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The "Vanitas" of Jacques de Gheyn

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1. Jacques de GHEYN (Dutch, 1565–1629). *Vanitas*. 1621
Oil on wood, 46¼ in. (117.5 cm.) x 65⅛ in. (165.4 cm.)
Gift of the Associates in Fine Arts. 1957.36



The “Vanitas” of Jacques de Gheyn

In 1957, through the generosity of the Associates in Fine Arts, the Yale University Art Gallery acquired a seventeenth-century Dutch Vanitas-still-life of unusual size, and remarkable quality (Fig. 1).¹ W. R. Valentiner had brought attention to this painting some two years previously in an article in *The Art Quarterly*² which briefly summarized its known history, indicated the general state of knowledge about paintings of this curiously macabre type, and proposed that this particular example was “probably the first and most imitated” of them all. When he had finished, certain questions remained to be answered, still others remained unasked.

The first inquiries to be made here concern its attribution and date. When it came to Yale, it bore the signature of Jacques de Gheyn and the year 1621, but the interlaced DG and the H and E of this name had then only recently been discovered beneath the superimposed letters VAN R. With this simple adjustment one of its previous owners had tried to turn it into an early work of Rembrandt van Rijn. Some indication of his success can be had from an article in the *Illustrated London News* of January 21, 1911,³ which reported the recent “discovery” of the painting by a noted collector, presumably in good faith, and plead a rather fanciful case for its acceptance as a Rembrandt. To agree to such an attribution was to ignore the irregularity of the signature in that form, but a variety

1. Acquired from French and Company, in 1957. Formerly Klein Collection, New York. In 1911, owned by Sir J. C. Robinson, London (see footnote 3 and related text). Only other known owner, Charles Sedelmeyer, Paris.

2. W. R. Valentiner, “A Still-Life by Jacques de Gheyn,” *The Art Quarterly*, 18 (1955), pp. 158–163.

3. P. G. Kolody, “Rembrandt’s Earliest Picture?” *Illustrated London News*, 138 (1911), pp. 92–93.



2. Jacques de GHEYN: *Self-Portrait* (Engraved by Hendrick HONDIUS). From *Pictorum aliquot celebrium praecipue Germaniae inferioris effigies*. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Dick Fund, 1917

of arguments were adduced in its favor and the question was only resolved by the emergence of the present signature. That this was in turn the original signature would seem to be substantiated by a variety of internal evidence.

(1) The work as a whole reflects the fundamental attitude toward painting repeatedly noted as characteristic of de Gheyn by J. Q. van Regteren Altena in his definitive monograph on the artist.⁴ In brief this attitude amounts to an almost exclusive concern for the elegant rendering of individual objects at the expense of compositional subtlety and regard for the implications of space. To be sure, these characteristics are in some degree common to the additive stage of development in still-life painting. However, they are particularly pronounced in this case, where indications of depth are frequently confusing and contradictory, while sensitivity to texture and attention to detail are most acute.

(2) Typical of de Gheyn also, are certain compositional devices found in the Yale *Vanitas*. For instance, the emphasis of symmetry by the superposition of balanced drapery is to be seen in striking degree in a flower piece of 1615⁵ and also in de Gheyn's picture of *Caesar in His Tent*,⁶ dated by van Regteren Altena about 1618. In the latter, the central axis is further emphasized by a breastplate, which in location closely parallels the one in the *Vanitas*.

(3) Similarly, a number of other objects in the *Vanitas* can be found as well in the known work of de Gheyn. As early as 1604, Carel van Mander in his *Schilderboeck* mentioned a painting by him of a skull.⁷ His "head of Seneca" was one of the items in an auction sale of 1626.⁸ In 1610 Hendrick Hondius engraved de Gheyn's portrait after the artist's own design (Fig. 2) and included a winged hourglass set in a medallion like the one near the upper edge of the *Vanitas*. In the engraving, the wings of the hourglass differ from each other, one belonging to a bat while the other is feathered, evidently referring to the passage of time both by night and by day, and perhaps also suggesting that time can be used either well or poorly. This rather complex symbol is rendered differently in the painting, but to the same effect, one wing being concealed by, while the other is just visible within, the folds of the shroud-like backdrop. Apparently of very personal import for de Gheyn, the winged hourglass was not to appear again in a seventeenth-century Dutch *Vanitas*, to the best of my knowledge, although without wings the hourglass was all but universal.

(4) Earlier in de Gheyn's career, in 1599, this same winged hourglass figured as one of the elements in an elaborate allegorical drawing on the subject of death,⁹ which included in a meticulously symmetrical composition a variety of symbolic objects and figures. Although the engraving taken from this drawing is described in Passavant's *oeuvre cata-*

4. Johan Quiryn van Regteren Altena, *Jacques de Gheyn, An Introduction to the Study of His Drawings*, Amsterdam, N. V. Swets and Zeitlinger (1935), pp. 25-26, 31-32.

5. Jacques de Gheyn: *Flower-piece*. Signed and dated panel, 42 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 29 $\frac{7}{8}$ in. Private collection. Published as fig. 40 in Ingvar Bergström, *Dutch Still-Life Painting in the Seventeenth Century*, New York, Thomas Yoseloff (1956).

6. Jacques de Gheyn: *Caesar in His Tent*. Signed oil on canvas, 55 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 73 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. Dated c. 1618 by van Regteren Altena. Collection of the Earl of Dysart, Ham House, London. Published as Plate 4 in van Regteren Altena, *op. cit.*

7. See p. 403 in Constant Van de Wall's translation of the *Schilderboeck: Dutch and Flemish Painters*, New York, McFarlane, Warde, McFarlane (1936).

8. van Regteren Altena, p. 26, footnote 1.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

logue as a “Vanitas,”¹⁰ there is an important distinction to be made between such an allegory with figures and a still-life of the Vanitas type. Yet de Gheyn’s early concern with this kind of subject and his treatment of it in large part through inanimate symbols would seem to increase the likelihood that he was the author of the Yale *Vanitas*.

(5) Appropriate Biblical verses in Latin were provided for the drawing just described by the international lawyer Hugo Grotius who was not only a fellow resident of Leyden, but also a close personal friend of de Gheyn.¹¹ This circumstance points to yet another probable connection between de Gheyn and Yale’s *Vanitas*, a connection having to do with the motto which appears at its base: *Servare modum, finemque tueri, naturamque sequi*. Roughly translatable as “[To] observe moderation, be mindful of one’s end, and follow nature,” this motto was taken from a most unlikely source, the *Pharsalia* of Lucan.¹² That highly rhetorical and frequently brutal account of the Civil War between Caesar and Pompey could hardly have been expected to provide so refined and stoic a sentiment. A much more logical source would have been the writings of Lucan’s uncle, Seneca, whose sculptured head, as already noted, appears in the *Vanitas*. This suggests that either the artist came upon this quotation by chance, or else it was supplied by someone who was unusually familiar with its source. Such a man was Hugo Grotius, who in 1614 had published his own completely annotated edition of the *Pharsalia*.¹³ One cannot prove that he supplied the motto for de Gheyn but in view of the earlier relationship between the two, it seems at least probable that he did.

