

Memento Mori

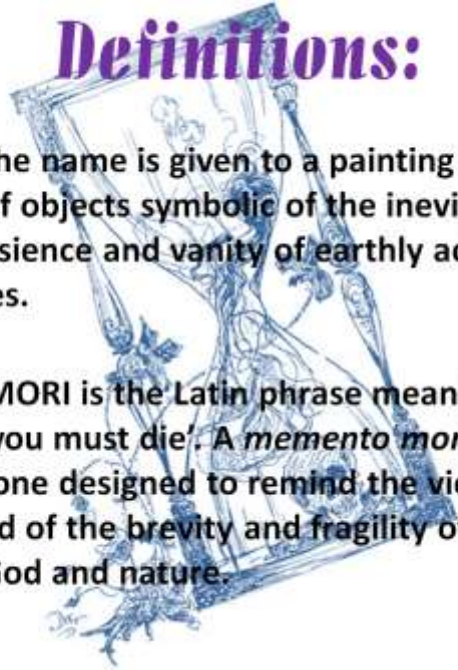
Vanitas



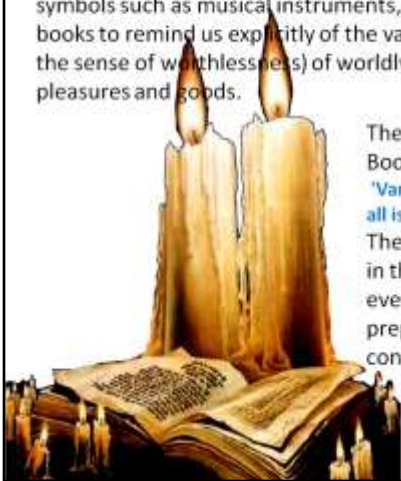
Definitions:

VANITAS is the name is given to a painting consisting of collections of objects symbolic of the inevitability of death and the transience and vanity of earthly achievements and pleasures.

MEMENTO MORI is the Latin phrase meaning 'remember you must die'. A *memento mori* painting or sculpture is one designed to remind the viewer of their mortality and of the brevity and fragility of human life in the face of God and nature.



A basic *memento mori* painting would be a portrait with a skull but other symbols commonly found are hour glasses or clocks, extinguished or guttering candles, fruit, and flowers. Closely related to the memento mori picture is the **vanitas** still life. In addition to the symbols of mortality these may include other symbols such as musical instruments, wine and books to remind us explicitly of the vanity (in the sense of worthlessness) of worldly pleasures and goods.



The term originally comes from the opening lines of the Book of Ecclesiastes in the Bible:

'Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities, all is vanity.'

The **vanitas** and **memento mori** picture became popular in the Seventeenth Century, in a religious age when almost everyone believed that life on earth was merely a preparation for an afterlife. However, modern artists have continued to explore this genre.





Sam Taylor-Wood- Still Life (Vanitas 1- 4)

Taylor-Wood is a modern day photographer who chose to create a still life photograph similar to a famous painting by Dutch still life artists.

While nature morte, the French translation for still life, may be the most appropriate terminology for the moving images of Still Life or A Little Death, many of Taylor-Wood's works could easily be discussed as examples of either memento mori – because they remind us of our mortality – or even better, as examples of vanitas – as they speak of the vanity of things (their eventual worthlessness).

“Two earlier films, Still Life of 2001 similarly employ the distortion of time – except by speeding it up rather than by stopping it – in order to reveal the extant drama in the banality of the everyday. They also draw on the history of art, specifically from still life painting, long considered the lowliest and most insignificant among subjects for art. The camera records the rotting and putrefaction of an arrangement of fruit in a bowl, this table setting commonly depicted in traditional still life painting. While the 17th-century Dutch or Spanish still life painters captured a peach at its moment of perfect ripeness or a flower in full bloom, Taylor-Wood's films brings this ordinary genre of foodstuff to life, albeit through the very process of its degeneration. In a further irony, the whole image is magically renewed once the video loops back to the beginning.”



