

## Comparative Analysis of Ideologies behind the Depiction of Still Life in European Painting and Islamic Decoration: 16th - 18th Century

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### Abstract

Still life representation from sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, either in paintings or as decorative motifs, has diverse ideological approaches. This genre appears in two different geographical regions both within these centuries contemporary to each other: Europe and South Asia. The research focuses on the novel idea of creating an analogy between the connotations beheld by both European and Mughal still life objects in visual portrayal. Still life painting emerged with a religious and moral approach in sixteenth century Europe as a result of Protestant Reformation. While in South Asia during the Mughal rule, it originated as a foreign decorative element from Persia, where it had symbolic associations for the terrestrial and celestial life. The noble ideology of both the European and Islamic still life gradually shifted towards a materialistic approach, under the influence of respective patronage during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The lack of scholarship on the subject matter inspired this study, which will contribute to elaborate how this genre has evolved to embody diverse concepts. The analytical study on the representation of still life in both European painting and Islamic decoration under

the Mughals, based on the formal qualities and corresponding ideologies will be a valuable perspective for existing art historical scholarship. Not only will the research be beneficial in studying the genre but will also create a holistic view of the changing thought perspective globally during the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries.

**Key words:** Still life painting, Still life motifs, European painting, Mughal decoration, Vanitas paintings.

### Comparative Analysis of Ideologies behind the Depiction of Still Life in European Painting and Islamic Decoration: 16th - 18th Century

Still life is a genre of painting characterized by the portrayal of inanimate objects, including organic and inorganic things ranging from fruits and flowers to the items of everyday use like vases and tables. Although it has long been originated in ancient times, yet with a new religious fervor it emerged in the sixteenth century Europe. It was the situation in Northern Europe at that time which led to the recognition of still life as a significant genre.

European still life painting started with a subjective approach, as a device to convey moral values and noble messages in the sixteenth century. The Protestant Reformation led by Martin Luther (1483-1546) stimulated the artists to convey realities of the temporary life through the paintings, instead of being patronized by the church.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, still life was also a familiar genre to the Islamic world with diverse approaches. The empires of the Persians and the Mughals excelled in still life depiction as a decorative motif. This paper aims to trace the origin and development of still life painting in Europe from sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries and presents its comparison with the ideology behind representing still life in the Islamic world, under different patronages, particularly the Mughals.

Historically, still life painting has its significance since the ancient times. Egyptian tombs have paintings with varied objects which they considered would be needed by the deceased (Fig. 1).<sup>2</sup> Roman wall paintings, on the other hand, depict still life with fruit dishes as a portrayal of the elite life, pomp, and glory (Fig. 2). Roman still life painting has “few successors until the

seventeenth century Dutch studies of food and other inanimate objects.”<sup>3</sup> Depiction of the skull in Dutch paintings, previously initiated in Roman Civilization, is a representation of mortality.<sup>4</sup>



Figure 1. Still-Life Found in the Tomb of Menna, Egypt, 15<sup>th</sup> Century BCE. Source: “How Artists Have Kept Still Life Painting Alive over Thousands of Years,” accessed May 26, 2019, <https://mymodernmet.com/what-is-still-life-painting-definition/>.



Figure 2. *Still Life with Glass Bowl of Fruit and Vases*, Pompeii, 63-79 AD. Source: “How Artists Have Kept Still Life Painting Alive over Thousands of Years,” accessed May 26, 2019, <https://mymodernmet.com/what-is-still-life-painting-definition/>.

Paintings of late Medieval period influenced early Renaissance paintings that depicted figures set in an interior with still life objects. As Renaissance art flourished under the Church still life painting also portrayed the religious fervor of Renaissance period. *Annunciation Triptych* or *Merode Altarpiece* (1427–32) made in the workshop of Netherlandish artist Robert Campin is a Biblical subject where Gabriel is sent to give the news of the birth of Jesus to Virgin Mary (Fig. 3).<sup>5</sup> The scene takes place in the interior setting consisting of well executed still life. The focus is both on the incident and the surrounding objects. Similar interest in still life and figures is also observed in the painting of a Netherlandish artist, Petrus Christus, *A Goldsmith in his Shop* of 1449 (Fig. 4).<sup>6</sup> The mirror and scale in the goldsmith’s shop refer to the didactic nature of the things, mirror being reflective of the worldly affairs and the scale being just.



