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## Still Life in Movement: A Commentary on the Order of Things of the Order of Things

### Keywords

still life, historical painting, hierarchy of genres

### Abstract

By the juxtaposition or the intertwinement of the two arguably seminal texts on still life, Charles Sterling's comprehensive art historical study and Gérard Wajcman's theoretical, philosophical commentary thereon, the interpretative net is firmly established; the impression is given that all that is left is the reiteration of the well-trodden paths. However, neither the historical presentation of still life's linear emancipation from *historia* nor the following ontological definition of the emancipated still life is so simple. Still life as a specific iconographic genre is shown to be, contrary to its name, in a perpetual state of becoming, of movement. And more, as soon as the goal of emancipation from the historical painting is achieved, the movement becomes inverted: a renewed relationship between still life and *historia* follows on another level. On the other hand, it is shown that still life is only rarely completely devoid of some narrative content.

## Tihožitje v gibanju: komentar o redu stvari reda stvari

### Ključne besede

tihožitje, historično slikarstvo, hierarhija žanrov

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### Povzetek

S sopostavitvijo oziroma prepletom dveh ključnih tekstov o tihožitju, vsezajemajoče umetnostnozgodovinske študije Charlesa Sterlinga ter teoretskega, filozofskega komentarja Gérarda Wajcmana, je ustvarjen vtis, da je bilo o tihožitju povedano že vse, da preostanejo le še uhojene poti. Vendar niti zgodovinska predstavitev linearne emancipacije tihožitja od historičnega slikarstva niti ontološka definicija emancipiranega tihožitja,

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ki sledi, nista tako preprosti. Tihožitje kot specifična ikonografska zvrst se izkaže za nekaj, kar je – v nasprotju s svojim imenom – v nenehnem stanju postajanja, gibanja. Še več, takoj ko je cilj emancipacije od historije dosežen, se gibanje zaobrne: osamosvojitvi od historičnega slikarstva sledi ponovna vzpostavitev razmerja med tihožitjem in historijo na drugi ravni. Poleg tega se izkaže, da je tihožitje le redko povsem izpraznjeno določene narativne vsebine.



What else is there to say about still life? The interpretative net seems to be firmly established. The progressive steps in the development of this specific iconographic motif have been meticulously registered in Charles Sterling's still unsurpassed classical art historical study, beginning in antiquity and ending in the 20th century.<sup>1</sup> The actual works of art are described and analysed and explained, constituting an inventory (or *the* inventory) of practically all the then known examples of still-life paintings. On the other hand, much later Gérard Wajcman's theoretical, philosophical commentary on this art historical presentation endeavoured to explicate those art historical presuppositions in greater detail and to define the essence of still life.<sup>2</sup> While Sterling strove to include every image with at least some still-life content—for his narrative, every image even as a mere potential still life or just a residue of still life, is relevant—Wajcman eventually discriminated between general, approximate still-life content (“*nature-morte*”) and true, proper still life (“*nm*”). Together, these two seminal studies of still life represent the screen through which still life continues to be perceived and discussed.<sup>3</sup> The historical presentation of still life's emancipation

<sup>1</sup> Charles Sterling, *Still Life Painting: From Antiquity to the Present Time* (Paris: Pierre Tisné, 1959).

<sup>2</sup> Gérard Wajcman, *Ni nature, ni morte: Les vies de la nature morte* (Paris: Nous, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> Other major studies on still life, however valuable in themselves, affirm and elaborate the established positions. See, for example: Max J. Friedländer, *Landscape, Portrait, Still-Life: Their Origin and Development* (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1949); Ingvar Bergström, *Dutch Still-life Painting in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Faber and Faber, 1956); Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion Books, 1990); Norbert Schneider, *Still Life: Still Life Painting in the Early Modern Period* (Köln: Taschen, 1999); Victor I. Stoichita, *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight into Early Modern Metapainting* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015); Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, *Pour en finir avec la nature morte* (Paris: Gallimard, 2020).