Sam Taylor-Wood *A little Death* 2003



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

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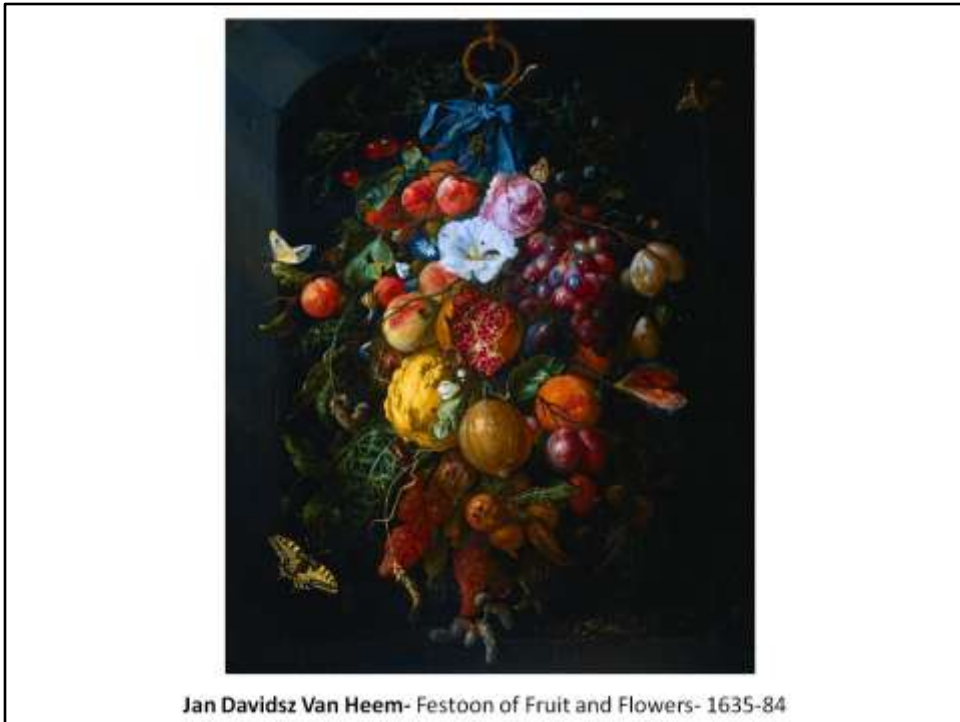
The skull and hour-glass symbolise the inevitability of death, while the musical instruments, wine and jewels represent the fleeting pleasures of life. The open book shows a brief poem emphasising the theme of mortality. The Latin inscription in the top left corner comes from the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes: 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity'. This is why such pictures are known as vanitas paintings. Edward Collier was born in Breda, in the Netherlands. He lived in Leiden and Amsterdam, but left for England in 1693. He died in London in 1708.



Cornelius Van Heem- *Vanitas Still Life with Musical Instruments*- c1661

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Cornelius was the son of the more famous painter Jan Davidsz der/van Heem



Jan Davidsz Van Heem- Festoon of Fruit and Flowers- 1635-84

Dutch still-life painter. He was born at Utrecht and his rare early pictures are in the style of Balthasar van der Ast, who taught him there. Later he worked in Leiden and showed that he had studied the restrained and simple works of the Haarlem still-life artists Claesz. and Heda. In 1636 he moved to Antwerp, became a citizen of that city in 1637, and spent most of his very productive life there. The paintings he did in Flanders are the ones for which he is most renowned and are very different in spirit from his earlier works: splendid flower pieces and large compositions of exquisitely laid tables which breathe all the opulent exuberance of Flemish Baroque painting. His work formed a link between the Dutch and Flemish still-life traditions and he is claimed by both schools. He came from a large family of painters and his many followers in Flanders and Holland included his son Cornelis (1631-95).