Figure 3. Workshop of Robert Campin, *Annunciation Triptych*, 1427–32, Oil on Oak, 64.5 x 117.8 cm. Source: “Annunciation Triptych,” accessed May 26, 2019, <https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/56.70/>.



Figure 4. Petrus Christus, *A Goldsmith in his Shop*, 1449, Oil on Oak, 98 x 85.2 cm.  
Source: "A Goldsmith in his Shop," accessed May 28, 2019,  
<https://www.metmuseum.org/en/art/collection/search/459052>.

Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* of 1498 is the portrayal of a Biblical subject with figures gathered on the supper table with the Christ in the middle (Fig. 5).<sup>7</sup> Although the main focus has been on the figures and incident taking place, yet the still life objects are not overlooked and rendered with required emphasis. The dishes on the table and the food has their significance because of the linkage with the subject matter. However, still life as a distinct subject received its importance with the religious wave which started as a result of Protestant Reformation in the early sixteenth century in Europe.<sup>8</sup>



Figure 5. Leonardo da Vinci, *Last Supper*, 1495-1498, Oil and Tempera on Plaster, 460 x 880 cm.  
Source: Kleiner, *Gardner's Art through the Ages*, 626.

Protestant Reformation was a protest against rigid practices, misuse of the authoritative power, and corruption of the Roman Catholic Church and pope. Europe was under the hold of the Church. However, Protestants regarded faith and religion as individual's own concern rather than linked with the Church, because according to them the Church's concerns have turned to be materialistic.<sup>9</sup> This reformation initiated with the thought of a German Augustinian monk Martin Luther, who challenged against the implementation of religious laws by the pope, in favor of the Bible itself. He convinced the public that salvation is to be earned with faith, instead of by paying to the

Church. The revolution against the Pope started by dispersion of the Bible, translated in German, thus in the reach of the common man, instead of only the Church. This reformation gradually travelled to the entire Europe including German states, Netherlands, Scandinavia, Scotland, and France.<sup>10</sup> Europe was then divided on the basis of beliefs; Northern part dominated by the Protestants, while Southern dominated by the Catholics.<sup>11</sup> At this time artists, influenced by the Protestant Reformation, arose to convey religious messages through their paintings, and the patronage of the Church in Northern Europe diminished.

Catholic Church's loss of power during the sixteenth century in Northern Europe led to a vacuum in patronization of religious art that resulted in reduced production of paintings. Moreover, religious paintings were declared to be idolatry by the Protestants, which on the other hand were a source of communication with God for the Catholics. Whereas, according to the Protestants such paintings were a source of distraction for the worshipers in their communication with God. For this reason, the churches in Northern Europe were barely decorated. However, Martin Luther allowed the paintings with no image of God. The subjects, then largely painted were historical, landscape, portraiture, genre scenes and still life, with chief focus on the moral values.<sup>12</sup>

Painters under the influence of Protestant Reformation employed still life subjects as portrayals of virtuous thoughts, worldly temperance, and vanity, thus having didactic nature. Hence, Vanitas paintings emerged in the mid-sixteenth century and evolved in Netherlands through the seventeenth century. In these paintings, still life dominates the figural, with the concealed message of vanity of the worldly life, worthlessness, mortality, and ultimate decay of every existent being.<sup>13</sup> Vanitas paintings consisted of decaying flowers, rotting fruit, snuffed candles, hourglass, watches, skull, bubbles, and objects of worldly pleasure to reflect the concept of life brevity. Coins, crowns, and gold jewelry stood for the fleeting worldly riches; weapons represented ephemeral worldly power, while books and musical instruments were the elements for momentary earthly pleasures. Slogan of the Protestant Reformation i.e. "Have Faith" well reflected in the art of that time.