**Fig. 1:** Workshop of Robert Campin, *Annunciation Triptych (Merode Altarpiece)*, c. 1427–1432, oil on oak panel, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

from *historia* leads to the ontological definition of emancipated still life. The linear movement towards self-realisation seems to be arrested once the goal of self-definition is achieved. However, neither the history nor the ontology of still life is so neat. Namely, even though *historia* is thought to be left behind, it returns as a point of reference as soon as the emancipation of still life is accomplished. Then, still life is explained as *historia*'s other, even though still life is actually rarely completely devoid of some narrative content.

## The Movement

The backbone of the art historical preoccupation with still life is the development of still life as an autonomous iconographic motif within the early modern period of European art (along with other “lesser” types of paintings, i.e. landscape and genre). At the beginning of this slow and gradual process of emancipation, in 14th- and 15th-century Italian and Netherlandish painting, objects appear accompanying a Christian story, bearing a symbolic meaning, identifying the figures depicted, accentuating their qualities, highlighting the message. In Robert Campin’s *Annunciation Triptych*, the extinguished candle (fig. 1) is probably a reference to the Holy Spirit, the white lily in a jug on the table and the white towel on the wall represent Mary’s virginity and purity, and the open book on the table most likely alludes to Mary’s secluded and pious life. The beginning is thus *historia*, a meaningful story composed of several human figures forming a scene as if on a stage, taking place in familiar surroundings and accompanied by accessories that heighten the reality effect of the depicted scene.<sup>4</sup> The emerging naturalism answers the expectations of the *devotio moderna* and facilitates the interpellation.

Development then follows by which the accessories—for various and also still largely unknown reasons—become the self-sufficient subjects of singular paintings, the *parergon* becomes *ergon*.<sup>5</sup> The emancipation of the still-life motif into a self-sufficient genre of painting is not just visual or formal. A story with human figures is not simply omitted: the objects also lose their symbolic content. The emancipation of the still-life motif is also a profanation, the objects cease to be subordinated to a sacred context.<sup>6</sup>

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This development gains in intensity in 16th-century Antwerp and is completed in 17th-century Holland, the two great moments not only for the emerging still

<sup>4</sup> Norman Bryson, *Word and Image: French Painting of the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1–28.

<sup>5</sup> Stoichita, *Self-Aware Image*, 53–65.

<sup>6</sup> In the context of the present contribution, the great discussion whether still life is a consequence of a realistic tendency of Northern Renaissance painters (Bergström) or whether the Antique models and Italian painters played their part in it as well (Sterling) will be disregarded.



**Fig. 2:** Joachim Beuckelaer, *Well-Stocked Kitchen (Christ in the House of Mary and Martha)*, 1566, oil on panel, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

life genre but also for the establishment of the capitalist world order.<sup>7</sup> The crucial turning points on the way are Pieter van Aertsen's and Joachim Beuckelaer's genre pieces. In Beuckelaer's *Well-Stocked Kitchen* (fig. 2), the story of Christ visiting Mary and Martha is pushed to the back, we glimpse the scene through an opening in the background. The small biblical figures are depicted in paler colours than the rest of the painting. The foreground is occupied by a more colourful genre scene, the anonymous figures are bigger, an abundant still life has taken over a great part of the painting. Mere things, unimportant in relation to the holy story, are pushed to the fore, the hierarchical relation is inverted. The viewer is supposed to be seduced by the plenty, and to be affected by the moralistic parable only in the next step. Here one can see still life in movement: moving

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<sup>7</sup> The emergence and development of still life are often set into and explained by the capitalist framework of the time: interest in depicting things and especially in depicting a wealth of things is often connected to the acquisitive principle of capitalism. See, for example, Elizabeth Alice Honig, *Painting and the Market in Early Modern Antwerpen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).