Adriaen van Utrecht- *Still Life with Bouquet and Skull* -1642

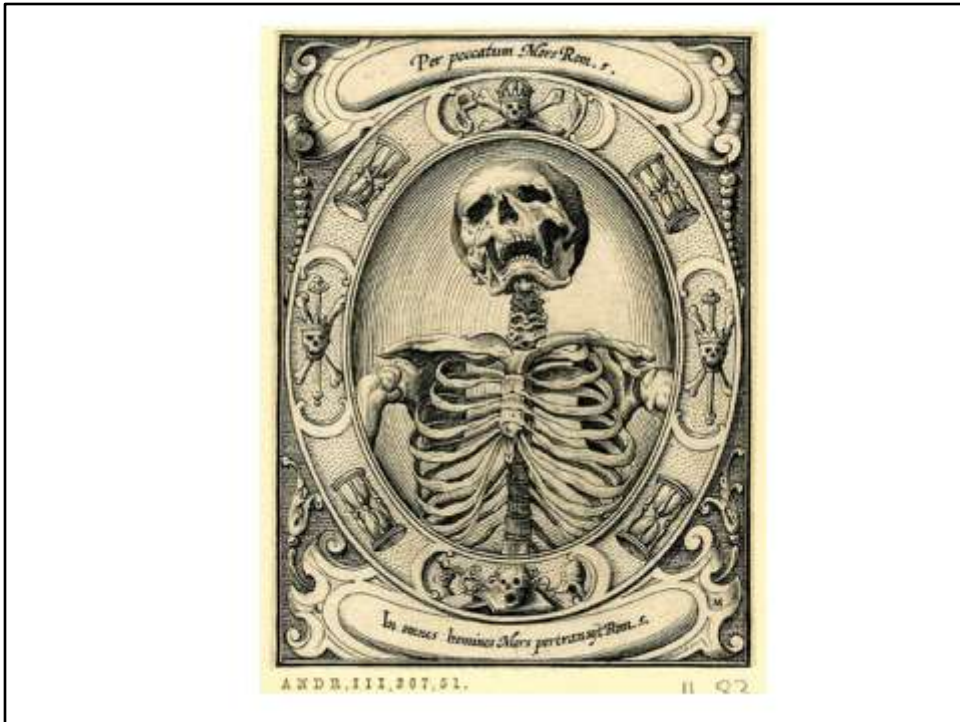
Adriaen van Utrecht- Still Life with Bouquet and Skull -1642

Still lifes were a great opportunity to show one's aptitude in painting textures and surfaces in great detail and with realistic light effects. Food of all kinds laid out on a table, silver cutlery, intricate patterns and subtle folds in table cloths and flowers all challenged painters. Virtually all still-lifes had a moralistic message, usually concerning the brevity of life – this is known as the vanitas theme – implicit even in the absence of an obvious symbol like a skull, or less obvious one such as a half-peeled lemon (like life, sweet in appearance but bitter to taste). Flowers wilt and food decays, and silver is of no use to the soul.



David Bailly- *Self Portrait with Vanitas Symbols*- 1651

The son of a Flemish calligrapher and fencing master, David Bailly first apprenticed to a local painter in Leiden and then to a portrait painter in Amsterdam. In his painted portraits, Bailly depicted attractive and expressive subjects in lively domestic settings. His vanitas paintings included the usual symbols of the transience and impermanence of human life, such as skulls, flowers, and burning or extinguished candles. He also included portraits of himself in these paintings, meaning to illustrate the ephemeral nature of his own artistic accomplishments. Though he sometimes intended his drawings as models for engravings, more often he made them as independently displayed works of art.