An artist from Antwerp Quinten Massys, son of a blacksmith, makes a commentary in his painting *Money Changer and his Wife* of 1514 about the secular aspects of Netherlandish life which are responsible for the distraction in Christian religious activities (Fig. 6).<sup>14</sup> Through the depiction of carafe containing water, a candle, and church steeple reflected in the small round mirror, the artist intends to signify moral and spiritual values. However, the wife is distracted during her recitation of the prayer book, by her husband weighing money. The original frame of the painting which no longer survives was inscribed with a Biblical verse saying “Let the balance be just and the weights equal” (Lev. 19:36).<sup>15</sup>



Figure 6. Quinten Massys, *Money Changer and his Wife*, 1514, Oil on Wood, 71 x 68 cm.

Source: Kleiner, *Gardner's Art through the Ages*, 687.

This approach of depicting religious element within a genre scene is also found in the *Butcher's Stall* of 1551 by Pieter Aertsen from Amsterdam (Fig. 7).<sup>16</sup> The stall consisting of the variety of meat products in the foreground has three vistas in the background. One in the middle is Mary holding baby Christ in her arms, seated on a donkey, and giving charity to the poor man's son, depicting the religious tendency of the artist. A group of devotees in the left vista make their way towards the church which are vaguely visible. While being representative of charity, this painting also shows the worldly matters of drinking and greediness in the right vista with oyster and mussel shells all fallen on the ground.<sup>17</sup>



Figure 7. Pieter Aertsen, *Butcher's Stall*, 1551, Oil on Wood, 115.6 x 165 cm.

Source: Kleiner, *Gardner's Art through the Ages*, 689.

The invention of microscope in the last decade of the sixteenth century led to the realistic rendering of the still life objects.<sup>18</sup> As the subject caught fame and success, the Vanitas paintings began to lose the actual meaning. The didactic approach in the depiction of still life gradually shifted towards interest in realistic rendering, and later the artists started using this subject as decorative paintings, incorporating the elements of worldly pleasures like jewelry, musical instruments, pipes, and playing cards. Thus, losing the true essence found in Vanitas paintings.<sup>19</sup>

Another interesting aspect for artists in European still life painting emerged in the seventeenth century with the growth and export of flowers by the Dutch Republic.<sup>20</sup> *Flowers in a Wooden Vessel* of 1603 by Jan Brueghel the Elder is suggestive of this newly developed interest (Fig. 8).<sup>21</sup> Among the earliest still life with flowers in Europe, this painting, besides being a depiction of rich nature and its realistic rendering, is also symbolic of life's impermanence reflective in the fallen and wilting flowers also a few eaten up by the insects. The insects were to symbolize the end of every being as a natural process. Parallel to this during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in South Asia different stylized flowers in the same plant were being painted under Mughal patronage.



Figure 8. Jan Brueghel the Elder, *Flowers in a Wooden Vessel*, 1603, Oil on Wood, 98 x 73 cm.

Source: "Jan Brueghel the Elder," accessed June 2, 2019, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jan\\_Brueghel\\_the\\_Elder](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jan_Brueghel_the_Elder).



Figure 9. Fresco Painted Still Life, Shahi Hammam, Lahore, Mughal Era 1635.

Source: Picture by Sidra Liaqat.

European prints and paintings of Renaissance brought by the Jesuit missions as gifts to the Mughal court during Akbar's reign initiated the influence of

European subjects and styles on Mughal art.<sup>22</sup> Although the major influence on Mughal art was the International Timurid Style and then Safavid art. The ideological depiction of flowers and fruits as symbols of paradise on earth penetrated Mughal art after direct inspiration from Persian art.<sup>23</sup> The *guldastā* motif characterized by the same or various kinds of flowers springing from an ornamental vase and fruit dishes are the chief objects used as still life on the surface decoration of architectural monuments, textiles, jewelry, and weapons. Still life depiction in the Islamic art is characterized by a schematized composition presented as decorative element, where the flowers have naturalistic forms but do not accord with the “botanical accuracy” and have “unlifelike symmetrical formation” (Fig. 9).<sup>24</sup>

In Islamic art still life depiction has a different ideological approach as compared to the Vanitas still life of Europe. In Islamic architecture floral motifs with vase make their earlier appearance in the stylized mosaic surface decoration of Dome of the Rock of 691 at Jerusalem (Fig. 10).<sup>25</sup> Here vegetal scrolls, floral motifs, vases, and winged crowns also reflect the preceding “pre-Islamic civilization of the region, the Sasanian Empire, which the Arab armies had defeated.”<sup>26</sup>



Figure 10. Detail of the Interior Mosaics, Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, 691-692 CE.

