



François van Daellen
active c. 1636 - c. 1651

Vanitas Still Life

c. 1650

oil on paper laid down on panel

overall: 20.3 × 16.5 cm (8 × 6 1/2 in.)

Inscription: lower left: F.V. Daellen

Nell and Robert Weidenhammer Fund 2014.58.1

ENTRY

This striking *vanitas* still-life painting juxtaposes scholarly and artistic achievements with reminders of the fleeting nature of human life. Daylight streaming into a dimly lit room from an open window at left highlights a marble tabletop adorned with a blue cloth. The cool light illuminates a large skull and femur on the table, softly modeling their smooth, curved shapes. Books and pamphlets of all sizes lie scattered beneath the bones. The books sit neatly shut, their leather covers glinting, while the pages of the pamphlets are curled and bent from frequent use. One of them is filled with small, illegible text. Smoke wafts upward from a just-extinguished candle with a warm ember still glowing at the tip of the wick.

This small panel is one of the finest known works by the Dutch painter François van Daellen. Van Daellen joined the Guild of Saint Luke in The Hague in 1636 after apprenticing with portraitist Joachim Ottensz Houckgeest (c. 1585–after 1644), but little else is known about his life. [1] In other works, such as the *vanitas* still life in Detroit [fig. 1], Van Daellen portrayed the same combination of objects on similarly sized panels, but with less compositional unity. He frequently varied the architectural settings of his scenes. Some show arrangements framed within illusionistic stone niches, while others offer glimpses of grander spaces with columns and courtyards. In this painting, Van Daellen has placed the still life behind an illusionistic archway, creating an intimate interior and suggesting the kind of secluded study in which this small painting may have hung. The bright highlights and streaming sunlight set before a dark background, as well as the distinctive vertical format, suggest a date around 1650.

Van Daellen probably derived his combination of books, skulls, femurs, candles, hourglasses, and other *vanitas* elements from the examples of artists working in Leiden in the 1630s, including Jan Davidsz de Heem (Dutch, 1606 - 1684) and Harmen Steenwijck (1612–1656). Leiden boasted an internationally renowned theological university, as well as a branch of the Plantin publishing house, both of which may have made books an especially evocative subject for that city's viewers. [2] Books, whose physical permanence can transcend the span of a human life, often suggest associations with scholarly and creative achievements. Some artists made this association explicit by including mottoes such as “non omnis moriar” (I shall not entirely die), “vita brevis ars longa” (life is short, art is long), or “finis coronat opus” (the end crowns the work) in their *vanitas* images. [3] These maxims underlined the Christian notion that, for one who has led a virtuous life, death is to be welcomed joyously rather than feared. Worn and tattered books could echo these positive connotations by evoking a life spent in worthwhile study rather than in the vain accumulation and display of worldly goods. An emblem from Geoffrey Whitney's *A Choice of Emblemes*, published in Leiden in 1586, advises, “The use, not the reading of books makes us wise” [fig. 2]. Similarly, in many book still lifes painters celebrated Dutch intellectual accomplishments by depicting specific title pages of plays or volumes of poetry, as in De Heem's *Books and Pamphlets* from 1638, in which Gerbrandt Adriaensz Bredero's *Treur-Spel van Rodd'rick ende Alphonsus* is prominent [fig. 3]. [4] No specific texts can be identified in the Gallery's small panel; the issues of scholarly achievement and human transience are broadly expressed rather than identified in a known publication.

Books, however, as with many objects in Dutch still lifes, did not have a single symbolic meaning. Finely bound publications could be seen as objects of vanity, and satirical emblems lambasted profligate book collectors as know-nothings who ostentatiously displayed their books without understanding their contents [fig. 4]. [5] In this painting the tattered pamphlets could also suggest how fugitive and vain are the accomplishments of man in the face of death. [6] As Geoffrey Whitney warns his readers, amassing huge numbers of books, and even perusing them at length, is a vain endeavor if the wisdom printed on the page is not applied to one's daily life. [7] Whitney paired this emblem with a second one that depicts a table bearing an hourglass, a candle, and an open tome [fig. 5]. [8] His explanatory text advises that idleness will consign one to oblivion, while studiousness will bring fame, and thus triumph over death.

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Van Daellen does not prescribe a specific reading of this *vanitas* still life by means of a painted motto, but the concentration of bright sunlight streaming into the study and the placement of the skull as though looking toward the open window evokes the promise of eternal life. One can easily imagine the owner of this small painting contemplating it in his own study, ruminating on his mortality and hopes for salvation.

