A Vanitas Still Life of 1621 by Jacques de Gheyn II: a Reflection of Neo-Stoic ideas

According to I. Bergström (Note 1), Dutch 17th-century vanitas still lifes were meant to make people reflect on the shortness of life, the fragility of man and the vanity of all things and are characterized by a serious, even morbid, atmosphere of melancholy, largely attributable to the strong moralistic approach of the Reformation and in particular Calvinism, of which Leiden University was a 'stronghold'. Bergström concluded that the objects in them representing the arts, sciences, prosperity, power and pleasures are not only doomed to perish, but also constitute a warning against pride in knowledge and the sinfulness to which art, power and pleasure can lead. However, on closer study (Note 2), this morbid character often appears to be lacking, while the sometimes very positive approach to the arts and sciences casts doubts on the idea that they transmit a warning. The inscriptions on Hendrik Hondius' engraving of 1626 (Fig. 1, Note 3), for example, glorify the arts and sciences and this appreciation is underlined by the figure of Hercules at bottom left, the virtuous hero who through his labours symbolizes Fortitudo, the quality needed to carry a task through to a good end. True, the snuffed candle, hourglass, skull and motto MEMENTO MORI point to the transience of human life, but the laurel wreath indicates that the end will be honourable, if work has been done with perseverance during that life. Again, another early example, a painting attributed to Jan Davidsz. de Heem (Fig. 2, Note 4), implies by its motto NON OMNIS MORIAR that the human spirit survives after death. On the one hand the ears of corn round the skull symbolize resurrection, on the other the laurel wreath stands for the fame one can acquire among posterity by deeds and works (Note 5).

Renunciation of the world, generally regarded as the only idea behind vanitas compositions (Note 6), was nothing new in the 17th century and cannot be attributed solely to the influence of Calvinism. It is an essential characteristic of some Antiquistic philosophies and can be traced in Christianity from the time of St. Augustine onwards (Note 7), particularly in Medieval transience literature and vanitas compositions after the Cumiace and other great reforms (Note 8).

The vanitas still life by Jacques de Gheyn II at Yale (Fig. 3, Note 9) links up with these 'divergent' compositions and the presence in it of the head of Seneca raises the question as to whether the rising Neo-Stoicism of the late 16th century and the wide dissemination of its ideas in the Netherlands may not have played a role in the creation of the genre and furnish an explanation of its popularity.

Stoicism (Note 10) teaches that man's striving for happiness is really a striving for virtue, since the virtuous life accords best with human nature. Virtue means acceptance of the inevitable in life and the winning of independence from external circumstances by learning to control the emotions through understanding and practice. Thus the Stoic strives for indifference (apatheia) and constancy, experiencing virtue, which is assisted by reason, as a bringer of peace. In opposition to virtue stands Fortuna who, with her contradictory nature, prosperity and adversity, is incalculable and restless and belongs to the world. She evokes the dangerous passions joy, hope, grief and fear, which can temporarily disturb the understanding. They must be combated by means of the intellectual virtues (Note 11).

The revival of Stoicism at the end of the 16th century was mainly based on late Classical authors like Seneca, Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus, who emphasize ethics and the human will. Humanists, disillusioned with scholasticism, thought they could recognize the lost atmosphere of early Christianity in Roman Stoicism, while it fitted in with the ideas expressed in Justus Lipsius' De Constantia (Note 12) that the current disasters in Europe were sent by God and must be endured as necessary and useful (Note 13). This book found a wide public, while many other works on moral philosophy that were also rooted in Stoicism in varying degrees were published at the same time (Note 14).