Source:

<https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2012/byzantium-and-islam/blog/where-in-the-world/posts/dome-of-the-rock>.

Having influenced the succeeding architecture of Persia, this two-dimensional execution of decorative still life was mastered by the Timurids (1370–1507) who extensively used vase and flower motif. The use of flowering plant and cypress in the vase during the Timurid and then Safavid period (1501 - 1722) has a symbolic meaning (Figs. 11 and 12). Vase being the representation of earth and plant being the link between the earth and heaven, appears mostly in mosque architecture and on carpets. This motif also represents “a sign of infinity and endlessness” quite contrary to the Vanitas still life paintings of Europe.<sup>27</sup> The European still life paintings with flowers are highly drawn

towards realistic depiction unlike the Islamic ones that are mostly stylized and non-naturalistic.



Figure 11. Vase Design in the Tiling of the Great Mosque of Herat, Timurid era. Source: <http://article.sapub.org/10.5923.j.arts.20180801.02.html>.

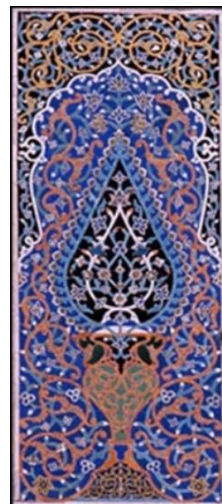


Figure 12. Vase Design in the Entrance to the Iwan of the Safavid Holy Shrine. Source: <http://article.sapub.org/10.5923.j.arts.20180801.02.html>.

Departure from the Vanity subject led the depiction of different European regional and seasonal flowers within the same vase showing the wealth of the patron. *Still Life with Flowers, Goblet, Dried Fruit, and Pretzels* of 1611 by Clara Peeters is also suggestive of the concern for the realistic depiction of flowers and fruits (Fig. 13). Called 'breakfast pieces,' Peeters' paintings present characteristic breakfast of the early seventeenth century with a close study of the surface texture of each object. Moving away from the vanity concept, Peeters' paintings anticipated the still life paintings of the Dutch artists to come.<sup>28</sup>



Figure 13. Clara Peeters, *Still Life with Flowers, Goblet, Dried Fruit, and Pretzels*, 1611, Oil on Panel, 52 x 73 cm. Source: Kleiner, *Gardner's Art through the Ages*, 736.

During the first quarter of seventeenth century the influence of still life painting had already started penetrating towards the South in Spain where the empire was against the Protestant Reformation. Although, it was a rare genre there but



The Dutch land itself was not quite productive, but it had succeeded in establishing a good trade on international level, due to which it enjoyed the import of exceptional and quality products from far-flung regions of the world. The merchant class then became a new patron of still life painting, reflecting their pride in worldly wealth and success. These paintings are “meticulously crafted images both scientific in their optical accuracy and poetic in their beauty and lyricism.”<sup>33</sup> However, despite of the influence of the merchant patrons, a Dutch artist Pieter Claesz maintains in his paintings the essence of the Vanitas paintings i.e. transience of life. *Still Life with a Skull and a Writing Quill* of 1628 and *Vanitas Still Life* of 1630s are among the examples (Figs. 17 and 18).<sup>34</sup> Representation of the impermanence of life is suggested by the skull with missing teeth, oil lamp, timepiece, fallen vine glass, and cracked walnut, all hinting on the notion that anything that has an existence has an end. However, on the contrary, the reflection of the artist’s self-portrait on the glass ball makes the artist immortal.<sup>35</sup>



Figure 17. Pieter Claesz, *Still Life with a Skull and a Writing Quill*, 1628, Oil on Wood, 24.1 x 35.9 cm.

Source: “Still Life with a Skull and a Writing Quill,” accessed June 4, 2019, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/435904>.



Figure 18. Pieter Claesz, *Vanitas Still Life*, 1630s, Oil on Panel, 35.6 x 59.7 cm.

Source: Kleiner, *Gardner’s Art through the Ages*, 748.

