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Olivia Carlson, UROP Project, May 2019

Microcosms: An Examination of Insects in 17th-Century Dutch Still Lifes

Introduction

There are many 17th-century Dutch flower still life paintings, and if you pass by one quickly during a visit at a museum, you may see nothing more than a bouquet of arranged flowers. But if you stop at one and look long enough, you will find visual treats that would have been missed when only glancing at the piece. Maybe you'd see the careful composition, or perhaps a shell or a figurine. Most often, however, you will discover insects; some are hidden in the bouquet, and some are very prominently displayed on top of the flowers or on a ledge. The inclusion of insects in Dutch still lifes is quite common, which provokes the question: why did painters include insects in their flower still life paintings? There are many interpretations: insects contribute to religious symbolism,¹ or they were chosen for their visual complexity or their rarity.² Yet the insects included were common to the Netherlands and one could argue that all the elements in floral compositions were chosen for complexity. Instead, as I will show in this study, insects were used by the painters to create microcosmic worlds that represented the painter's ideals and Dutch identity.

In the past, insects have been examined within the context of symbolism in still lifes, visual analysis with other types of still lifes, and insects in art from other periods. Here, I continue that examination but have focused in particular on two still life specialists, Rachel Ruysch and Maria van Oosterwijck. I chose these artists because of an interest in expanding research done on women artists, and because both artists included insects in their works. After

¹ Jordi Vigué, *Great Women Masters of Art*, (New York: Watson-Guption, 2002), 130.

² Janice Neri, *The Insect and the Image: Visualizing Nature in Early Modern Europe, 1500-1700*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 78.

collecting reasonable quality images of works, the images were analyzed, and the information about the work (such as title, date, size, as well as other data such as the number of insects, type of insect, etc) was put into a spreadsheet. This granted the ability to sort the works by size, insect, or any other qualitative or quantitative information available. Having the capability to sort electronically in different ways illuminated patterns or emphases that would have been considerably more difficult to ascertain by hand. This is related to digital humanities work and led to new ways of looking at these works that listing by hand would have taken far longer.³ These results helped to generate my own interpretation of why insects are placed within Dutch flower still lifes.

Background on Still Lifes and Insects

Netherlandish still life painting had its beginnings in the 1550s, but it wasn't until the 17th century that they became truly popular.⁴ Still lifes are paintings of mostly inanimate objects, although my paper will be looking at the animate parts of the still lifes. They included sub-genres such as flower paintings, laid tables, dead game and fish, and offices, studios, or cabinets. These paintings were historically low on the traditional Western hierarchy of art (the order being from top to bottom: history painting, portraiture, genre painting, landscapes, animal paintings, then still lifes).⁵ This hierarchy was based on the notion that man was the measure of all things and still lifes were at the bottom of the hierarchy because they did not depict important human subject matter.⁶ But despite being so low on the scale, they brought success to many an artist and

³ Johanna Drucker, "Is there a "Digital" Art History?" In *Visual Resources: An International Journal of Documentation*, 2013, 5-13.

⁴ Alan Chong and Wouter Kloek, *Still-life Paintings from the Netherlands, 1550-1720*, (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 1999), 8.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Tate. "Genres – Art Term." Tate, Tate Museum, 2018, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/g/genres>.

were popular with the burgeoning middle class in the Dutch seventeenth century. This middle class was important and relatively new to economic systems in Europe. They bought still life paintings for a variety of potential reasons: as a means of decoration, an interest in illusionary or life-like images, or to ‘have’ a painted version of a thing that otherwise would have been financially beyond their grasp.⁷

Dutch floral paintings, the sub-genre explored in this paper, are still lifes that focus on bouquets of flowers. They are carefully arranged; so carefully crafted that they look like perfectly plausible bouquets arranged for a wealthy patron, but they are not. These bouquets are in fact, fictional; blooms included in a single bouquet, for example, a tulip and a rose, would not have bloomed at the same time in nature. The flower piece could be seen, like other still life genres, as reminders of the brevity of life, emblems of the power of art, or as moral messages from God.⁸ They could also have been viewed as depictions of luxury commodities; the blooms illustrated within the paintings were often far too expensive for the middle class, so they were purchased as paintings instead, as a representation of wealth.⁹

This middle class developed during the Dutch Golden Age, a period of time when the Netherlands was expanding in trade, economy, military, and art. The Golden Age also affected the natural sciences, including the field of entomology (the study of insects). Humans had been interested in insects long before the Golden Age, however. The earliest study of insects was by Aristotle, who around 300 BCE began orderly studies of biology. There was little study of insects between Aristotle and the Renaissance; other religions in Europe that rose after Aristotle,

⁷ John Loughman, “The Market for Netherlandish Still Lifes, 1600-1720,” In *Still-life Paintings from the Netherlands, 1550-1720*, Chong and Kloek, 88.