**Fig. 3:** Balthasar van der Ast, *Still Life of Fruit and Flowers*, 1620, oil on panel, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

from the back to the forefront, displacing the connection to the holy figures (the function of the objects in fig. 1 is to explain Mary) and replacing it with the connection to ordinary people (the function of the objects in fig. 2 is to define their everyday milieu). One can see still life in the process of becoming. From subordination to *historia* on the way to autonomous existence, for still life there is a middle station. Still life is juxtaposed with genre painting. Everyday things are part of everyday life. Saints are substituted for by common people, and, finally, human figures vanish from the picture entirely (fig. 3). Once the human figure is eliminated from the painting, only still life is left. Still life finally appears as the remains of some wider narrative and of some larger composition. Still life eventually takes place not in itself but as a result of a crushed relation, as a residue after an operation of elimination. Still life is what is left after all the more important parts are taken out of the picture.<sup>8</sup>

The goal is achieved by the Dutch still lifes of the 17th century, such as Willem Claesz. Heda's *Breakfast Table with Blackberry Pie* (fig. 4).<sup>9</sup> There is only a table, with a few glasses and a few plates, a partially eaten pie, some crushed nuts, and a watch against a neutral background. A painting like this possesses the components, which, according to Wajcman, constitute still life proper, "la *nm*."<sup>10</sup> A painting is an *nm* if *nm* is the unique and exclusive subject of a painting.<sup>11</sup> An *nm* is a type of a painting, representing an assembly of utensils, presenting a group of juxtaposed solitary objects, which are borrowed from the domestic sphere, private or intimate, and which are situated in the interior of a

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<sup>8</sup> "Ces natures mortes sont comme ce qui reste d'une histoire." Wajcman, *Ni nature, ni morte*, 247.

<sup>9</sup> This, of course, is a very neat and very simplified version of the art historical vision, but it does constitute its core truth.

<sup>10</sup> Wajcman, 313.

<sup>11</sup> Wajcman, 314.



**Fig. 4:** Willem Claesz. Heda, *Breakfast Table with Blackberry Pie*, 1631, oil on oak panel, Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister.

domestic space.<sup>12</sup> An *nm* is an assembly of objects which can be handled, held in hand, which can be accompanied (or not) by inanimate beings or natural products; an assembly of objects of pleasure, of banal objects, modest objects, looked upon from close-up.<sup>13</sup>

But in Dutch painting of the 17th century, as in the previous century, there was not just one still life, there were many. A still life is not a presentation of just any kind of object, of whichever objects, of whatever one finds at home, at hand. On the contrary, still lifes present specific and eventually predictable kinds of objects. There are specific types of still lifes, with particular meanings or messages, within which variations are minimal and—for further art historical interpretations—quite unimportant. The message in question concerns the type, rather than the actual specific painting. Still-life paintings are eventually more meaningful as a type, rather than each specific instance—each particular painting is

<sup>12</sup> Wajcman, 313–16.

<sup>13</sup> Wajcman, 317–18.



**Fig. 5:** Paul Cézanne, *Still Life with Apples and Pears*, c. 1891–1892, oil on canvas, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

only an example of the type, but, on the other hand, there is also not a single word that encompasses all the types of still lifes (“*stilleven*,” “*nature morte*”) until much later. There is no *nm*—only flower pieces, *fruytagies* (“fruit pieces”), *ontbijtjes* (“a little breakfast”), *banketjes* (“banquets”), game pieces, *vanitas*, *bedriegertjes* (“a little deception,” “little trickster”), and so on, exist.

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Once still life is established in its autonomous state of being, it stays there in subsequent centuries. Occasionally a new motif or type is added to the array, but in general, the purposeful movement seems now to be arrested, the goal has been reached. The many still-life paintings which are still being painted seem to be stuck in the prescribed itineraries. Still life has not been absolutely stilled; still life as such has, of course, not simply ended, the movement is not absolutely finished—but it no longer possesses a direction. Once still life has developed into itself, it merely continues to exist. It marks time, it stands still. It is stuck in its itineraries, until at the end of the 19th century it seems to become devoid of a

particular prescribed meaning. For Paul Cézanne, the established iconographic motif of a still life is a useful starting point for his experiments in form precisely because the motif is so well accepted that it does not draw the spectator's attention to itself, to the content of the picture. *Still Life with Apples and Pears* (fig. 5) does not attract attention and interest as a still life, but as a new way of representing known, old, boring things, i.e. four apples and four pears on two plates on a table. Cézanne's audacity in form is foregrounded even more by the banality of content. The motivation for depicting mere objects thus becomes very personal. Now, one could say, finally, still life's movement has finished; still life has been absolutely stilled.<sup>14</sup>