If in the light of the foregoing evidence we can accept unequivocally the signature of Jacques de Gheyn, it does not necessarily follow that we should accept the date as given on the panel. Indeed, Valentiner, in his article, suggested that this date might possibly have been changed from 1611 to 1621 to correspond more closely with Rembrandt’s early period at the same time that the signature was altered. However, no indication of this came to light in the course of the cleaning which revealed the original signature, and this suggestion seems inherently unlikely in view of what is known of the pattern of development of the *Vanitas* as a still-life theme. From its inception, generally placed around 1620, until about 1625, it seems to have enjoyed a moderate but steady growth in popularity, and thereafter in the second half of the decade, a rapid expansion. Ingvar

10. J. D. Passavant, *Le Peintre-graveur*, Leipzig, R. Weigel (1860–64), III, pp. 115–126, no. 67.

11. van Regteren Altena, p. 67. These Latin verses did not appear on the engraving, according to Passavant, who mentions instead an inscription in Dutch. Evidently the Latin was considered too obscure for popular consumption in a print, while it was permissible, if not indeed desirable, for a drawing or a painting like the Yale *Vanitas* to be somewhat recondite.

12. Lucan, *Pharsalia*, text of A. E. Housman, Oxford, Blackwell (1927), Book 2, lines 381–382. During an interlude in the continuous description of slaughter, these lines appear as part of a tribute to the character of Pompey’s supporter Cato, who, at the moment, is about to take back a wife whom he had earlier *sold* to a friend, since deceased, who wanted the child she was about to bear to Cato! Their immediate context is: “. . . *hi mores, haec duri inmota Catonis secta fuit, servare modum, finemque tenere, naturamque sequi, patriaeque inpendere vitam nec sibi sed toti genitum se credere mundo.*” This may be translated as: “It was the austere yet unshakeable custom of Cato to observe moderation, to hold fast to his objective, to follow the dictates of nature, to devote his life to his country, and to regard himself as born not for his own purposes, but for those of mankind.”

13. *M. Annaei Lucan, Pharsalia: Sive De Bello Civili Caesaris Et Pompeii, Libri X. Ex emendatione V. C. Hugonis Grotii, cum eiusdem ad loca insigniora Notis, etc., Lugduni Bavorum, Ex Officina Plantiniana Raphelengii, 1614.*

Bergström in his *Dutch Still-Life Painting in the Seventeenth Century*,¹⁴ has suggested that this may have been due in part to the enormous toll exacted in these years by the plague and the resumption of war with Spain following the termination of the Twelve Years' Truce in 1621. If the *Vanitas* type, once established, did in fact spread rapidly, it would seem unlikely that de Gheyn's painting remained unnoticed and uncopied for a period as long as ten years.

There is, however, one difficulty inherent in the foregoing argument which limits its usefulness for fixing the date of the *Vanitas*. That is the fact that only a small fraction of the paintings of the *Vanitas* type executed at this time are still known today. Whether subsequent changes in taste and outlook rendered their somewhat esoteric theme unpalatable or time simply took its toll, only two works close in date to 1621 are cited by Bergström.¹⁵ Since 1890, the Leyden painter and sometime pupil of de Gheyn, David Bailly, has been regarded as the probable originator of the *Vanitas*, but solely on the basis of conjecture, as no *Vanitas* from his hand of date prior to 1651 was known until Bergström drew attention in 1947 to a small pen-and-ink drawing dated 1624.¹⁶ By the same token, the name of de Gheyn was connected with the *Vanitas*-still-life only through his connection with Bailly and in his capacity as the author of the *Vanitas*-allegory and the skull picture mentioned above.¹⁷ It therefore becomes a thoroughly uncertain process to attempt to date the *Vanitas* of de Gheyn by reference to related works, and recourse must be had to other means.

The most obvious of these is by comparison with other known works of de Gheyn, but here again the same difficulty confronts us. The fate which befell the present work can be taken as just one of the many ways in which the greater part of de Gheyn's *oeuvre* has disappeared. On the other hand, we are fortunate that de Gheyn lived in a period of pronounced artistic transition and was himself subject to a continuing process of development throughout his life. Born in Antwerp in 1565, he first began to paint only at some date close to the turn of the century, having previously worked primarily as an engraver.¹⁸ We have it from Carel van Mander that the reason for this shift in media was that de Gheyn found painting "the most adequate to resemble life or nature."¹⁹ This desire for greater realism together with his penchant for radical innovation were evident throughout the course of his subsequent development.²⁰ Thus van Regteren Altena is able to trace, through merely a handful of known paintings, his progression from an early "mannerist expressionism," through a neutral stage characterized by an absence both of mannerist exaggeration and of effective realism, to a genuine realism marked by patient attention to detail combined with great simplicity and economy in conception and composition.²¹ This process was essentially complete by 1620 according

14. Bergström, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

15. Willem Claesz. Heda: *Vanitas*, 1621 and Pieter Potter: *Vanitas*, "1619 or somewhat later." Cf. Bergström, pp. 165-168. These are reproduced in the present article as Figs. 4 and 3, respectively.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 159-161. This theory was advanced originally on the basis of documentary implications, by Abraham Bredius in "De Schilders Pieter en Harmen Steenwyck," *Oud Holland*, 7 (1890) p. 143 ff.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 160-161.

18. van Regteren Altena, pp. 4, 36-37.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

to van Regteren Altena, who notes particularly the disappearance between 1618 and 1620 of the sense of *horror vacui* previously conspicuous in de Gheyn's work. Clearly the *Vanitas* belongs to the culminating phase of this development. The objects in this picture are grouped together tightly, but the groups are distinct and well-defined and are separated from each other and from the limits of the composition by broad corridors of unoccupied space. There is, then, no stylistic inconsistency in the date of 1621 given for the *Vanitas*, and we would seem justified in accepting this as the year in which the work was executed.

There remains the more important question, can this work be regarded as the prototype of the seventeenth-century Dutch *Vanitas*-still-life? At a casual examination, there would seem to be more points of dissimilarity than there are features in common between de Gheyn's *Vanitas* and the typical example of the theme executed during the next decade or two in Holland. Generally, in the latter the light tends either to the extreme of hard, merciless clarity or the opposite quality, soft, sombre gloom; the composition is resolved into a clear diagonal; the coloring is monochromatic; the objects portrayed are scattered about in no perceptible order and display all the earmarks of both hard wear and more recent neglect (cf. Fig. 4).

In our picture, on the other hand, the light can best be described as a warm, mellow glow; the composition is emphatically triangular, firmly stabilized, and symmetrically disposed; the coloring is not brilliantly varied, but is marked by discreet insertions of lively shades, as in an aqua bookstrap, the pale cerise of the little mortar-like vessel, the rich green of the laurel around the skull, the glimmering brass of the trumpets; the objects portrayed are arranged and grouped in a very definite order, not rigid, but clearly organized and inviting, indeed, apparently awaiting use. The variety and extent of these divergences cast in a very odd light Valentiner's conclusion that this work was "probably the first and most imitated of all the still-lives of this type in Holland." Even if such factors as the trend to monochrome and diagonal composition are regarded, as was undoubtedly the case, merely as a reflection of developments common to all Dutch painting at this time, there remain significant differences. The question of the priority of this work, itself by no means yet proven, would become entirely irrelevant if, in fact, it developed that this painting had no direct bearing upon subsequent works of the type. Bergström cites two other early *Vanitas* paintings, one dating from 1621, and the other perhaps done still earlier.²² The relationships between these and the de Gheyn painting must be clarified, at the very least, but in order to do so, we must first consider what is known about the sources and manner of development of this kind of still-life, as a type.