⁸ Paul Taylor, *Dutch Flower Painting, 1600-1720*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 77.

⁹ Alan Chong and Wouter Kloek, *Still-life Paintings*, 8.

such as Judaism and Christianity, implied that nature was subservient to man, an idea that remained the dominant way of thinking about insects until the Renaissance.¹⁰ The scientific revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries rejected previous notions of superstitions and magic within biology but did not reject the ideological bias of religion that nature was subservient to man.¹¹ In the 17th and 18th centuries, entomology advanced as a field of study within zoology following the invention and use of the microscope in the Netherlands; the microscope permitted the observation of insects and their parts.¹² The advancement in entomology prompted the notion that “God’s creation [of insects was] no longer an emblematic web of symbolic references and religious meanings but a divine place of engineering, referring to and proving the existence of God, the almighty architect.”¹³

Discoveries of insects were further enhanced by the flow of exotic plants and animals into Europe from other countries; the merchant culture of the Netherlands lent itself particularly well to this development.¹⁴ The influx of collectables likely brought about the first entomological collections that were established in the early seventeenth century. These insect collections were included in the cabinets of “curiosities” which led to the first modern natural history museum.¹⁵ Cabinets of curiosity continued to grow and led to the first classification system of insects in 1705 by John Ray.¹⁶ During this time, collections of insects were now the most spectacular part

¹⁰ *Encyclopedia of Insects*, edited by Vincent H. Resh, et al., (Elsevier Science & Technology, 2009), ProQuest Ebook Central, 450, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/morrismn-ebooks/detail.action?docID=452854>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Eric Jorink and Bart Ramakers, "Undivided Territory: 'Art' and 'science' in the Early Modern Netherlands," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek (NKJ)/Netherlands Yearbook for History of Art* 61 (2011): 17.

¹⁴ *Encyclopedia of Insects*, 450.

¹⁵ Ibid., 681.

¹⁶ Ibid.

of the well-filled cabinet.¹⁷ Frederik Ruysch (Rachel Ruysch's father) possessed a cabinet of curiosity himself and held a particularly large insect collection, which was even visited by Maria Sibylla Merian, an important entomologist and entomological illustrator.¹⁸ Frederik Ruysch was also an anatomist (known at the time as an anatomicus) and an amateur painter. He was criticized for using hands both in surgical work and also in painting. A rebuttal from another individual argued that an anatomicus should be able to paint, and a painter should know anatomy; each skill would help the other.¹⁹

In truth, Ruysch was not alone; the boundaries between art and science in the early modern era were fluid.²⁰ The cabinets of curiosity reflected those intersections; they showed an interplay of words and things, nature and art, and expertise and technique.²¹ Because of this unusual convergence of ideas, and perhaps for other reasons, artistic women of the Netherlands were remarkably able to satisfy their creative curiosity, to invent, discover, and represent aspects of their worlds that were meaningful to them, and to receive social (and at times financial) acknowledgment.²² These women were able to operate in a broadly creative social environment that valued and validated their achievements according to standards that they accepted.²³ Women were also particularly drawn to the new and rapidly developing field of the natural sciences as an arena for visual exploration and representation.²⁴ This is what may have led to artists like Rachel Ruysch and Maria van Oosterwijck to specialize in this field.

¹⁷ Eric Jorink, *Reading the Book of Nature in the Dutch Golden Age, 1575-1715*, Brill's Studies in Intellectual History; v. 191, (Leiden, the Netherlands; Boston: Brill, 2010), 239.

¹⁸ Neri, 160.