The Protestant approach changed with which initially the Vanitas still life had emerged. Therefore, gradually the ideology of still life painting shifted towards worldly luxury from brevity. The mortality and impermanence of the worldly life and objects began to be overlooked to portray a complete opposite

approach i.e., to depict the worldly pleasures. One of the reasons for this change was also that the artist had to comply with demands of the patron who in turn intended to show off his wealth. Moreover, these paintings also reflected the favorite pastime of the aristocratic class. Similar materialistic approach is also evident in the contemporary Mughal art of India. Emperor Jahangir (1605-1627) was quite inspired by the *Chini Khana* established by Safavid ruler Shah Abbas (1588-1629) in Ardabil. *Chini Khana*, named after China, was characterized by Chinese objects placed in niches of similar shapes as of the object (Fig. 19).<sup>36</sup> Jahangir, on the other hand, employed this idea in the surface decoration of Mughal monuments. Hence, the architectural surface has panels consisting of niches with still life design scheme such as the *guldestā* motif inlaid in stones imparting a grandiose impact. Jahangir, who had the wit of employing art as a tool of his ideology, utilized still life to display the wealth and abundance of his empire. Such panels can be observed at the tomb of Itimad-ud-Daula of 1628 at Agra where still life is mostly comprised of vases with or without flowers, and fruits in marble inlay and fresco painting (Figs. 20 and 21). Here the cypress tree also appears amongst the still life theme niche and cartouche patterns creating the concept of garden and partying (Fig. 22).<sup>37</sup> Similar imposition of superiority and wealth through the depiction of lavish still life is also observed during downfall of the Vanitas subject in Europe.



Figure 19. Niches in *Chini Khana*, Ardabil, Safavid Era.

Source: "Chini Khana," accessed July 17, 2019, <https://i.pinimg.com/originals/82/ca/da/82cada09ca7d9997f24cad8f41147242.jpg>.



Figure 20. Still Life Motifs in Marble Inlaid Panels on the Exterior of Itimad-ud-Daula's Tomb, Agra, 1628.

Source: Razvi, "The Mausoleum of Itimad-ud-Daula," <https://www.sahapedia.org/the-mausoleum-of-itimad-ud-daula>.



Figure 21. Still Life Motifs in Fresco Painted Panels in the Interior of Itimad-ud-Daula's Tomb, Agra, 1628.  
Source: <https://www.sahapedia.org/the-mausoleum-of-itimad-ud-daula>.



Figure 22. Cypress Tree and Still Life Motifs in Stone Inlaid Panels, Itimad-ud-Daula's Tomb, Agra, 1628.  
Source: Michell, *The Majesty of Mughal Decoration*, 182, 183.

To emphasize the concept of wealth and beauty, the European still life was presented with *chiaroscuro*: a characteristic feature of Baroque art in the seventeenth century. Aristocratic families as well as middle class started buying these exuberantly lavish artworks to celebrate their riches. Dutch artist Abraham van Beyeren's *Still Life with Lobster and Fruit* of 1650s is a similar depiction of the profusion of wealth, which is evident through the Chinese porcelain and profusely crowded table with food items reflecting in the glass and metal objects (Fig. 23).<sup>38</sup> The prime focus here is on the portrayal of pleasure and enjoyment in luxury, rather than on the vanity of life.



Figure 23. Abraham van Beyeren, *Still Life with Lobster and Fruit*, 1650s, Oil on Wood, 96.5 x 78.7 cm.  
Source: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/435663>.



Figure 24. Willem Kalf, *Still Life with a Late Ming Ginger Jar*, 1669, Oil on Canvas, 78.1 x 66 cm.  
Source: Kleiner, *Gardner's Art through the Ages*, 749.

Instead of the rotting fruits, fascination for eastern foods adds material approach in these paintings. Painted for the Dutch merchant class of seventeenth century, these paintings became a tool of self-projection of a wealthy patron. The artists started making use of objects that reflected the patron's societal status. *Still Life with a Late Ming Ginger Jar* of 1669 by Willem Kalf shows off the vast trade that Dutch merchants had then established (Fig. 24). Persian carpet, Chinese Ming jar, and Mediterranean lemon and orange are essentially painted as the celebration of this prosperous trade. However, addition of the watch is to be observed as it was a significant element of the Vanitas paintings.<sup>39</sup>

To further impose an impression of the rich class, expensive animals rare in Europe, like peacock, which is found in the Indian Subcontinent, were imported and painted along with the expensive fruits. A painting *Peacock* of 1683 by Dutch artist Melchior d' Hondecoeter is an example of this style (Fig. 25).<sup>40</sup>



Figure 25. Melchior d' Hondecoeter, *Peacock*, 1683, Oil on Canvas, 190.2 x 134.6 cm.  
Source: "Peacocks," accessed June 3, 2019,  
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436671>.