Two somewhat contradictory views of the problem have been presented, one by Bergström²³ and the other by Charles Sterling, in *La Nature Morte, de l'Antiquité à Nos Jours*.²⁴ The implicit point of disagreement between Bergström and Sterling involves the role played by Italian painting in this evolutionary process. Both concur in recognizing the importance of the tendency in Dutch painting from the fifteenth century on-

22. Cf. footnote 14.

23. Bergström, pp. 12-18.

24. Charles Sterling has published two books under the same general title, *La Nature Morte de l'Antiquité à Nos Jours*. In the catalogue of the exhibition of this name held at the Orangerie, Paris (1952), see xvi-xviii, pp. 5-22, 57-58, 77-78. In the considerably expanded version done for Editions Tisné, Paris (1952), see pp. 26-27, 30-33, 47-48. This book is now also available in English: *Still Life Painting from Antiquity to the Present Time*, Paris, Pierre Tisné (1959).

ward, to emphasize and eventually to isolate symbolic objects and accessories. This process culminated in the establishment of symbolic groups of attributes located separately from the main work on the backs of diptychs and of the wings of triptychs. One of the scenes most frequently subjected to this process of distillation was that of the scholar-saint, such as Jerome or Augustine, in his cell, from which were extracted not only the tools of the theologian's trade, books, writing desk, hourglass, and candle, but also the evidence of the simple ascetic way of life, the boxes and bottles kept close to hand in order that the need for food and drink might not long distract him from his work. By an analogous process, the skull so commonly included in sixteenth-century portraits as a quiet reminder of the brevity of life found its way onto the backs of portrait panels where it was frequently combined with some other symbol of transience and an appropriate inscription, such as appears on the back of a donor's portrait of 1517: *Facile contemnit omnia qui se semper cogitat moriturum. Hieronymus.* (He easily despises everything who always ponders on the approach of death.)²⁵ Taken from the letters of Saint Jerome (*Epist.*, 53, II, 3), this sentiment is the dominating theme of the typical seventeenth-century Vanitas-still-life, though not, as we shall see, of de Gheyn's. On the basis of such early examples, Bergström concludes that "the decisive influence" in the sudden flowering of this theme in the next century during a period of intense preoccupation with literary symbols and emblems was the motif of Saint Jerome in his cell.

To this thesis Sterling takes exception. He regards Saint Jerome as a "*sujet iconographique-ment bien défini*,"²⁶ incapable of generating such a vast array of emblems as found their way into the later Vanitas. According to Bergström's tabulation²⁷ these comprise firstly symbols of "earthly existence," including in three subgroups, the symbols of all the arts and sciences, of wealth and power, and of various tastes and pleasures, secondly, symbols of human mortality, and finally symbols of resurrection. So prodigious an iconographic expansion, to Sterling's mind, cannot be explained or justified, and he therefore rejects the Saint Jerome theme as the source of the fully developed Dutch Vanitas. In its place he offers the vitally catalytic environment of humanistic quattrocento and cinquecento Italy. To this source, he attributes not only the formulation of the Vanitas theme, but the very existence of the still-life as an independent subject after the middle of the fifteenth century.

Basing his argument on various examples of Italian intarsia work dating from this period, he has been able to demonstrate that the decisive step of separating the all-but-nascent still-life compositions in Flemish painting from their narrative generatrices was taken first in Italy, and very probably under the influence of antique literary references. Thus in the celebrated *studioli* marqueteries executed at Urbino and Gubbio for Federigo da Montefeltro approximately between 1475 and 1480,²⁸ with their cabinets full of the humanistically diverse paraphernalia of the good Duke, he sees the product of the union of the Flemish taste for the representation in trompe-l'oeil of everyday objects with the

25. This portrait, of Jehan Carondelet, Archbishop of Palermo, is the subject of the left wing of a diptych by Jan Gossaert van Mabuse, now in the Louvre. The right wing shows the Virgin and Child. Cf. Bergström, p. 15, fig. 12.

26. Sterling, *op. cit.* (catalogue), p. 12.

27. Bergström, p. 154.

28. Cf. Preston Remington, "The Private Study of Federigo da Montefeltro. A Masterpiece of XV Century Trompe-l'oeil," *Bulletin, The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 36 (1941), pp. 3-13. Also, Emanuel Winternitz, "Quattrocento Science in the Gubbio Study," *Bulletin, The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 1 (1942), pp. 104-116.

Roman tradition of decorating walls with still-life frescoes and mosaics articulated by illusionistic architectural elements. That these decorations were intended to be merely refreshing and flattering to a man of Federigo's temperament and were more concerned with morale than with morality, can be seen from the variety of objects represented, which range through and beyond the symbols of "earthly existence" later found in Vanitas compositions to include such purely lighthearted items as a squirrel munching on a nut and a turban ring, of interest primarily as a problem in perspective. Moreover, when inscriptions appear, they are either taken from family heraldic devices and badges of honor, or else are of a simply commendatory nature, such as the inscription appearing in one of the panels at Urbino, *Virtutibus itur ad astra*, which might be translated in the spirit in which it was formulated, "The road to heaven is paved with good achievements."

When the client was the Church and not Duke Federigo, the objects portrayed in these cupboards were changed into the liturgical implements used in religious observances, ewers, chalices, and candlesticks, and signs of ecclesiastical authority, such as miters and canopies, but the mood and intent remained at first fundamentally unchanged, being at the most one of contemplative devotion to the ideas and rituals thus represented. This at least would seem to be the effect conveyed by the marquetry panels of Fra Giovanni da Verona in the choir of the Cathedral of Siena. It is only gradually that the work of this master was to take on a coldly moralistic tone, as Francesco Arcangeli has shown,²⁹ and indeed the only indication that has apparently survived of the final culmination of this process is the pair of panels now in the Louvre, which Sterling cites as the earliest known instance of the fully developed Vanitas. These were the work of Fra Vincenzo da Verona,³⁰ were executed probably between 1520 and 1523 for the church of San Benedetto Novello at Padua, and must have descended through some such intermediary phase as is indicated by the Siena choir panels from the *studioli* of Federigo da Montefeltro. In one of these panels can be seen in juxtaposition the symbols of secular and ecclesiastical power, crown, mitre, and Papal cross, and the symbols of the brevity of life, skull, hourglass, and plucked blossom, while the accompanying panel echoes in a new and different key the assemblage of musical instruments and scientific tools previously found in Urbino. Now, several strings on the violin are broken, the candles shown are extinguished, and the intention is not to proclaim the gratification to be had from progress in the humanistic disciplines, but rather to warn of the folly of such temporary delights in view of the imminence of death. Clearly the Vanitas must be recognized as dating from at least the creation of these two panels. If Sterling is correct in his assumption that they were copied from still earlier examples, then the conception is still older.