¹⁹ Jorink and Ramakers, "Undivided Territory," 7.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

²² Elizabeth Alice Honig, "The Art of Being "Artistic": Dutch Women's Creative Practices in the 17th Century," *Woman's Art Journal* 22, no. 2 (2001): 36.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 35

Background of Artists

During the seventeenth century many women and men practiced the arts of botanical illustration or flower painting but only two women -- Maria van Oosterwijck (1630-1693) and Rachel Ruysch (1664-1750) -- appear to have had a steady and prestigious clientele for their paintings.²⁵ Women have, through the centuries, often been associated with the “low” genre of flower-painting, a link attributed to their lack of access to the education and institutions that produced and valued “higher” genres like history painting.²⁶ But van Oosterwijck and Ruysch were able to gain international stature for their work, and their paintings in the “low” genre brought them much success. They also had fortuitous backgrounds; both were born to well-off families and lived in the Netherlands where it seems that factors such as social class and other aspects of family background frequently had a more determinant effect on women’s production than their gender did.²⁷ Most Dutch women of the 17th century made art as “amateurs;” women whose families came from the world of consumers, such as city officials, wealthy merchants, members of the legal and medical professionals, and nobility.²⁸ Van Oosterwijck and Ruysch’s familial ties belonged to this world of buyers, and they were successfully able to negotiate between feminine “amateurism” and what was considered practical “masculine” commercialism, to become renowned in their time.

Van Oosterwijck’s family background was a religious one; she was the daughter of a Dutch Reformed minister.²⁹ Likely because of this, biblical allusions are often a prominent

²⁵ Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*, 5th ed. World of Art, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012), 131.

²⁶ Honig, 35.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

²⁹ Chadwick, 137.

aspect of her paintings.³⁰ She lived and worked in Delft, where she was the only female professional painter of the century, though not a member of the guild there; she also lived in Amsterdam and The Hague.³¹ Maria van Oosterwijck often depicted symbols of *vanitas* (the transience of life) in her paintings. Other allegorical elements or symbolism she included in still lifes are sunflowers (faith), butterflies (resurrection), skulls (memento mori), and more. She also included insects in her compositions; of the 13 works I studied that had at least one insect, on average, there were 2.69 insects in a single work.³² To paint her complex compositions and achieve maximum naturalistic effects, van Oosterwijck worked slowly; there are only about two dozen works attributed to her hand today.³³ This partly accounts for the fewer number of identified works compared to Ruysch, for whom there are about one hundred paintings extant. Van Oosterwijck usually kept her paintings in a smaller format, approximately 58.2 by 49.4 cm (or 22.9 by 19.4 inches) on average, but often feel larger than their size due to how much space each bloom is given in a painting.

Ruysch's background was significantly different; her father was a professor of botany and anatomy who contributed substantially to the natural sciences in the late seventeenth century³⁴ and who (as noted) was also an amateur painter.³⁵ Due to her scientific background, Ruysch did not use religious imagery in her compositions; rather, her works have been interpreted as

³⁰ Julia Kathleen Dabbs, *Life Stories of Women Artists, 1550-1800: An Anthology*, (Farnham, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 160.

³¹ Chadwick, 137.

³² This number of works is the amount I have found that were of reasonable quality to analyze.

³³ "Oosterwyck, Maria van (1630–1693)," *Women in World History: A Biographical Encyclopedia*, *Encyclopedia.com*, (April 27, 2019).

³⁴ Harold J. Cook, "Death Defied: The Anatomy Lessons of Frederick Ruysch," *Bmgn-The Low Countries Historical Review* 126, no. 4 (2011): 2.

³⁵ Alan Chong, Wouter Kloek, and Betsy Wieseman, "Catalogue," in *Still-life Paintings from the Netherlands, 1550-1720*, Chong and Kloek, 281.

“allegories of real subjects.”³⁶ She was a student of Willem van Aelst (who at one point courted Maria van Oosterwijck), although she was able to develop a style unique from him; she developed further the “spiral” composition and included richer colors.³⁷ Her painting technique is very fine and based almost entirely on oil glazing; despite this lengthy way of working, Ruysch was able to produce about one hundred paintings during a sixty-five-year artistic career and while also having ten children. She lived and worked in Amsterdam for almost her whole life³⁸ where she received an unusually steady and prestigious clientele.³⁹ Her clientele included elector Palatine Johann Wilhelm, for whom she was a court painter;⁴⁰ that position meant that the artist was successful and had a steady form of patronage.⁴¹

Project Description

I started my project by gathering images of paintings by van Oosterwijck and Ruysch from databases like ARTSTOR, but most of the imagery I found came from internet searches on Ruysch or van Oosterwijck that led me to websites with decent resolution images. Some of these websites were “Art UK,” the “Web Gallery of Art,” or “Wikimedia Commons”. I was also able to gather images from digital museum collections and books on Dutch still lifes such as *Still Life Painting from the Netherlands 1550-1720* by Alan Chong and Wouter Kloek, and *Dutch Flower Painting* by Paul Taylor.