Figure 26. *Ustad Mansur, Jahangirshahi*, 1610, *Gadh Rang on Wasli*.  
Source: "Jahangirshahi," accessed July 17, 2019,  
<https://www.wikiart.org/en/ustad-mansur/jahangirshahi-1610>.

In the contemporary Mughal art, the extreme fondness of Emperor Jahangir for the flora and fauna is evident in the meticulous studies of animals and plants executed by his court painter *Ustad Mansur* (Fig. 26). These decorative motifs speak of Jahangir's great admiration for nature. At the tomb of Itimad-ud-

Daula, an interesting visual, in fresco painting, is of the Rohu fish composed in the form of vase placed on a dish with pomegranates, while flowers are projecting out of the vase (Fig. 27).<sup>41</sup> The depiction of Rohu fish in Mughal Empire has been a symbol of high authority, honor and power, which was conferred upon the royal dignitaries, as this was highly prized fish of River Ganges and was in great demand.<sup>42</sup>



Figure 27. Fresco Painted Still Life in a niche, Itimad-ud-Daula's Tomb, Agra, 1628. Source: Michell, *The Majesty of Mughal Decoration*, 186.

Jahangir's Tomb of 1637 at Shahdara, Lahore, patronized by Empress Nur Jahan, is also embellished with the *guldasta* as well as vegetal and still life motifs representing the grandeur of the deceased Emperor. Here marble inlay in red sandstone on the façade, fresco paintings of flowers in vases in the tomb interior and the fresco paintings of still life with fruits adorning walls of the cells surrounding the tomb chamber, reflect the blessings which are ultimately awaiting the Emperor in the hereafter, apart from being depictive of the profusion of Mughal wealth (Figs. 28-32).



Figure 28. Still Life Motifs, White Marble Inlaid in Red Sand Stone, Exterior of Jahangir's Tomb, Lahore, 1637. Source: Picture by Sidra Liaqat.



Figure 29. Still Life Motifs, Fresco Painted Panels, Interior of Jahangir's Tomb, Lahore, 1637. Source: Picture by Sidra Liaqat.



Figure 30. Still Life Motifs, Fresco Painted Panels, Interior of the cells in Jahangir's Tomb, Lahore, 1637.  
Source: Picture by Sidra Liaquat.



Figure 31. Still Life Motifs, Fresco Painted Panels, Interior of the cells in Jahangir's Tomb, Lahore, 1637.  
Source: Picture by Sidra Liaquat.



Figure 32. Still Life Motifs, Fresco Painted Panels, Interior of the cells in Jahangir's Tomb, Lahore, 1637.  
Source: Picture by Sidra Liaquat.

This ornamental device continued in Shah Jahan's (1628-1658) reign, where these motifs appear in the *pietra dura* and relief carving techniques on architectural surfaces, on textiles and carpets, on jewelry and even on weapons, as a reflection of the Empire's glory and splendor (Figs. 33-36).<sup>43</sup>



Figure 33. Balustrade Carved and Inlaid with Stones, interior of the Taj Mahal, Agra, 1648.  
Source: "The Mausoleum of the Taj Mahal," accessed July 24, 2019, <https://www.wonders-of-the-world.net/Taj-Mahal/Mausoleum-of-the-Taj-Mahal.php>.



Figure 34. Cotton Floor-spread with Still Life Motif, Mughal Era, 1630.  
Source: Michell, *The Majesty of Mughal Decoration*, 190, 191.



Figure 35. Mughal Pendant Inlaid with Stones.  
Source: "What did the Mughals Wear?" accessed July 24, 2019, <https://www.dkfindout.com/us/history/mughals/what-did-mughals-wear/>.