One question, however, remains to be answered before Sterling's total thesis can be accepted, and that is the question of how this theme was transported to the Netherlands at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Bergström acknowledges the probable influence of the Italian marquetry work on later Dutch still-life painting, particularly on the work of Gerard Dou,³¹ but he accounts for this through the appearance of such work

29. Francesco Arcangeli, *Tarsie*, Rome (1943), pp. 21–22, figs. 48–52.

30. Sterling, pp. 11–17.

31. Bergström, pp. 182–185. Just as this article was going to press, Mr. Bergström, having very kindly read the galley proofs, called to my attention "the so-called writing desk of Charles V" in the Victoria and Albert Museum, which appeared to contradict my present argument. Published as item 21 in the museum's *Fifty Masterpieces of Woodwork*, London, Her Majesty's Stationery Office (1955), this piece is faced with intarsia work, including two still-life panels strongly reminiscent, on a portable scale, of the humanistic pleasure-

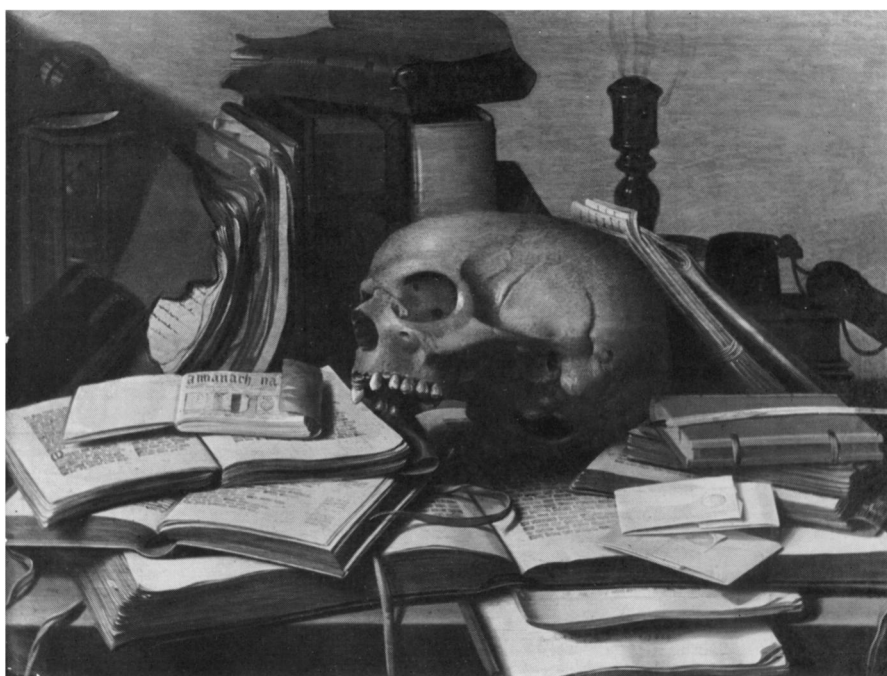
in portable form on *cassoni*, and the doors of cupboards imported from Italy by merchants trading in the Netherlands. However, there would seem to be no reason to conclude that the Vanitas was one of the themes reproduced on such furniture. The very fact that no other example of it beside the Louvre panels has come down to us suggests that it was never a very common theme. Granted that it sank its roots deep into humanist soil, it was nonetheless planted and tended in an ecclesiastical setting; granted that it might have been seen *in situ* by Dutch travelers in Italy, how did it happen that the militantly Calvinistic city of Leyden, generally recognized as the birthplace of the seventeenth-century Vanitas, took to its heart this rather obscure still-life subject, if its only previous occurrence was under the *imprimatur* of the Roman Catholic Church? Sterling may object that the transition from Saint Jerome to the Vanitas has been inadequately explained, but the same charge may be brought to bear on this alleged transition.

However this transition was accomplished, and from whichever source, it is clear that a considerable jump was made, and it would appear only reasonable to expect the process to have left its mark on any work that served in an intermediary capacity. Such a mark may, perhaps, be taken as the strongest evidence of priority, apart from their date, among the early examples that have come down to us. Which, then, if either, of the two early Vanitas paintings cited by Bergström bears such a mark?

The first of these, the panel by Pieter Potter (Fig. 3), was dated 1619 in the Swedish edition of his book, but this was changed in the English edition to read "1619 or somewhat later," since the date in question proved to belong not to the painting but to the title page of an open book portrayed in it. Bergström sees in this work close affinities to such representations of Saint Jerome in his cell as that of Marinus van Roemerswael, now in the Prado.³² He notes the presence in both of books, hourglass, candlestick, writing materials, and skull, but his observation that, in this case, "the crucifix and the open Bible are missing" is really something of an understatement, for indeed there are no manifestly religious symbols anywhere in the picture. Indeed, the title page of the small book just to the left of the skull identifies it as some kind of "almanach," and the principal contention of this painting therefore would appear to be specifically the vanity of scientific endeavor. This restriction to symbols of learning and transience in turn suggests that this work represents a later state of specialization that had evolved from an earlier stage in which the theme found much broader and more inclusive expression. Moreover, there are a number of reasons for regarding this work of Pieter Potter as a derivative of our *Vanitas* by de Gheyn. The triangular composition with the centrally located skull serving as focal point, the trompe-l'oeil rendering and clear even light, the quite fresh condition of the volumes and their relatively ordered grouping in mainly horizontal and vertical planes, the balancing of books on the upper edges of standing volumes, all these features appear in these two paintings, and some of them only in these two. Indeed, the Potter gives the impression of having resulted from the indiscriminate

marquetries of the *studioli*. Both panels were apparently intended to depict the contents of the small cupboards of which they form the doors, the objects represented including books, boxes, scissors, fruit, and an hourglass. Mr. Bergström suggested that the panel containing this timepiece constituted a kind of Vanitas composition. However, there is no indication in it of the decay and disuse that marks the true moralizing Vanitas, and therefore the actual purpose of these panels would appear to have been simply decorative rather than normative.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 166 and fig. 1.