### The Order of Things

When one attempts to reduce this variety of still lifes to a common denominator, to compress all these different types of paintings into "still life," into *nm*, one risks making these modest and banal objects even more modest and banal, and empty. Wajcman explicates the platonic ideal of Sterling's narrative scheme, although this ideal, *nm*, is constantly being negated by actual still-life paintings: by not quite yet being still life, or by being slightly more than just still life. Still life is both, at the same time, a too much (of various empirical content) and a too little (of inherent complexity). A still-life painting is too simple, too evident, too boring, and at the same time there are too many different motifs, too many contexts, and too few connections between them.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Various artworks from the 20th and 21st centuries focused on the object and the objectness are often connected to and incorporated into this art historical narrative of still life, as if the object and the objectness are the primary criteria of the genre. However, still life is not only objects; still life is particular objects comprehended and presented in a certain way. Once this specificity is gone, still life is also gone, and something else takes its place. To name the most well known and notorious example, Duchamp's *Fountain* is not a still life, since it is not about the object that is being (re)presented. The point of Duchamp's *Fountain* is not the object, but the gesture; Duchamp's *Fountain* is not a still life, but a Dada provocation.

<sup>15</sup> It seems that all that is left are particular art historical studies of particular paintings, discovering, perhaps, some new information about the buyer of the still-life painting in question, or its original location, etc., which would not considerably change the general understanding of still life as such.

As various residues of *historia* are thus established as autonomous iconographic motifs, once still life is emancipated, it is considered best not to be left on its own, to its own devices. Once still life acquires an existence comparable to *historia*, on the material level, an existence of an autonomous picture (*tableau*), the hierarchy, which was obliterated and overcome by the emancipation of still life (along with landscape and genre painting), needs to be re-established. Once the material autonomy is set, the autonomous pictures need to be ordered, brought into line, adjusted, and subordinated to a higher principle once again. The movement of still life towards autonomy is then inverted. After the movement towards being on its own follows the movement back towards inclusion in a bigger picture. Still life needs to be inserted into its proper place within the larger order of things. The old hierarchy is reinstated, although on different premises.

It is now the painter's ability that is the foundation of the hierarchy of genres in academic theory, clearly and firmly posited just at the time when still life with its Dutch flourishing came into its own. From the painter's point of view, depicting mere objects is deemed too easy, too shallow. It is a matter of the painter's reputation: the question of a still life versus a *historia* is a matter of his irrelevance or his greatness. Since it is more difficult to paint many human beings in movement than just things lying still, someone who paints something alive and moving is more estimable than someone who paints only dead things without movement: "*celuy qui peint des animaux vivans est plus estimable que ceux qui ne representent que des choses mortes & sans mouvement.*"<sup>16</sup>

The Representation that is made of a Body by Lines or Colours is considered as a mechanical Employment; for this Reason as there are different Workmen in this Art, who apply themselves to different Subjects; it is certain that in Proportion as one employs himself in the most difficult and noble Parts, he excels those which are low and common, and aggrandises himself by a more noble Study. Thus he who paints fine Landships, is above him who only paints Fruits, Flowers, or Shells: He who paints after Life is more to be regarded than he who only represents still Life; and as the Figure of a Man is the most perfect Work of God upon Earth, it is also certain that he who imitates God in painting human Figures, is by far more excellent than all others. Moreover though it be no small Matter to make

<sup>16</sup> André Félibien, *Conferences de l'Academie Royale de peinture et de sculpture* (Paris: Frederic Leonard, 1668), n.p.

