch still lifes open up possibilities of connection. They give to objects, and to their beholding community, a sort of collective individuality, and they create a pleasure in material things by allowing understanding to be a performance of imagination.

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