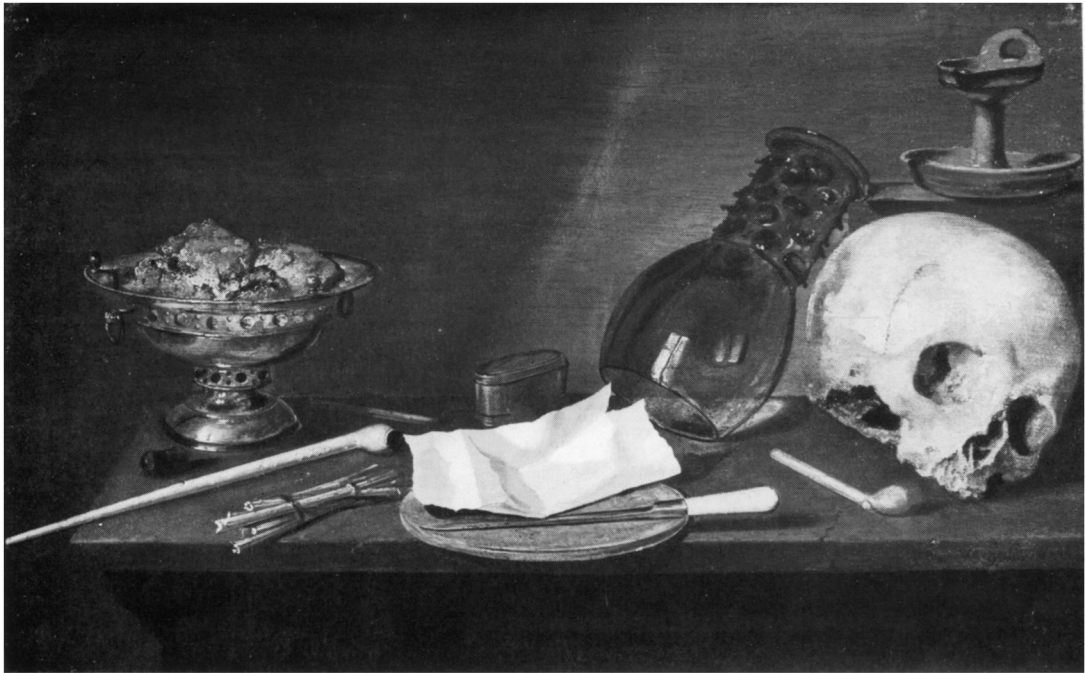
3. Pieter POTTER (Dutch, 1597/1600–1652): *Vanitas*. Probably after 1621. Panel, 17 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 24 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. Sandegren Collection, Malmö. Courtesy of Ingvar Bergström

meshing of what in the de Gheyn are separate and distinct groups of books. However that may be, the relatively much broader iconographic implications of the de Gheyn suggest that if either of these served as an intermediary, it was the latter.

By contrast with this situation, there would seem to be no connection whatsoever between the de Gheyn and the other early *Vanitas* cited by Bergström, that of Willem Claesz. Heda, signed and dated 1621 (Fig. 4). Not only are there no objects in common save for the table, but the Heda already displays the strong diagonal composition and the fully developed grayish-brown monotone later to prove so typical of the *Vanitas*-still-life. Of this work, Bergström remarks that it is the first instance in Dutch still-life painting in which smoker's requisites are included,³³ and therein would appear to lie the explanation of the whole scheme, for it is properly speaking not a *Vanitas* in the developed sense at all, but rather a symbolic condemnation of the practice of smoking and drinking. Even a perfunctory comparison of it with one of the breakfast-pieces by the same artist such as that in the *Mauritshuis*, in the Hague,³⁴ strongly suggests that its roots, in so far as it has any at all, lie in this earlier type of still-life. The plate and knife in the center fore-

33. *Ibid.*, p. 165.

34. *Ibid.*, fig. 109.



4. Willem Claesz. HEDA (Dutch, 1593–1680/82): *Vanitas*. 1621. Panel, 17 15/16 x 27 3/8 in. The Hague, Museum Bredius

ground and the overturned roemer behind them are taken from the vocabulary of his breakfast-pieces, and the same loosely additive arrangement is still in evidence in the example just mentioned which dates from 1629. It is obvious that no light will be shed on any possible connections between the Dutch *Vanitas* and either the *Saint Jerome* theme or *Italian marquetry* work, by the consideration of this painting. On the other hand, its relationship to subsequent work of this type is clearly of great interest, for if it presented only one slender element iconographically, of the total *Vanitas* conception, it plainly demonstrated the manner in which that conception was to be expressed thereafter. Moreover, the simultaneous appearance of two such completely disparate works as this and the de Gheyn and their subsequent assimilation, may serve to indicate to us how highly evolved and complex an ideational artifact the *Vanitas* actually was.

With these conclusions and theories in mind, we may now proceed to ask once again and to attempt this time to answer the questions, “Where did the *Vanitas* of Jacques de Gheyn originate, and to what extent was it the prototype for subsequent works of its kind?”

The solution to these questions is closely bound up with the most conspicuous aspect of the painting, its tripartite structure (Fig. 1). The basic triangle into which the major part of the composition is organized, is composed of two intermingled groups of three parts each. The first group consists of what may be termed abstract symbols, the medallion

with cherub heads representing the heavenly or divine presence, the shrouded and winged hourglass suggesting the elusive flight of time, and the laurel-wreathed skull indicating both death and the hope of resurrection. The second group consists of a number of separate elements arranged in clusters to form the three points of the triangle. It will be seen that these all fall under the heading of what Bergström terms “symbols of earthly existence.” On the shelf above may be seen to the right three sculptured heads, or more probably, plaster casts, and to the left a group of objects of three kinds, books, boxes, and what looks like the top of a bottle or flask. Finally, it may be noted that the motto on the cartellino at the base of the painting, is composed of three parallel infinitive phrases.

The key to the meaning of this whole complex work clearly lies in the interpretation of the varied assortment of “symbols of earthly existence,” which are grouped around the focal point established by the skull. Above and behind it, forming an apparent entity, are the breastplate and apron of a set of armor, together with a pair of trumpets. To the left are a large number of books, a candle, a feather pen, and the tip of a hook-like instrument, possibly a penknife. One of these books is of exceptional size and fitted with clasps, and although no legible printing appears on its pages, it may be that it is intended to represent a Bible. From another a slip of paper extends slightly, on which is visible what appears to be the top of an illuminated initial. To the right, in addition to a further collection of books on the pages of the largest of which may be seen geometric figures, there are a variety of implements connected with the arts or with science, including a pair of dividers, a burin, a container with paint brushes, a small vessel, perhaps a mortar, and a large roll of paper, presumably some kind of chart or plan. Beneath the skull and serving as a sort of bridge between these two groups is a pile of three very large books, evenly stacked. Sheets of paper protrude from the ends of two of these, and on the label thus attached to the middle one is inscribed the name of the architect Vitruvius. Compositionally, the skull, these three books, and the large cartellino constitute a sort of inner triangle reflecting the larger triangle of which they also form a part. Unfortunately, whatever was written on the slip protruding from the lower of the three volumes is no longer legible.

Now the number three is of no less importance in both medieval and Renaissance thought than it is in this composition, largely due to its mystical association with the Trinity. Thus the scholastic philosophers classified the virtues under three headings, moral, theological and intellectual, as Erwin Panofsky has pointed out in his commentary on the three most important engravings of Dürer, the so-called “*Meisterstiche*.”³⁵ Each of these engravings is concerned with one of these categories of virtue, each category being represented allegorically as a way of life. *Knight, Death and Devil* (Fig. 5), demonstrates the role of moral courage in the world at large. *Saint Jerome in His Cell* (Fig. 6), reflects the happy, contemplative life of the religious scholar. *Melencolia I* (Fig. 7), is concerned with those whose gifts lead them to design and create. As Panofsky goes on to explain, the last two diverge in mood and intent, opposing “a life in the service of God to what may be called a life in competition with God—the peaceful bliss of divine wisdom to the tragic unrest of human creation.”³⁶ This strikingly medieval conception is

35. Erwin Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer*, Princeton, Princeton University Press (1955), p. 151.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 156.