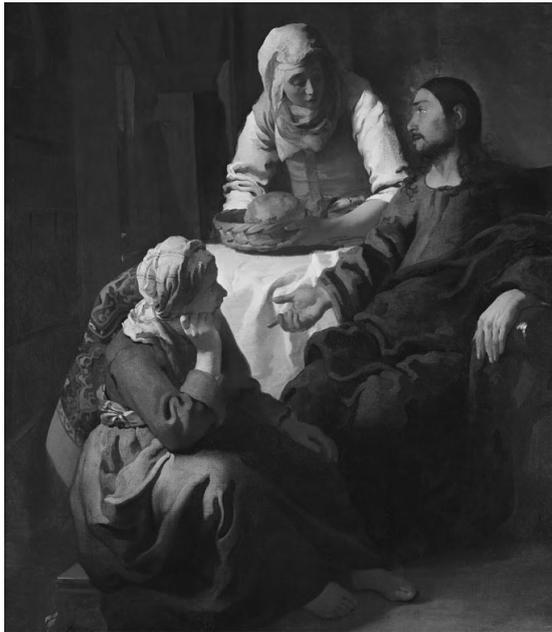
the Picture of a Man appear as if it was alive, and to give the Appearance of Motion to that which has none; one who can only draw Portraits, has not as yet attained to this high Perfection of Art, and cannot pretend to the same Honour with abler Painters. He must for that end advance from Painting one single Figure to draw several together; he must paint History and Fable; he must represent great Actions like an Historian, or agreeable ones as the Poets. And soaring yet higher, he must by allegorical Compositions, know how to hide under the Vail of Fable the Virtues of great Men, and the most sublime Mysteries. He is esteemed a great Painter who acquits himself well in Enterprizes of this Kind. 'Tis in this that the Force, the Sublime and Grandeur of the Art consists.<sup>17</sup>

One who paints “only dead things without movement” only transcribes what he sees, his inventiveness does not need to be involved; in still-life painting, the painter’s imagination, too, remains still.<sup>18</sup> His mind does not need to be activated, his imagination is not set in motion. A still life appears to be the very opposite

<sup>17</sup> André Félibien, *Seven Conferences Held in the King of France’s Cabinet of Paintings* (London: T. Cooper, 1740), xxvi–xxviii.

“La representation qui se fait d’un corps en trassant simplement des lignes, ou en meslant des couleurs est considerée comme un travail mécanique; C’est pourquoy comme dans cēt Art il y a differens Ouvriers qui s’appliquent à differens sujets; il est constant qu’à mesure qu’ils o’occupent aux choses les plus difficiles & les plus nobles, ils sortent de ce qu’il y a de plus bas & de plus commun, & s’anoblissent par un travail plus illustre. Ainsi celuy qui fait parfaitement des païsages est au dessus d’un autre qui ne fait que des fruits, des fleurs ou des coquilles. Celuy qui peint des animaux vivans est plus estimable que ceux qui ne representent que des choses mortes & sans mouvement; Et comme la figure de l’homme est le plus parfait ouvrage de Dieu sur la terre, il est certain aussi que celuy qui se rend l’imitateur de Dieu en peignant des figures humaines, est beaucoup plus excellent que tous les autres. Cependant quoy que ce ne soit pas peu de chose de faire paroistre comme vivante la figure d’un homme, & de donner l’apparence du mouvement à ce qui n’en a point; Neantmois un Peintre qui ne fait que des portraits, n’a pas encore atteint cette haute perfection de l’Art, & ne peut pretendre à l’honneur que reçoivent les plus sçavans. Il faut pour cela passer d’une seule figure à la representation de plusieurs ensemble; il faut traiter l’histoire & la fable; il faut représenter de grandes actions comme les Historiens, ou des sujets agrables comme les Poètes; Et montant encore plus haut, il faut par des compositions allegoriques, sçavoir couvrir sous le voile de la fable les vertus des grands hommes, & les mystères les plus relevez. L’on appelle un grand Peintre celuy qui s’aquite bien de semblables entreprises. C’est en quoy consiste la force, la noblesse & la grandeur de cēt Art.” Félibien, *Conferences*, n.p.