³⁶ Vigué, 129.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Marianne Berardi, “Van Oosterwijck, Maria”, in *Dictionary of Women Artists*, ed. Delia Gaze, vol. 2, (London; Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1997), 1209.

³⁹ Chadwick, 131.

⁴⁰ Alan Chong, Wouter Kloek, and Betsy Wieseman, “Catalogue,” In *Still-life Paintings from the Netherlands, 1550-1720*, Chong and Kloek, 279.

⁴¹ Dabbs, 265.

After I found an image that had a high enough resolution to analyze, I put the image into a spreadsheet along with all the information I could gather about the work: title, date, dimensions, collection, and link to where I found the image. When I had finished gathering images I thought would be useful (about 14 in total for van Oosterwijck and 34 for Ruysch) I began looking closely at each work for the number of insects, what kind they were and where they were located, the composition of the piece, the insects' prominence within the composition, and any repetition that occurred regarding insects. If I was unfamiliar with an insect, I used online insect digital image collections to identify the species. After analyzing each piece and recording the found information on the spreadsheet I was able to sort columns of information in interesting ways to reveal new or compelling information using the metadata I gathered on the works.

While I was working on the spreadsheet I undertook research on the historical background concerning 17th-century entomology, Dutch still life paintings, and the lives of the artists. I looked for research materials in a variety of ways including WorldCat, Briggs Library system, and multiple databases such as JSTOR, Academic Search Premier, and the Bibliography of the History of Art. I gathered background information on insects, including the recent invention of the microscope in the 17th century, the history of entomology, and insect images through the ages. This background was intertwined with research on Dutch still lifes of the time, including information on the contemporary merchant culture, middle-class wealth, and cabinets of curiosities and other collections. I also completed research on the background of van Oosterwijck and Ruysch including their familial relations. This proved to be challenging, however, as there is not much written on van Oosterwijck and Ruysch, even though they were

well-known in their time. The lack of information on these artists has happened consistently with other women artists as well.

Spreadsheet Results ⁴²

For the most part, I analyzed this spreadsheet of works by sorting columns. Sorting by date to see any developments in works seemed most logical, so I began with that. However, I was only able to find thirteen works by Maria van Oosterwijck that had insects in them and their range was from 1668 to 1689 - not enough to sort by date and conclusively prove any kind of development. Another way to sort was by the number of insects, which gave more interesting results. The most insects in one work were six, and the least was zero (there was only one still life with zero insects). Van Oosterwijck made more paintings with just one insect than Ruysch did and averaged fewer insects per image than Ruysch. Interestingly, for all of those paintings with just one insect, that insect was a type of butterfly. Out of the thirteen paintings that contained at least one insect, the average for van Oosterwijck was 2.69 insects per work.

By cataloging the information of the works in this way and sorting them, I was able to see patterns more easily. For example, van Oosterwijck used the *Vanessa atalanta* (common name Red Admiral) butterfly frequently; of the 13 works with insects, 11 contained the *Vanessa atalanta* butterfly. Every still life with insects contained at least one butterfly, in contrast with Ruysch who did not always include a butterfly in her still lifes. As well as differences, both artists had some commonalities in terms of insects. In particular, the *Vanessa atalanta* butterfly was popular; in addition to van Oosterwijck's frequent inclusion (noted above) Ruysch included

⁴² This spreadsheet can be viewed here:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1qWEdD3JYzL7SFwvyUVRzeuLxRrtUYsuoOSBR7LfhEBO/edit?usp=sharing>

the butterfly about 13 times out of 30 works. Both artists also included butterflies from the *Pieris* genus of butterflies, the *Aglais io* butterfly (common name Peacock butterfly), a species of katydid (which was likely a *Tettigonia viridissima*), and Stag beetles (likely *Lucanus cervus*, the Flying Deer beetle).