Alexandra Libby

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 François van Daellen, *Vanitas Still Life*, 1692, oil on oak panel, Detroit Institute of Arts, Gift of Alfred Brod, Ltd. Detroit Institute of Arts / Bridgeman Images

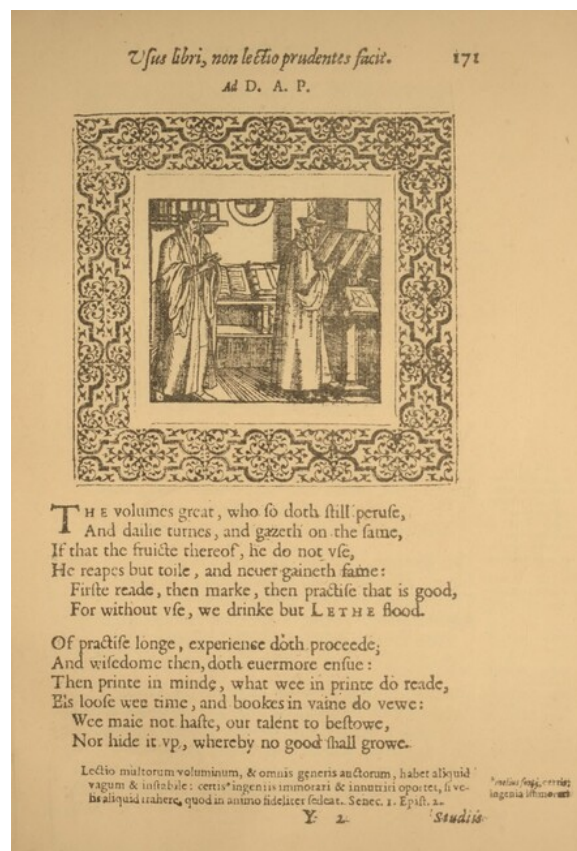


fig. 2 Geoffrey Whitney, "Usus, non lectio prudentis facit," from *A Choice of Emblemes* (Leiden, 1586), 171, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (90-B15020)



fig. 3 Jan Davidsz. de Heem, *Still Life with Books*, 1628, oil on panel, Fondation Custodia, Collection Frits Lugt, Acquired in 1918, inv. 183

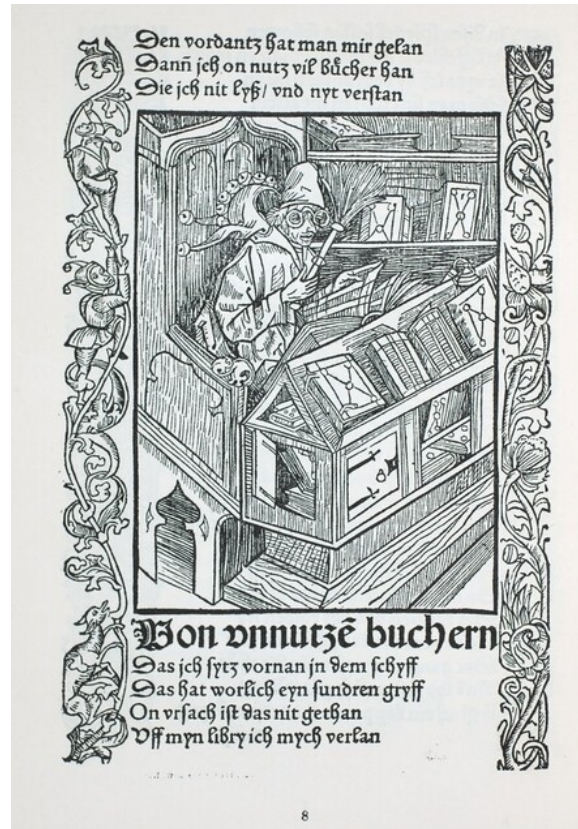


fig. 4 Sebastian Brant, *Das Narrenschiff*: Faksimile der Erstaussgabe von 1494 / Sebastian Brant; Mit einem Anhang enthaltend die Holzschnitte der folgenden Originalausgaben und solche der Locherschen Übersetzung, und einem Nachwort von Franz Schultz, Basel, 1494, National Gallery of Art Library, Washington, PT1509. N2 1913