<sup>18</sup> And yet there can be a contradiction: some art historians call attention to a still life as an opportunity to flaunt the painter’s virtuosity, especially in the *pronk stilleven*, with which there is a confluence of material affluence, symbolised by the expensive and rare objects



**Fig. 6:** Johannes Vermeer, *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*, c. 1655, oil on canvas, Edinburgh, Scottish National Gallery.



**Fig. 7:** Willem Claesz. Heda, *Still Life with a Roemer and Watch*, 1629, oil on panel, Den Haag, Mauritshuis.

of a *historia*. At the opposite end of the scale, at its very bottom, there are dead things without movement, such as the fruits, the flowers, and the shells. Landscapes are already one step higher, even higher still the depiction of animals, while the top level is for the human figure. The academic hierarchy of genres, concerning the painter's admirability, follows the great chain of being in nature (*scala naturae*) from God in the heavens, down to dead things on earth, the chain from (pure) spirit to (heavy) matter. Man as a creature just in the in-between sphere, made of matter and spirit, a being made from matter in God's likeness, is thus the most proper subject of painting. Still life, with its modest and banal objects, makes no sense on its own, it only makes sense in comparison

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depicted, and the painter's mastery in depicting their fine textures and glitter. See, for example, Schneider, *Still Life*, 108.

with *historia*. Still life, even if eventually independent, does not exist in itself, but in the final instance, too, only in relation to *historia*.

The ontology of *historia* is (unbearably) easy. Tied to a literary source, its origin is well defined, obvious, real. *Historia*, being an illustration of a story, a representation of a tale, remains tied to the story, keeps the story as its constant reference. For every iconographic motif, there is a fixed point of departure, a fixed reference, no matter how creative and imaginative the painter is, no matter how far he departs from the original text, the origin is there and it does not change. The ontology of still life is not so simple. Still life's origin are bits and pieces within *historia*, unrelated to each other, without a shared origin, apart from all serving as accessories to the main story. For *historia*, no terminological difficulty exists: at the very beginning, with Leon Battista Alberti's foundational text, *historia* gets named and defined, one and only, whereas still life remains scattered into various names for certain kinds of objects for a long time. And when it finally receives a collective noun, it is in fact doubled: it is split into *still life*, *stilleven*, *Stilleben*, *tihozitje*, *zátiší*, on the one hand, and *natura morta*, *nature morte*, *mrtva priroda*, and *natureza-morta*, on the other. Even in its final and single definition, still life is not just one thing; it is two things, each with its own set of associations. It is life that is stilled, a life with movement arrested, and/or it is nature with its life extinguished, nature that is dead.

A continuous art historical or iconographic development is possible only for *historia*, since it is the only genre with a proper continuity, because of its well-defined origin and the continuity in its demand.<sup>19</sup> *Historia* is an axis of the entire art of painting; all other genres are conceived as a declination, a deviation, a deflection therefrom. Sporadic and coincidental, they are always the other, sprouting in the random cracks, in the gaps between one and another *historia* that open up accidentally, or appear by chance.

A *historia* (fig. 6) is a picture that can always return to its primary origin, to the text, whereas a still life (fig. 7) is a picture of many and various things of this

<sup>19</sup> There is no such continuity for still life; there is no constant demand for these kinds of pictures (at least not until much later, in the 18th century), and art historians still do not know very much about the buyers or patrons of these kinds of images, or about their function and role.

world. A *historia* is a picture of a great public gesture, a gesture of a worldly resonance, and a still life is a picture of small, private things. In *historia*, a gesture is movement and movement is an expression of a spirit that is alive; in still life, things are still and quiet, they are matter that is dead. Imagination is required to depict the spirit in movement, whereas in order to depict dead matter mere copying will do. Still life is thus presented as *historia*'s absolute other.<sup>20</sup>

## The Dead Life

And yet, those dead things are not merely things, things themselves; they are always already things in some kind of relation to the human being: they are things for man, they are man's things. They are the things man makes, the things man desires, uses, consumes and contemplates. Perhaps they are dead in themselves, but they become enlivened by the human presence. They narrate about the human beings that make, desire, use, consume, and contemplate them.