Ruysch's works were quite different from van Oosterwijck's in both numbers and insects. I was able to find about 31 images that had high enough resolution for analyzing, compared to the 13 works for van Oosterwijck. Ruysch's range of paintings spanned from ca. 1682 to ca. 1720. Although the range was longer than for van Oosterwijck, I still did not find anything conclusive when sorting by date. Sorting by insect again gave more interesting results; the most insects in one piece was 17 (and this number was gained by only counting a group of ants as a single insect). The average number of insects was 5.57 per image. Like van Oosterwijck, when there was only one insect within the work, that insect was a butterfly. But unlike van Oosterwijck, there were few circumstances where there was only a single insect. Ruysch almost always included a variety of insect species and genera⁴³ within a single piece. And on average, the more insects in a work, the more variety of insects would be seen. That isn't to say, however, that Ruysch did not repeat insects; some common insects in her works are the bumblebee, dragonfly, damselfly, katydid, beetles, and butterflies.

While both artists depicted insects with a scientific accuracy (like Dutch still life painters before and after them),⁴⁴ it was in Ruysch's works that the insects are depicted with scientific

⁴³ Within taxonomic hierarchy, *species* is a group of living organisms consisting of similar individuals capable of exchanging genes or interbreeding, and *genera* (the plural form of *genus*) is a principal taxonomic category that ranks above species and below family, and is denoted by a capitalized Latin name. (Google dictionary)
So with the *Vanessa atalanta* butterfly, *Vanessa* is the genus, and *atalanta* is the species.

⁴⁴ Here is an in-progress list of 17th century still life painters that included insects in at least one of their still lifes, ranging from 1603 to 1726, that I have identified: Jan Brueghel the Elder, Roelandt Savery, Jacques de Gheyn II,

ideas in mind. The use of the microscope and changing ideas in science and entomology of the time seemed to shape the way insects were depicted. Rather than painting insects as they looked when they were pinned, Ruysch depicted insects more often as they were when they were alive. For example, van Oosterwijck often painted beetles with their wings out even while they were sitting on flowers; in contrast, Ruysch painted them with their wings down when they were resting, as they would do when they were alive. And instead of using insects for religious symbolic means, Ruysch painted insects with no apparent meaning other than scientific depiction, reflecting the change of thought on how insects were regarded. It was also at this time⁴⁵ that another Dutch woman artist, Maria Sibylla Merian, was making strides in the depiction and study of insects.⁴⁶ Merian lived from 1647 to 1717, exactly in between van Oosterwijck, who lived from 1630 to 1693, and Ruysch, who lived from 1664 to 1750. These developments perhaps led to Ruysch making changes in the depiction of insects within flower still lifes; i.e. more insects, more variety of insects, showing them at different angles and with wings at different positions, to name a few.

Selection of Pieces

Below I have analyzed several pieces by van Oosterwijck and Ruysch. These were chosen based on insects included in the piece that were of interest and for possible exceptional elements. They were also selected for their resolution and accessibility to the image. They are:

Bosschaert the Elder, Bosschaert, Hans Bollongier, Jan Davidsz de Heem, Abraham Mignon, Willem van Aelst, Otto Marseus van Schrieck, and Jan van Huysum.

⁴⁵ Ella Reitsma and Sandrine A. Ulenberg, *Maria Sibylla Merian & Daughters: Women of Art and Science*, (Amsterdam: Rembrandt House Museum, 2008), 11.

⁴⁶ Merian's book was published in German in 1679; it was titled, *Der Raupen wunderbare Verwandlung, und sonderbare Blumennahrung*, also known as Caterpillar Book I.

Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase and *Flower Still Life* by van Oosterwijck, and *Flowers in a Glass Vase* and *Still Life of Flowers* by Ruysch. The pieces can be found on the spreadsheet as well.

Analysis 1

Artist: Maria van Oosterwijck Title: *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase* Date: ca. 1670's
Collection: Denver Art Museum Spreadsheet Number: 4 Image: [here](#)

In this piece there is a glass vase on a marble stone ledge, and on the edge of the stone is the artist's - van Oosterwijck's - signature. The work has four insects in total: *Vanessa atalanta* butterfly, 2 beetles, and a larvae-like insect on a leaf. *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase*, like most Dutch flower still lifes, has an assortment of types of flowers that would not have bloomed at the same time in nature - roses, peonies, carnations, irises, queen anne's lace, petunias, tulips, sunflowers, and more. The largest flower is the sunflower which faces down, looking upon the rest of the composition. Sunflowers within Dutch still lifes and in other imagery were symbolic of unswerving devotion, especially to God,⁴⁷ probably based on the sunflower's heliotropism (the diurnal motion of plant parts in response to the direction of the sun).⁴⁸ Below the sunflower is a large variegated tulip, a symbol of the Dutch golden age when tulips, which are not native to the Netherlands, were being bought and sold at enormous prices and quantities during the "Tulip Mania" period in the Netherlands.⁴⁹ The history of tulips in the Netherlands and of variegated tulips is an interesting subject and history in its own right. This Tulip Mania was made possible by the merchant culture of the Netherlands.