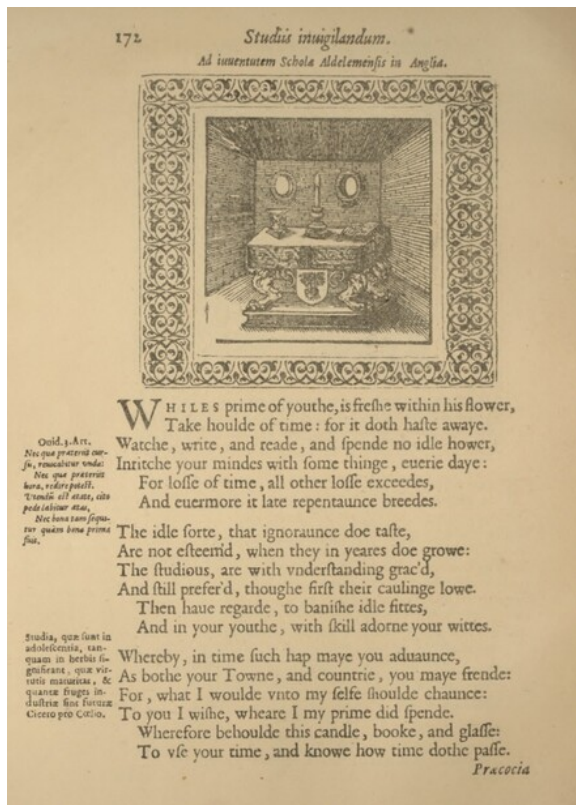


fig. 5 Geoffrey Whitney, "Studiis invigilandum," from *A Choice of Emblemes* (Leiden, 1586), 172, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (90-B15020)

NOTES

- [1] Frederik Daniel Otto Obreen, *Archief voor Nederlandsche kunstgeschiedenis*, vol. 4, (Rotterdam, 1881–1882), 32.
- [2] Alan Chong, and Wouter Kloek, *Still-Life Paintings from the Netherlands, 1550–1720* (Amsterdam and Cleveland, 1999), 168.
- [3] For example, see Hendrick Hondius I, *Vanitas* ("Finis Coronat Opus"), 1626, engraving, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam RP-P-1904-15; see Ruud Priem, *Vermeer, Rembrandt, and the Golden Age of Dutch Art: Masterpieces from the Rijksmuseum* (Vancouver, 2009), 48–49.
- [4] Alan Chong and Wouter Kloek, *Still-Life Paintings from the Netherlands*,

1550–1720 (Amsterdam and Cleveland, 1999), cat. 27.

- [5] Sebastian Brant, *Das Narrenschiff* (Basel, 1494; facsimile edition, Strasbourg, 1913), 8.
- [6] See Jan Bialostocki, “Books of Wisdom and Books of Vanity,” *In Memoriam: J. G. van Gelder, 1903–1980* (Utrecht, 1982), 37–67; Ann Jensen Adams and Sabine Schulze, eds., *Leselust: Niederländische Malerei von Rembrandt bis Vermeer* (Frankfurt am Main, 1993); Jochen Becker, “Das Buch im Stilleben, das Stilleben im Buch,” *Stilleben in Europa* (Munster, 1980), 448–478.
- [7] Geoffrey Whitney, *A Choice of Emblemes* (Leiden, 1586), 171; adapted from Johannes Sambucus, *Emblemata* (Antwerp, 1566), 56.
- [8] Geoffrey Whitney, *A Choice of Emblemes* (Leiden, 1586), 172; adapted from Hadrianus Junius, *Emblemata* (Antwerp, 1565), 11. Also see Ann Jensen Adams and Sabine Schulze, eds., *Leselust: Niederländische Malerei von Rembrandt bis Vermeer* (Frankfurt am Main, 1993), 34.
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TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The primary support is paper that measures 19.1 by 14.7 centimeters (7.5 by 5.75 in.) and is adhered to a thin wooden panel. A 0.6-centimeter-wide wooden veneer is glued around the edges of the secondary support to the height of the top layer of paper, possibly as an attempt to hide the edges of the paper and make the painting look as if it were directly on the panel. Two incisions have been made along the top and the bottom edges of the wooden veneer, likely meant to imitate panel joins.

The paper support is covered with an extremely thin, dark, blackish brown layer applied overall. Under magnification, this layer appears as small islands of paint particles that allow the paper support to show through. On top is a thin, transparent, reddish brown imprimatura, which extends throughout much of the composition but was not applied overall. The thickness and transparency of this layer vary throughout. Although infrared reflectography shows no signs of an underdrawing, it appears that the artist planned the composition partly with a thin, dark, blackish brown painted line, as well as leaving reserves in the reddish brown imprimatura for certain compositional elements. [1] The blackish brown painted line was applied on top of the thin blackish brown layer.

The paint medium is estimated to be oil, and the paint is delicately applied in thin glazes with little texture. As a result of thin, semitransparent or transparent paint

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layers, the luminosity of the underlying layers and the paper support play a large role in the overall composition.

The primary support and paint layers are in good condition, although there are several small areas in the top portion of the painting where the paper support is delaminating from its wooden secondary support. There is some inpainting in the dark background and in some of the shadows of the still-life elements. The varnish is thick, glossy, and mildly discolored.

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] Infrared reflectography was carried out using a Santa Barbara Focalplane InSb camera filtered to 1.1–1.4 microns (J filter).

PROVENANCE

Private collection, United States; (sale, Bonhams, New York, 6 November 2013, no. 15, as Attributed to Frans van Dalen); (Jack Kilgore & Co., Inc., New York); purchased 20 May 2014 by NGA.

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