5. Albrecht DÜRER (German, 1471–1528): *Knight, Death and Devil*. 1513. Engraving B.98. The Fritz Achelis Memorial Collection. 1925.61



6. Albrecht DÜRER: *Saint Jerome in His Cell*. 1514. Engraving B.60. The Fritz Achelis Memorial Collection. 1925.59



7. Albrecht DÜRER: *Melencolia I*. 1514. Engraving B.74. The Fritz Achelis Memorial Collection. 1925.60

further shown to be related to the Neo-Platonic tripartite division of human genius according to the dominance of *mens* (mind), *ratio* (reason), or *imaginatio* (imagination).³⁷

If, in the light of these earlier schematizations, we attempt to analyze the pattern behind the array of objects in the *Vanitas* of de Gheyn, we are immediately confronted with an apparent similarity too obvious to be accidental. Indeed, not only is the system of ideas here incorporated fundamentally identical with that represented in the *Meisterstiche*; it can, I think, be definitely shown to have been taken from the *Meisterstiche*. Its relationship to that earlier scheme, indeed, is entirely analogous to the relationship between the attributes often presented on the back of a diptych and the scene portrayed on its face. These are the attributes of the three engravings, lifted from their allegorical setting, combined, classicized, and presented as the surprisingly venerable components of an entirely novel scheme.

Thus the breastplate and the trumpets are a would-be-antique abbreviation of the armor in which the Knight maintains his steadfast indifference to the malicious taunts of Death and Devil, and not perhaps, inappropriately antique in view of the source to which Panofsky has traced back this theme, viz., Saint Paul: "Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness. . . ." (*Ephes.*, VI, 14). The books on the left together with the pen, the candle, and the skull, are all among the traditional attributes of Saint Jerome, and may be taken here to stand for concern with life's end and ultimate religious values. Finally, the books and instruments to the right, and at any rate one of the books beneath the skull also, find their counterparts among the various objects in Melencolia's lap and at her feet, and invoke achievement in the arts and sciences. It is in this third portion of the de Gheyn scheme, however, that a most important change takes place, if only, at first glance, by implication. Whereas Dürer in his last engraving drew a totally different moral from that of his first two, de Gheyn makes no such distinction between the three sections of his painting at all. The same warm glow pervades each group of attributes, the same freshness, the same apparent sympathy. If anything, he has lingered more fondly in this third area, treated it with more variety, allowed it a richer palette. We can only infer that the old unhappy notion of a "life in competition with God" has mellowed into something like a "life in collaboration with God." If there be still any doubt about this interpretation, the motto must certainly dispel it. Indeed this may have been its original justification, for as mentioned earlier, this was not the original, but a substitute motto, evidently chosen to make more clear than before the actual import of the painting. The first motto, *Finis coronat opus*, was a familiar Latin proverb meaning literally "The end crowns the work," and implying in this context that there was always time to reform by taking up the triple standard of virtue here displayed. Such was the ambiguity of this phrase, however, that it probably referred also to the medallion which "crowned" the composition and stood for the "salvation" awaiting the dutiful "worker." It will be immediately observed that even this first motto involves a fundamentally different emphasis from that conveyed in the traditional *memento mori*, or the later *Vanitas*. It is one thing to dwell on the uncertainty of life and the inevitability of death; it is another to call for a more meaningful life as an answer to death. In the *Meisterstiche* there may be found precisely the same underlying intention, to present an answer, or rather a set of answers to the challenge of death and the swift passage of time. The hourglass which Death holds up teasingly to the Knight is to be seen again in both the later engravings, and each seems to show how little or

37. *Ibid.*, pp. 165-169.

much this implicit threat means to one who has spent his life in the manner portrayed. That de Gheyn was aware of this challenge and in just these terms is demonstrated by his inclusion of the hourglass symbol in his own self-portrait, but his placing the symbols of his artistic achievement and versatility in opposition to it would seem to indicate that his reaction was not one of fear or depression, but rather, at the most, one of moderate frustration at having so much to do and so little time in which to see it done. That he had come to terms with the problem by 1621, or at least settled on a general and inclusive answer is evident from the statement of that answer in the present work and from his subsequent emphasis of it by the change in motto.

One quite significant change occurred in the lifting of this motto from its context in Lucan's *Pharsalia*: the verb in the second phrase was changed from *tenere* to *tueri*. Since both words mean roughly the same thing, and both might be casually translated by such an expression as "concentrate on your end," the distinction drawn is a nice one, but nonetheless important. In the original form, the sense was "to hold fast to an objective" as in navigating a ship one "holds" one's course; the substitution of the new verb made this mean instead "to gaze steadfastly at one's end," plainly a specific reference to the practice for which Saint Jerome was most conspicuously noted. On the other hand, the third phrase, *naturamque sequi*, was already in its original form a most strikingly apt response to the attitude expressed in the *Melencolia I*. Far from deploring the limitations or the character of one's natural gifts and propensities, the point made here is simply that one ought to make the most of them. To do so, in fact, is to find one of the three fundamental keys to happiness.

Finally, in connection with the first phrase, *servare modum*, it should be noted that there is perhaps a more than chance reflection of this idea of moderation and balance in the dominantly axial and symmetrical position of the breastplate in this composition. This fact, together with the position of the skull, strongly tempts one to think that de Gheyn may have had some knowledge of such an antique representation of death, the great leveler, as is, for example, found in a mosaic from Pompeii now in the Museo Nazionale in Naples.³⁸ Here also is to be seen the martialing of the symbols of death and transience on the central axis. The wheel of time, the wings of a butterfly, a skull, and a triangular level, are piled one on top of another, and hanging from the arms of the balance may be seen the robe of a king on one side and on the other the cloak of a beggar, precisely in equilibrium. The idea of death as a leveling agent (*Mors omnia aequat*) is not identical with the idea of moderation as a rule of life, but their ultimate implication is similar and their mode of representation quite analogous. There is every indication that de Gheyn never went to Italy, and of course this particular mosaic was still buried at that time. On the other hand, his affection for things classical is obvious, and he had ample access to the classical authors through Grotius. There is perhaps still another echo of this classical version of the theme in the aforementioned allegorical drawing of 1599, which included symmetrically placed figures of "a king and a peasant." It is known that Grotius supplied the Biblical inscription for this drawing. Is it not perhaps possible that he supplied at least part of the conception for it as well?

If there is any validity to such a hypothetical link with antiquity in the *Vanitas* of de Gheyn, it follows that Sterling is at least partly correct in his insistence that the total *Vanitas* scheme could only evolve under the influence of Italian humanism. On the other hand, whereas such a link must in all probability remain hypothetical, the relationship

38. Sterling, *op. cit.* (Editions Tisné), p. 26.



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between our painting and the *Meisterstiche*, as outlined above, is susceptible of relatively specific corroboration.