⁴⁷ Hagop S Atamian, et. al., 2016, "Circadian Regulation of Sunflower Heliotropism, Floral Orientation, and Pollinator Visits," *Science* 353 (6299): 587–90, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aaf9793>.

⁴⁸ James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, 2nd ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2008), 293.

⁴⁹ Peter M. Garber, "Famous First Bubbles," *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 4, 1990, no. 2: 35-5, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1942889>.

The insects in this composition are not immediately eye-catching but do have some prominence within the piece: the largest beetle, likely a *Polyphylla fullo* beetle, with its wings extended, looks like it has just landed on or is about to take flight from, the marble ledge. The light source glares off of its shiny exoskeleton, drawing the viewer's focus to the lower right darker corner of the painting. The smaller beetle stands in stark contrast to the white peony it rests on, especially with its placement at the center of the piece. The smallest insect, which sits in the cupped part of a large green leaf on the left-hand side of the piece, is a mystery to me and it seemingly does little for the composition because of its size; despite that, it still provides naturalism and invites the viewer for a closer look. The last insect is the *Vanessa atalanta* butterfly (the common name for it is the Red Admiral or Red Admirable). It is sitting within the middle left side flowers, hanging upside down and clinging to a leaf. The *Vanessa atalanta* is in almost every work by van Oosterwijck that I have found (in fact, all except one). This butterfly is also common in other still life painters' works as well, perhaps due to the butterfly's large distribution across Europe.⁵⁰ For van Oosterwijck, the daughter of a minister and who also often includes *vanitas* symbols in her works, the butterfly probably represented the resurrected human soul. This connection is based on the butterfly's metamorphosis of caterpillar (life), chrysalis (death), and butterfly (resurrection).

There could be further religious meaning within the work; it is dark behind the sunflower, the leaf has chew marks, and there are thistles on that side of the bouquet which could mean corruption lurks where there is a lack of devotion. Since the butterfly is under the sunflower there could be a suggestion that the viewer should keep their faith strong. It's possible that these

⁵⁰ Distribution: <https://en.butterflycorner.net/Vanessa-atalanta-Red-Admiral-Admiral-Le-Vulcain.417.0.html>

suggestions are nothing more than that - if the painters of still lifes wanted you to see a moral, they would usually not be at all subtle about it.⁵¹ But given the importance of symbolism in other seventeenth-century Dutch art, one could conceivably see symbolism in small insects and their placement within the composition.

Analysis 2

Artist: Maria van Oosterwijck Title: *Flower Still Life* Date: 1669
Collection: Cincinnati Art Museum Spreadsheet Number: 7 Image: [here](#)

In this painting there are six insects dispersed evenly within the composition. Like the previous work, this bouquet sits in a glass vase on a marble or other type of stone ledge. The ledge is signed with the artist's name and date of creation. In this composition the flowers are large and the bouquet takes up nearly the whole canvas. There is a similarity in the flower choice to the last piece: variegated tulips, feathered carnation, a pink rose, and a centered white peony that again holds an insect, but instead of a small beetle, it is a large dragonfly. I have not been able to find any symbolism on dragonflies in the seventeenth century but it is interesting that van Oosterwijck chose to make that insect so prominent and include such detail in painting it -- the detail of the wings is especially awesome.

In the rest of the composition, too, the insects are as large or larger than some flowers, in contrast to *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase*. The *Vanessa atalanta* butterfly in this piece is at rest in the right corner, showing its well-known inner wing markings. There is a second butterfly (perhaps in the *Fritillary* family) settled atop the sprig of lily of the valley between the two large tulips. Lilies often were a symbol of purity or chastity in Dutch still lifes and in other works that included symbolism. The butterfly could be placed in that spot to bring attention to the lily.