Figure 36. Mughal Dagger with a Carved Rock-Crystal Hilt, Inlaid with Gold, Rubies, and Emeralds, 2<sup>nd</sup> half of 17<sup>th</sup> Century.  
Source: "Mughal India, 1526-1707," accessed July 24, 2019, <https://www.davidmus.dk/en/collections/islamic/dynasties/mughal-india/art/33-1979>.

Still life as a decorative device also makes its appearance in Mughal mosque architecture. The Wazir Khan Mosque of 1635 at Lahore presents vases with flowers in tile mosaics and fresco paintings (Figs. 37 and 38). Not only does the representation of Chinese porcelain depict Mughal possession of valued objects from China but it also displays their royal eminence and lavish lifestyles. Similar approach is also observed in a European still life by Willem Kalf entitled *Still Life with a Late Ming Ginger Jar* of 1669 (Fig. 24).



Figure 37. Tile Mosaic with *Guldasta* Motif, Wazir Khan Mosque, Lahore, Mughal Era, 1635.  
Source: Michell, *The Majesty of Mughal Decoration*, 185.



Figure 38. Fresco Painted *Guldasta* Motif with Chinese Porcelain, Wazir Khan Mosque, Lahore, Mughal Era, 1635.  
Source: Picture by Sidra Liaqat.

In Taj Mahal of 1643 at Agra, the upper tomb chamber is exuberantly embellished with various kinds of flowers springing out of decorative vases carved out of white marble, suggestive of the significant rank of the Empress buried in this Tomb (Fig. 39).<sup>44</sup> A relief carving in the Khaas Mahal of 1648 at Delhi, depicts the “scales of justice” symbolizing “the righteous law dispensed throughout the Mughal Empire during Shah Jahan’s reign” (Fig. 40).<sup>45</sup> In the preceding centuries, the scale in European paintings also embodied justice (Figs. 4 and 6).



Figure 39. *Guldasta* Motif Carved in White Marble, Interior of the Upper Tomb Chamber at Taj Mahal, Agra, 1648.

Source: Michell, *The Majesty of Mughal Decoration*, 2.



Figure 41. Still Life and Floral Motifs on the vault *muqarnas*, Badshahi Mosque, Lahore, 1673.

Source: Michell, *The Majesty of Mughal Decoration*, 92.



Figure 40. Scale of Justice Carved in White Marble, Khaas Mahal, Delhi, 1648.

Source: Michell, *The Majesty of Mughal Decoration*, 106, 107.

Mughal Badshahi Mosque of 1673 at Lahore, patronized by Emperor Aurangzeb Alamgir (1658-1707), has *guldastā* motifs on ceiling *muqarnas* (Fig. 41).<sup>46</sup> The lavish fresco decoration imposes royal grandeur on the Muslim worshippers, ensuring the strength of Islam.

Moreover, *dastarkhawān* (eatables laid down on floor by hand on a cloth-mat) still life in Mughal miniatures are also noteworthy still life examples. These cuisine objects display royal class' status consciousness who nevertheless were patronizing these paintings. In the miniature *Prince Feasting on a Balcony*, painted between late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, gold plated semiprecious stone embedded objects, Chinese porcelain, dishes with a variety of fruits, and intricately decorated carpets are all suggestive of the profusion of wealth and luxury which the royal class enjoyed and showed off (Figs. 42 and 43).<sup>47</sup> This tradition of imposing their hegemony and affluence through art was carried on by the successive reigns of India.

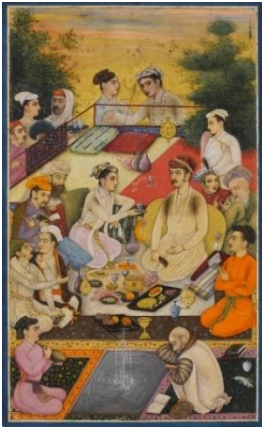


Figure 42. *Prince Feasting on a Balcony*, Mughal, late 17<sup>th</sup> – early 18<sup>th</sup> Century, Ink, Opaque Watercolor, and Gold on Paper, 24.1 x 15.7 cm.

Source:

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/448487>.



Figure 43. Detail of *Prince Feasting on a Balcony*, Mughal, late 17<sup>th</sup> – early 18<sup>th</sup> Century, Ink, Opaque Watercolor, and Gold on Paper, 24.1 x 15.7 cm.