In the first place, we have quite good reason to suspect that de Gheyn, with his patchwork approach to composition, found Dürer's work a fruitful source of raw material. Panofsky cites an engraving by de Gheyn (Fig. 8) as an instance of the monumentalization of the concept of "Saturn-Geometrician"³⁹ in connection with his iconographical study of *Melencolia I*. It would seem possible that de Gheyn in fact started with *Melencolia I* itself in evolving his design, which appears to have involved grafting onto the body of Melencolia the head of none other than Saint Jerome, in this case as portrayed in the Dürer painting of 1521 now in the National Museum at Lisbon (Fig. 9). It is interesting that the image of Saint Jerome in Dürer's mind, now under the influence of Luther instead of Erasmus, has taken on the troubled look of Melencolia. In the Yale *Vanitas* de Gheyn was to make precisely the opposite adjustment by reconciling Melencolia with the old, happy conception of Saint Jerome.

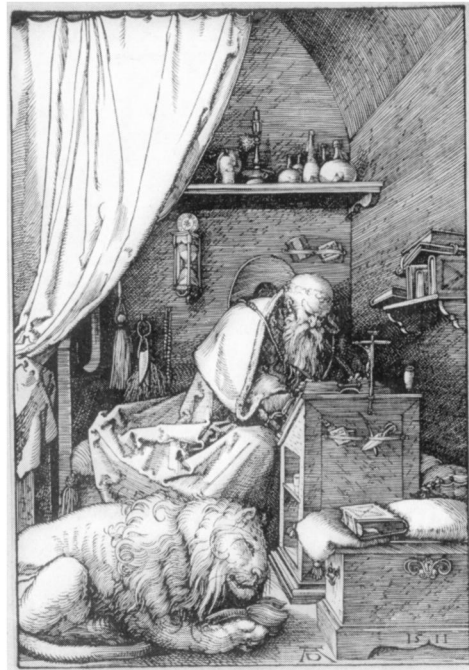
A more specific clue—one almost has the feeling it was left as one—is to be had from the group of objects in the upper left-hand corner of the picture, and indeed from the shelf on which they are located. The two oval boxes and the two books are easily enough recognizable, and by themselves not of any apparently great significance. However, the object on top of the books does not immediately lend itself to identification, and its use

39. Panofsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 167–168.

8. Jacques de GHEYN: *Saturn-Geometrician*
Engraving P.79. Courtesy of Erwin Panofsky

9. Albrecht DÜRER: *Saint Jerome in Meditation*. 1521
Oil on wood, 18 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 23 $\frac{5}{8}$ in.
Lisbon, Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga

10. Albrecht DÜRER: *Saint Jerome in His Cell*. 1511
Woodcut B.114. Courtesy of the Metropolitan
Museum of Art, Gift of Junius S. Morgan, 1919



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or purpose is not at first glance evident. Yet if we return to the 1514 engraving of *Saint Jerome in His Cell* (Fig. 6), we find on the shelf above and behind the Saint's left shoulder, a similar object, conical in shape and crowned by a small spherical knob. However, the object has some kind of bag-like cover over its top, equipped with drawstrings for tightening it around what must be therefore the neck of a bottle. This theory is strengthened by the presence next to it of what appears to be a large carafe, similarly capped. It is confirmed, finally, by the preliminary woodcut for this engraving, done in 1511 (Fig. 10) in which the perspective viewpoint is considerably higher, and the lower parts of these two containers can be clearly seen. Approximately the same amount of each has been cut off by the lowering of the viewpoint in the engraving. The edge of a box similar to those in the *Vanitas* can be seen also at the extreme right of the shelf in the engraving.

Still another link, albeit a rather tenuous one, with the *Meisterstiche* is to be found in the group of heads in the upper right corner of the picture. Here also the organization is tripartite. The familiar bust of Seneca, on the right, is related to the first theme through his Stoic philosophy. The middle head is that of the younger son of Laocoön from the celebrated group in the Vatican Museum. It is this son that is killed by the serpent while the older son goes free. Thus, like Saint Jerome, he might well justify and dramatize the second injunction, *finem tueri*.

The third head, though evidently that of a youth, is not so easily identified. Yet if we turn once again to the Dürer engraving which corresponds to the only part of the theme

not yet accounted for (Fig. 7), we are confronted with the industrious little figure of the *putto* at Melencolia's side. According to Panofsky's closely reasoned analysis, "The mature and learned Melancholia typifies Theoretical Insight which thinks but cannot act. The ignorant infant, making meaningless scrawls on his slate and almost conveying the impression of blindness, typifies Practical Skill which acts but cannot think. . . ."40 If we recall de Gheyn's matter of fact response to the plight of Melencolia (*naturamque sequi*), is it not possible that he may have taken the head of this scribbling little *putto* and used it to convey the idea that the bane of Melencolia's existence, like that of the Knight's would be rendered ineffectual if it were only thus ignored:

This, at any rate, would seem to be the message of the whole composition of de Gheyn, not really one of complacency, but rather one of confidence and assurance. And there was good reason that it should be such. De Gheyn was successful in his way in everything he undertook, was happy in his calling, well-connected politically, socially, and intellectually, versatile and inventive, at least to a point, and by marriage, if not otherwise, had become a man of such considerable property as permitted him to decline to take on pupils in the latter part of his life.⁴¹ He tried his hand at all kinds of design, perhaps, as van Regteren Altena has suggested, to the exclusion of profound achievement in any one of them.⁴² He created formal gardens, monumental fountains,⁴³ stained-glass windows,⁴⁴ commemorative medals,⁴⁵ he was the author, according to Bergström, of the earliest known dated Dutch flower piece (1600),⁴⁶ and, as I think we may now conclude, the inventor of what was not yet, but subsequently evolved into, the typical seventeenth-century Dutch Vanitas. His independent, almost high-handed approach to matters of more or less traditional iconography may be connected with the fact that he was a Protestant, but more probably both were manifestations of some yet more fundamental aspect of his nature and experience. Bergström has stressed quite forcibly the role of Calvinism in the evolution of the almost morbid morality of the Dutch Vanitas through its stronghold in the Netherlands, the University of Leyden. If Calvinism implied the condemnation of "everything that could be called worldly,"⁴⁷ however, there was also the other aspect of its teachings, the idea that those who are chosen of God will evidence their happy state as much by success in this world as by salvation in the next. Surely this is the kind of religious formalization of humanistic values that might lead a man like de Gheyn to paint such a picture as his *Vanitas*. And too, there is surely something here of the spirit of Calvin himself, who is said to have replied in his last days, when urged to rest and spare himself a little, "Would you that the Lord should find me idle when He comes?"

If now we understand something of the sources of this remarkable painting of de Gheyn's, we have still to finish with the question of its progeny. As we have seen, there is at least one fairly direct lineal descendant, the early product of Pieter Potter, but the

40. *Ibid.*, p. 164.

41. van Regteren Altena, pp. 6-9, 12-14, 18-19.

42. *Ibid.*, pp. 115-116.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

46. Folio 2 of a book of illuminations on vellum formerly in the possession of the Emperor Rudolf II in Prague. Signed "JD Gheyn FE 1600." Frits Lugt Collection, Paris. Cf. Bergström, pp. 44-45.