⁵¹ Taylor, 46.

Other insects include a spider (which is no longer classified as such, but was thought to be an insect at the time), a red-abdomen wasp, and a fly or beetle; all are smaller and within the lower middle/left of the piece. While the large insects, such as the butterfly and dragonfly, grab your attention, these smaller insects provide slow discovery and points of interest for the viewer.

Analysis 3

Artist: Rachel Ruysch Title: *Flowers in a Glass Vase* Date: 1704

Collection: Detroit Institute of Arts Spreadsheet Number: 32 Image: [here](#)

This painting by Ruysch contains nineteen insects total, significantly more than the largest number of insects included in any one piece by van Oosterwijck. The insects vary greatly in size, shape, and type and are placed in seemingly random locations. However, each insect is placed carefully, just like the flowers included; some flowers face up or down, and are sometimes facing away from the viewer. The compositional shape (bunched with loose parts hanging out) lends itself well for insects to be both hidden and conspicuous.

The most obvious insect is the cream-spotted tiger moth (scientific name *Epicallia villica*) in front of the bottom ledge, which contains Ruysch's signature and date, much like van Oosterwijck's and other still life painters' works. Also similar to van Oosterwijck's work is Ruysch's use of a bouquet with flowers that would not have bloomed in the same season: lilies, poppies, roses, irises, carnations, tulips, morning glories, and daisies to name some of the flowers included in the piece. There is even a late summer peach resting on the stone ledge. But instead of neatly contained flowers that generally stay out of each other's way as van Oosterwijck paints, Ruysch's foliage topples over itself with many tendrils hanging out of the main bouquet.

The insects included are the same way -- they are dispersed evenly throughout the bouquet and there are many types: long-horned beetles, several moths, bumblebees, wasps, a

caterpillar, several small ants, and a damselfly. Having an even dispersal allows for the slow, rewarding process of discovery for the attentive viewer. Not all insects are hard to find, however; the tiger moth, for example, is upfront and obvious, hanging there on a thin stalk of wheat. A long-horned beetle sits on the ledge facing the glass vase; its color imitates the leaves above it and its antennae repeat the long hanging tendrils of the bouquet, but it stands out starkly from the bouquet because of the light shining upon it. A bumblebee sits on the edge of a red lily petal in the center of the composition -- Ruysch includes bumblebees frequently in her pieces and often places them on plain petals of flowers so they are easily seen. Even now as I write this paper, I am noticing new insects that I did not see my first or second time analyzing the work. There is a butterfly hanging upside down on a striped carnation on the right side that I had previously overlooked.

Ruysch depicted insects with scientific accuracy; this accuracy makes insects easy to identify.⁵² She was also interested in the scientific value of insects, as well as the insect's abilities to reference the infinite wisdom of God. Because of these emphases the insects may less likely to contribute to religious symbolism than do van Oosterwijck's insects.⁵³ Ruysch's insects serve to guide your eye around the work and act as surrogate sensors for the viewers. They explore the bouquet and feel the surface of various flora and view the bouquet from different places. The tiger moth, for example, is hanging from a stalk of wheat that is bending from the weight. Following that stalk up, a wasp is resting on the back of a droplet covered rose; going further up brings the viewer's eyes to the bumblebee who perhaps just visited the lily for pollen. If we keep

⁵² The insects and flowers depicted in Dutch still life painters' works are so detailed and accurately painted that one can often easily identify the genus of the flora or fauna, if not the species.

⁵³ George E Ball, *The Art of Insect Illustration and Threads of Entomological History*, (Edmonton: University of Alberta Libraries, 2005), 15.

going up to the right, we pass a small beetle and a wasp next to three ants on a white lily. Those lead us to the top of an iris where a worm inches its way along the edge of the iris, a white moth hangs on the stem of a tulip, and a bee rides the edge of the tulip petal. Lastly, a blue damselfly hovers in the air at the top right corner, completing the composition of *Flowers in a Glass Vase*.