Accordingly, there are two courses of interpretation of still-life paintings that are the most general. On the one hand, a still-life painting can be seen as a means of expressing an aspiration to or of boasting about one's wealth and prosperity.<sup>21</sup> On the other, it can be understood as a means of reminding the viewer of one's mortality, the brevity and fragility of life. The things of a still life are the things that a man identifies with, the things that display his character and/or his social position; and they are the things that comment on and judge his

<sup>20</sup> Still life is *historia*'s absolute other in one more sense: landscape, the next on the ladder just after still life, for example, can contain human figures and can still be defined as a landscape, whereas the "removal of the human body is the founding move of still life." Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 60; see also Wajcman, *Ni nature, ni morte*, 329. A painting of things with human figures is no longer a still life, but is straightaway promoted to a genre piece.

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Alice Honig, "Making Sense of Things: On the Motives of Dutch Still Life," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 34 (Autumn 1998): 166–83, <https://doi.org/10.1086/RESV34N1MS20140414>; Julie Berger Hochstrasser, "Imag(in)ing Prosperity: Painting and Material Culture in the 17th-Century Dutch Household," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 51 (2000): 194–235, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22145966-90000664>; Joanna Woodall, "Laying the Table: The Procedures of Still Life," *Art History* 35, no. 5 (November 2012): 976–1003, <https://doi.org/10.1111/J.1467-8365.2012.00933.X>; Miya Tokumitsu, "The Currencies of Naturalism in Dutch 'Pronk' Still-life Painting: Luxury, Craft, Envisioned Affluence," *RACAR: Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review* 41, no. 2 (2016): 30–43, <https://doi.org/10.7202/1038070ar>.

endeavours and way of life. In Heda's breakfast piece (fig. 4), the white napkin partly covering the table, pewter plates, a silver drinking cup, a roemer, and a golden watch bespeak an affluent household. The painting's owner thus has his wealth and social standing mirrored back to him, or he beholds the painting as a representation of his strivings towards prosperity. But then again, an overturned vessel signifying a finished meal, a half-eaten pie, or a watch marking the passing of time also speak of the transiency of worldly possessions and carnal pleasures. The beholder is reminded that his striving for affluence is in the final instance futile. The two interpretations are related to—one could even say conditioned by—each other: the admonition against the vanity of earthly pleasures and material wealth makes sense only if this danger is obvious and ostentatiously presented. Still life thus assumes a function that echoes *historia's* task: to teach the beholder a lesson.

To conclude, the depicted objects are never merely objects, they are never mere things. The life of still life is rarely absolutely still, the nature of the *nature morte* is rarely completely dead, the objects depicted are rarely just mute and meaningless things. Not only in *vanitas*, a particular type of still life, but in many "ordinary" still lifes there are signs and symbols, presenting a little story, that draw a still life near or at least slightly closer to a *historia*.<sup>22</sup> Not only the most obvious one, a human skull, but also half-eaten meals and fruit, withered leaves, fallen-off flower petals, rotting fruit, cracked nuts, watches, and insects crawling over fruit and flowers, intent on devouring them, signify the warning that everything is destined to wither, disintegrate, expire, pass away, die, in its time. Not things already totally still or finally dead, but things in movement towards their final demise. Life is stilled and quietened so that it can proclaim, quite loudly, that everything in nature—everything that is alive and spirited and moving—will eventually die.

<sup>22</sup> Even when disengaged from (great) *historia*, still life becomes a (little) story in itself. For Wajcman, a *vanitas* still life cannot be an *nm*, precisely because of its narrative character (*Ni nature, ni morte*, 329). For Wajcman, a still life ceases to be a still life when the historical enters it. It thus seems that, in his view, not many still lifes could attain the platonic status of *nm*.

### Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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