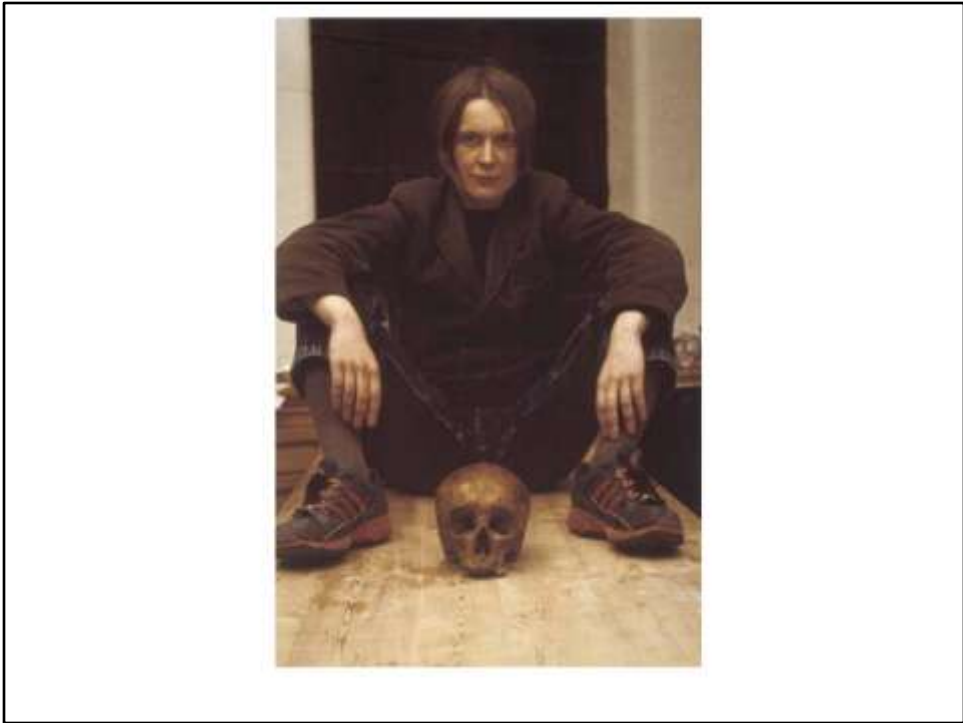


Another example of Memento Mori this time as an etching- talk about symbols on the page and emotion of skeleton

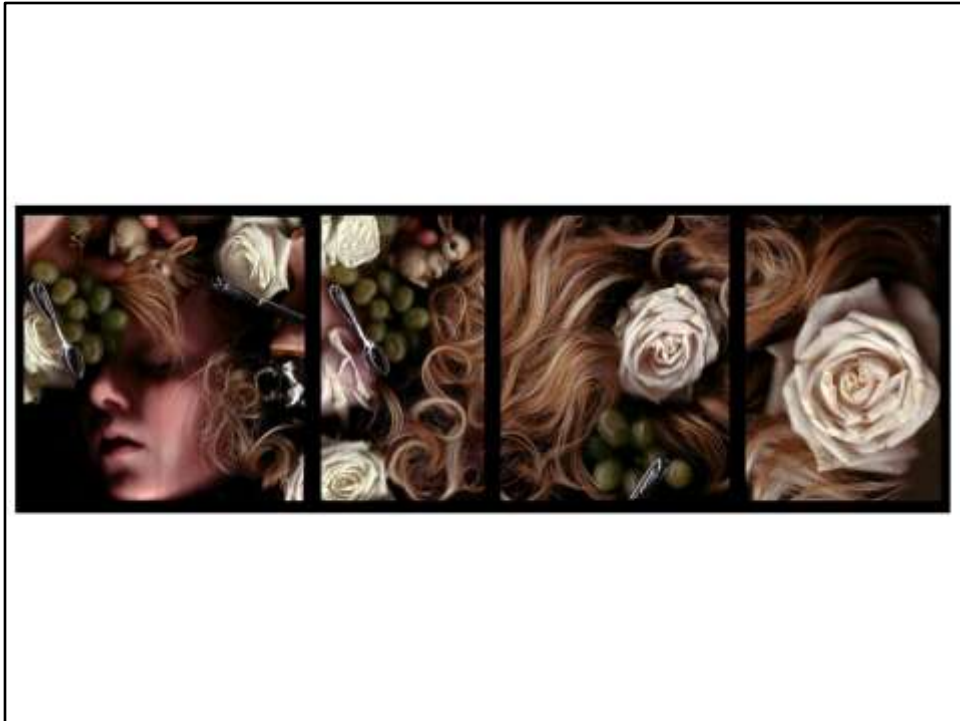


Pablo Picasso- *Goat's skull, bottle and candle- 1952*

This is a more modern example of a series of symbolic objects used to create a more abstract still life.



Sarah Lucas- Self Portrait with Scull- 1997



Modern examples of *Vanitas* and *Memento Mori* being used with various techniques in order to create exciting pieces of work.



Nicole Natri- *Vanitas*- 2008



This is a modern sculpture of different symbols associated to the theme of vanitas-
What symbols used and how do they fit in with the definition of Vanitas???