Analysis 4

Artist: Rachel Ruysch Title: *Still-Life of Flowers* Date: 1710
Collection: Private Collection Spreadsheet Number: 6 Image: [here](#)

This Ruysch work is in what I call a loop-de-loop composition (more formally known as “spiral”). Tendrils of flora hang down in one direction and the flora sticking out of the top face the opposite direction. The bottom tendril in *Still-Life of Flowers* is a sunflower, facing the viewer; sitting on the sunflower is a bumblebee. Rather than the sunflower primarily being a religious symbol as it is in van Oosterwijck’s works, the flower, with its petals nearly kissing the edge of the canvas, acts as the starting point of viewing the work, and the bee inside creates a version of *trompe l’oeil*.⁵⁴

Besides the bee, there are several other insects within the piece: a butterfly on the right (perhaps a *Polyommatus* blue butterfly), a butterfly above the sunflower (belonging to the *Pieris* butterfly family), a beetle resting on a hydrangea, a fly on a leaf, a wasp or related insect to the right of the largest tulip, a *Tettigonia viridissima* katydid, and a *Vanessa atalanta* butterfly. The insects in the composition (particularly the large ones) are an important aspect of the work;

⁵⁴ *trompe l’oeil* is a visual illusion in art, especially as used to trick the eye into perceiving a painted detail as a three-dimensional object. (Encyclopedia of Art) This had been practiced long before Ruysch, and was introduced to several genres of painting. Giorgio Vasari, an Italian painter and writer, wrote of a young Giotto who painted a fly on his master’s painting; the *trompe l’oeil* was so effective that the master repeatedly tried to brush the fly away.

without them, the piece would not seem as alive or real, and it would lack interesting details, and details are what still lifes are all about.

Furthermore, insects represented the modernity of the time in which Ruysch lived -- of merchant trade, the invention and use of microscopes, and of insect collections in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century. These still lifes with insects were representing the Netherlands in its modern ways; a wide variety of flowers, some introduced from different parts of the world represented the amount of trade happening. However, in contrast to this, the insects depicted in still lifes were from the Northern Netherlands area. The use of local insects could represent a pride in Dutch identity. Or, maybe adding an element -- local insects -- that viewers may recognize solidifies the flowers' realism; that the flowers are really in a the viewer's home, where those insects would exist at the same time.

Conclusion

Different art historians have offered a variety of possible explanations as to why van Oosterwijck and Ruysch added insects to their still lifes. It is likely that the artist's distinct backgrounds led to some differences in reasons. Some art historians, such as Jordi Vigué have suggested that insects in van Oosterwijck's works are an allegory of evil.⁵⁵ It is also possible that with their particularly short life span, insects especially emphasized the transience of life. Prior to a renaissance of study in the field of entomology in the middle of the 17th century, insects were considered destroyers of beauty and "thus symbolized death [within van Oosterwijck's paintings]."⁵⁶ Other scholars have proposed additional alternative reasons: insects occupy a position between living and not living, or, insects are a means of controlling an otherwise chaotic natural world by fixing features and movements.⁵⁷

All of these interpretations are meritable and interesting; however, I argue that the insects are included for a different reason. They turn the paintings into microcosms -- miniature worlds of their own. Insects help display and support this 'microcosm' by offering "surprise and delight to the attentive viewer"⁵⁸ and act as surrogates for viewers, exploring the bouquet, feeling the surfaces and observing the still life from different angles.⁵⁹ Insects support whatever world the artist was trying to create; for van Oosterwijck that meant supporting allegories and religious symbolism and for Ruysch it meant supporting scientific ideas. Insects were the best way to suggest microcosms because they were relevant for the time, given the cultural interest in the

⁵⁵ Vigué, 109.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 130.

⁵⁷ Neri, 80.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 78.

⁵⁹ Alan Chong, "Contained Under the Name of Still Life: The Associations of Still Life Paintings," In *Still-life Paintings from the Netherlands, 1550-1720*, Chong and Kloek, 28.

natural world, they represented Dutch identity (hence, using local and common insects), there were many different types (which lend themselves to good composition structures), and they necessitated fine detailed work, much like the rest of the still life.

The results of looking at these still lifes in this way are preliminary, in a sense, because of the current lack of numerous high-quality digital images. There are many extant works by Ruysch (about one hundred) but I was only able to find about thirty by the artist that were high enough quality to analyze. Introducing more and better images of both artist's works will increase the number of works that could be analyzed, and thus yield more interesting and accurate results when completing research and analyzing patterns within still life paintings. This could reveal further curious repetitions of insect species, provide more examples of how insects guide the viewer's vision, or further reveal why insects are included in still life paintings. It is my hope that my research and preliminary study have helped set up a possible model for future studies of Dutch 17th-century still life paintings.

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