

# Arts & Faith

Art and Commentary for Pentecost +8, Proper 13C by [Hovak Najarian](#)

## Introduction

Greetings to everyone associated with St. Margaret's Sunday Morning Forum,

In the Old Testament lesson for Sunday, July 31st [[Ecclesiastes 1:2 12-14; 2:18-23](#)] the writer speaks of vanities; "I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind." In the Gospel [[Luke 12:13-21](#)], Jesus said; "Take care! Be on your guard; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

For the merchants of Antwerp during the seventeenth century, trade became the source of great wealth. Among things they did with their wealth (then as now) was to acquire possessions. In art, this led to a type of painting called *vanitas* (Latin for vanity). The art attached is [Adriaen van Utrecht's Still-Life with a Bouquet and Skull](#). It is a painting of a large bouquet of flowers but with it are earthly possessions and reminders of the passage of time. My comments are attached.

~Hovak Najarian

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*Still-Life with Bouquet and a Skull*, oil on canvas, c.1642, Adriaen van Utrecht, 1599-1652

Commentary by Hovak Najarian



Adriaen van Utrecht, *Still-Life with a Skull*, o/c, c.1642

In a book titled, *The Painted Word*, Tom Wolf gives an account of a *New York Times* art critic who said he was unable to comment on a painting because he did not know the theory behind it. Instead of a picture being worth a thousand words, a painting today may require a thousand words to help us understand what the artist was trying to say. This sometimes is true of abstract art but it also may be true of a “realistic” painting. Art is created in an historical time period and understanding the context in which it was made is often essential to its meaning. A person looking at Adriaen van Utrecht’s *Still-Life with a Bouquet and a Skull*, without regard to the wealthy merchant class and the Protestant Reformation in the Low Countries during the seventeenth century, may think the skull is very much out of place and that it ruins an otherwise perfectly pleasant painting.

In Flemish artist, van Utrecht's still-life, we see some of the recurring themes and objects of the *vanitas* genre (the term *vanitas* is Latin for "vanity"). Although paintings such as this were created more than four hundred years ago, they continue to have a message for us today.

If we were to be asked why flowers exist, it is likely we would agree with Ralph Waldo Emerson (said of a rhodora), "If eyes were made for seeing, then beauty is its own excuse for being." Flowers bring pleasure but even while enjoying them, we are aware of their short shelf life. In a *vanitas* painting, flowers symbolize the cycle of life and often they will be shown in various stages; bud, full bloom, and faded. They remind us that, like flowers, we too come into being, mature, blossom, and then fade. Contained in this painting also are objects that represent the passing of time; thus they are reminders of the transient nature of life and our mortality. On the table is a chronometer (a portable timekeeping instrument) and in the background, an hourglass in a wooden case. The smoking pipe and the pilsner and champagne glasses represent time spent in empty pleasures.

Items in the painting also represent treasures that were possessed typically by the wealthy merchants of Antwerp; a string of pearls, a gold chain, a ring, and money. The wealthy often displayed items such as rare sea shells; a nautilus is on the far right. A decorative pedestal serving dish above the nautilus denotes luxury.

As a reminder of the folly of acquiring treasures, *vanitas* often contained a skull; the universal symbol of death. In van Utrecht's still life it is placed prominently atop a book that represents the limits of human knowledge. The skull's presence among earthly treasures serves as a message, "As I am, so too you will be." A crown of laurel leaves is placed over the skull to remind viewers that for believers there is victory over death.

There is irony in the fact that *vanitas* were expensive works of fine art and like other objects they too became commodities – vanities – that were among possessions that were purchased by the wealthy.

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