47. Bergström, p. 158.

next *Vanitas* of his that Bergström illustrates⁴⁸ is as closely related to the other *Vanitas* prototype we have noted, that of Willem Claesz. Heda, as the earlier work was to de Gheyn's. The same diagonal progression from smoking utensils on the left to skull on the right, the same references to drink in between, the same worn and tattered disorder dominate both compositions. Most important of all, the theme of the de Gheyn painting has totally disappeared. Like a negative used to produce a positive print, his *Vanitas* was to see its values totally reversed in all the paintings that followed it.

This is perhaps not surprising. It would have been easy to misunderstand, accidentally or intentionally, so erudite an iconographical scheme as that of de Gheyn. Indeed, this may have been one of the reasons for the change in motto. In any event, the course of development during the first three decades of growth of the *Vanitas* theme in Holland tended always away from the intellectualistic standard of concern here established and toward a materialistic one. It was more and more the symbols of wealth and power and of pleasure and taste with which the *Vanitas* dealt. That this in turn reflected partly a growing tendency toward the more overtly decorative, and partly a related tendency toward a lower common denominator of appeal, is perhaps implicit in the very fact of growth in popularity.

This is not to say that de Gheyn's painting ceased to have perceptible repercussions once the force of its initial impetus was spent. To cite a minor but specific instance, there would seem to be grounds for attributing to de Gheyn the device of placing a dominant skull firmly upon a pedestal consisting of one or more books. At least this motif does not seem to occur in any of the representations of Saint Jerome, nor in the Italian *tarsia Vanitas* in the Louvre, and therefore appears to be the inspiration of de Gheyn. Once established by him, however, it enjoyed a popularity both widespread and of long duration. It appears in a *Vanitas* of 1630⁴⁹ by Pieter Claesz., whose work is so closely similar to that of Willem Claesz. Heda, the author of the "Tobacco-*Vanitas*," and is still to be seen in a *Vanitas* by the Frenchman Jacques Linard,⁵⁰ which bears the motto *Voilla comment tous noz beaux iours deuiennent, ce XXe ianvier 1644*, inscribed on a slip of paper protruding from the edge of the book, precisely in the manner of de Gheyn.

Finally, our *Vanitas* was not to be denied the compliment of a full-fledged reworking in the latter half of the century in the then current, riotously decorative manner, by Pierre Boel in collaboration with Jacob Jordaens (Fig. 11), the latter providing the figure of Death the reaper, the *putti*, and the other figures into which de Gheyn's plaster heads had been expanded. The metamorphoses that have taken place between these two paintings are almost ludicrous, but there can be little doubt that they are related. The skull is located in precisely the same focal position above a most elegant metal vase, the unmistakable successor to the breastplate, although another, less classical, breastplate appears on the right. It is both amusing and in this case helpful that W. R. Valentiner, in describing our *Vanitas*, apparently from a reproduction or memory, mistakenly identified its breastplate as a "vase of Roman design." If the form of de Gheyn's painting is

48. Pieter Potter: *Vanitas*. Signed "P. Potter f. 1636." Panel, 10 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 13 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. Berlin, Kaiser Friedrich Museum. Published as fig. 143 in Bergström.

49. Pieter Claesz. (Dutch 1597/8–1661): *Vanitas*. Signed in monogram "PC 1630." Panel 23 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 17 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. Collection of David Hultmark, Saltsjöbaden, Sweden. Published as fig. 141 in Bergström.

50. Jacques Linard (French, c. 1600–1645): *Vanitas*. Signed and dated 20 January, 1644. Oil on canvas, 15 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 18 $\frac{7}{8}$ in. Private collection, Paris. Published as Plate XXII and Exhibit 57 in Sterling (catalogue).



11. Pierre BOEL (Flemish, 1622–1674) and Jacob JORDAENS (Flemish, 1593–1678): *Vanitas*
After 1650. Oil on canvas, 55½ x 78¾ in. Brussels, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts

basically here, however, its spirit and intent most certainly are not, for Boel has neither understood nor apparently even noted what de Gheyn was trying to say, and his objective in borrowing from him can only have been to acquire quickly and easily an effective skeleton on which to drape his lavish baubles.

What, then, may we say in conclusion about this most appealing work, the really misnamed *Vanitas* of de Gheyn? In spite of the sobering dominance of the skull, “appealing” is not too intimate a term to apply to it, and *Virtus* might be a better name for it. In a sense its dominant ingredient is the only one it really has in common with the progeny it spawned. Yet it is equally true that without this work, or one quite like it, the seventeenth-century Dutch *Vanitas* might not have come into being. Like the marquetries of Urbino, it paid aristocratic homage to *Virtutibus* rather than condemning them, and performed a function of coalition, an almost eclectic combination of diverse elements related only in the eye of its creator. What followed may have been essentially a process of disintegration; the role of this picture of de Gheyn’s may have been one that diminished with time rather than increased. It was not, for that reason, less vital. Bergström draws a distinction “between a *Vanitas*-still-life in the pure sense, and for instance, a flower-piece with a skull, which mainly expresses transience.”⁵¹ The basis of that distinction is the presence in the *Vanitas* of “a message of clearly moralizing import.” There would seem to be quite as much justification for drawing an analogous distinction between the full-fledged *Vanitas* with its references to all of man’s achievements and worldly status-symbols, and the breakfast-piece with a skull, which mainly exhorts to moderation or abstinence in the use of tobacco and the consumption of drink. The watch which

51. Bergström, p. 152 and fig. 179.

appears in the breakfast-piece of Willem Clasz. Heda, cited earlier,⁵² was an exceedingly common insertion in this type of painting, being a gentle-voiced reminder not to over-indulge in the good things displayed around it. That the same artist raised the pitch of the voice and gave it a note of greater urgency by replacing the timepiece with the ultimate symbol in this category, the skull, was not really the same thing as creating a *Vanitas*. On the other hand, the fact that he did this is an inescapable indication of the psychological state and habits of mind that were to alight eagerly upon the novel creation of Jacques de Gheyn and turn it to their purposes. Such was the flexibility, if not the ambiguity of symbols at this time, that once all the components of the *Vanitas* had appeared together in one place, for whatever purpose, they continued to be employed together, or at least partly together, for purposes altogether different.

For these reasons, we can, I think, regard this "*Vanitas*" as the first and most important step, indeed the decisive step, toward the establishment of the *Vanitas* theme in the Netherlands during the third decade of the seventeenth century. That this was thus a purely Northern development, with, at the most, *classical* Italian overtones, and that one of its sources, though by no means the only one, was to be found indeed in the cell of Saint Jerome, we can, with Bergström, accept. Just as much, however, we must admit the correctness of Sterling's assertion that the *Vanitas* was the product peculiarly of a humanistic environment of the sort pre-eminently to be found in the Italy of the Quattrocento, for such was the personality and the universality of Jacques de Gheyn, that almost anachronistically, he created in himself the kind of incubative atmosphere in which, not the prototype, but the prerequisite of the *Vanitas*-still-life might come safely into being.

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52. See footnote no. 34.