Source:

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/448487>.

Still life paintings of eighteenth-century Europe similarly carried connotations of prevailing ideologies and concepts. Rachel Ruysch's *Flower Still Life* after 1700, rather than depicting the Dutch still life trend in vogue displays personal inspiration from her scientist father's collection of plants and insects (Fig. 44).<sup>48</sup> Though the studies of flowers of different seasons have been combined, yet they form a well composed arrangement aesthetically, thus showing an increasing interest of the patron in the ornamental aspects rather than brevity of life.



Figure 44. Rachel Ruysch, *Flower Still Life*, after 1700, Oil on Canvas, 75.6 x 60.7 cm.

Source: Kleiner, *Gardner's Art through the Ages*, 749.



Figure 45. Jan van Huysum, *Vase with Flowers*, 1715, Oil on Panel, 79.1 x 60.6 cm.

Source: <https://www.dulwichpicturegallery.org.uk/explore-the-collection/101-150/vase-with-flowers-1/>.

Bird's nest, small boy running, flowers in their full bloom, and the darks behind in Jan van Huysum's *Vase with Flowers* of 1715 are though reflective of the cycle of life from birth till death, yet the microscopic details of the flower petals with raindrops and insects suggest the prime focus to be on the aesthetic delicacy (Figs. 45 and 46).<sup>49</sup>

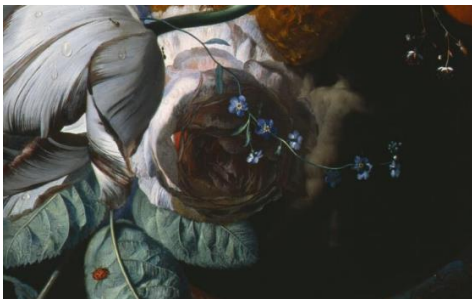


Figure 46. Jan van Huysum, detail of *Vase with Flowers*, 1715, Oil on Panel, 79.1 x 60.6 cm.

Source:

<https://www.dulwichpicturegallery.org.uk/explore-the-collection/101-150/vase-with-flowers-1/>.

The European approach towards still life painting kept changing with the passage of time. From interest in life's transience to the celebration of wealth, highlighted through chiaroscuro, these Baroque still life paintings gradually turned to be decorative with an intention to compose well-placed objects in Rococo period. *The Afternoon Meal* of 1772 by Spanish artist Luis Meléndez reveals artificiality in the placement of the fruits and dishes (Fig. 47).<sup>50</sup> Placed against a landscape, these objects are more suggestive of the concern for an aesthetically appealing arrangement, while absolutely shifting from the ideology

of sixteenth century European still life. This shift continued time after time giving a whole new concept to nineteenth century still life painting where the formal approach began to originate with Impressionism and then with Cezanne who laid the foundations for the Modern art.



Figure 47. Luis Meléndez, *The Afternoon Meal*, 1772, Oil on Canvas, 105.4 x 153.7 cm.  
Source: "The Afternoon Meal," accessed June 4, 2019, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/437053>.

### Conclusion

After flourishing of Vanitas still life paintings in the seventeenth century, approach towards the depiction of vanity subject gradually began to turn towards depiction of worldly blessings and wealth with fruits, flowers, and material objects, adding the concept of superiority. The religious enthusiasm of the artist gradually decreased. A gradual shift in the approach and meaning permitted the same objects to portray the very opposite of the vanity of life and hence the subject lost its actual meaning. The still life paintings then became a means to show luxuries of the high class. The eighteenth century still life with a decorative appeal hence paved the way for further changes in the approach towards formal rendering of still life in the nineteenth century.

In Islamic art, however, still life with floral motif appears with symbolic connotations exhibiting the connection between the terrestrial and celestial life in Persian architectural decoration. Whereas, in seventeenth century South Asia, an inspiration for displaying still life objects is obtained from Shah Abbas I court, but then nurtured under the patronage of the nature loving Emperor Jahangir, whose admiration for various art forms developed a new Mughal artistic vocabulary for the execution of still life motifs. This culminated in the use of still life as a decorative motif aiming to impart the grandeur and supremacy over the class being ruled, the approach which similarly became the cause for decline of the Vanitas still life paintings in Europe.

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