Since reason plays an important part in combating the emotions, education is the best way to achieve indifference and so Seneca held that the most efficient way to defeat the passions was to demonstrate that the things that arouse them are all vain (Note 15). To the Stoics earthly goods,
being transient, were not worth endangering one's peace of mind for. Thus the idea vanitas vanitatum
is essentially a Stoic one and not an expression of Christian forsaking of the world (Note 16).
Although the Christian must not indulge his emotions, they are nonetheless part of God's creation
(Note 17) and can have a positive value.
However, in still lifes vanitas vanitatum can only relate to such things as coins, crowns, jewels or
portraits of loved ones. Over against these bona corporis et externa stand the immoveable bona
animi, objects connected with the life after death, education and schooling, books, pens, scientific
instruments, art objects, musical instruments. Objects symbolizing transience could also indicate
that time is needed to become wise and must be used properly, while also expressing the Stoics' intense
concern with death.
In De Gheyrt’s painting of 1621 there are no symbols of power, wealth or earthly pleasures, earthly
existence being expressed mainly by the arts and sciences (Note 19). This has led various writers to
conclude that its subject is virtus and studium rather than vanitas (Note 20). But the symbols of
time, death and resurrection are so clear that a close relationship with other vanitas still lifes cannot
be denied, while other compositions with no emblems of wealth are also counted as representations
of vanitas (Note 22). In fact the gifts of Fortuna are represented here by adversity and a combination
of her two aspects does, indeed, crop up regularly in vanitas still lifes (Note 23). Merrill sees a three-fold
division in the objects on the table, which he links with Dürer's engravings and regards as standing
for the moral, theological and intellectual virtues (Note 24), an argument that scarcely seems
tenable, while both he and Miedema have already pointed to the Stoic character of the motto on the
painting (Note 26).
In the most general sense the large quantity of books points to knowledge and wisdom, while the
large open book with clasps on the left might be a Bible, representing divine wisdom. Gombrich
held that wisdom means knowledge of divine and human matters and regarded it as inseparable
from virtue and living well (Note 27). The idea that virtue can be learned was not only a central
theme in his work, but was also widespread at the time (Note 28). By learning what good and evil
are, man can turn away from sin (Note 29), while study and knowledge signify continuity and per-
severance in doing good. Lipsius too was convinced that wisdom leads to virtue (Note 30), regarding
steadfastness and tranquility of mind as the rewards of philosophy. However, he echoed Seneca in
regarding ethics as the only part of philosophy that can be called studium virtutis or is of use in the
fight against Fortuna (Notes 31, 32).
These ideas can be traced in all sorts of forms in emblem books. Ripa describes Philosophy as a
woman with a pile of three books in her right hand, representing the diligence needed to attain wis-
dom (Note 34), while he interprets a combination of a book and pen, as in De Gheyrt's painting, as
study, memory and improvement (Note 35). Otto van Veen has an emblem of a man leaning on
Father Time and turning towards a table with books, while disregarding glamorous figures and
monsters behind him (Fig. 4, Note 36). Gabriel Rollenhagen further has an emblem to the effect
not only that the passions can be stilled by study, but also that death has no power over knowledge
(Fig. 5, Notes 37, 38). Thus the books signify that study is an essential part of the virtuous life.
Among the objects on the table are a pair of compasses, which in Ripa are an attribute of Perfection
(Note 39) and also of Symmetry, who has a plumb line in her other hand to denote the harmony of
all parts, something found in man if he can control his passions (Note 40). From 1557 onwards
Christopher Plantijn used a pair of compasses with the motto LABORE ET CONSTANTIA
as his device (Note 41), while in Rollenhagen there is a similar emblem with a verse to the effect
that work once started must be carried through to completion with perseverance (Note 42). Thus
the compasses in the painting could stand for the Stoic ideas of constancy and equanimity.
The arts are represented in the painting by painting, drawing, engraving, architecture and sculpture
and here it may be noted that the nine muses have a certain value in Lipsius' thought. While they
cannot teach man the difference between good and evil, they do contribute to his improvement, since
one occupied with them is less subject to the influence of Fortuna (Note 43). The part played by the
arts and sciences in education is also clear from the Tabula Cebetis (Note 46), where those who
practise the liberal arts are always represented on a higher level than those swayed by fortune (Note
47). While the Tabula Cebetis shows how one can attain the highest virtue step by step, the vani-
tas still life similarly depicts the objects that can help or hinder.