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DUTCH FLORAL STILL LIFE: SYMBOLS OF MEMENTO MORI

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The study presents an analysis of the figurative structure of Jan Davids de Heem's still life "Flowers in a Glass Vase", created in 1683/4. The symbolic meaning of flowers in the painting of Dutch still life of the XVI century in the context of the theme of Memento mori is revealed.

Key words: *floral Dutch still life, painting, Memento mori, symbolism of flowers.*

INTRODUCTION

The flowering of still life as an independent genre occurred in the Netherlands in the early 16th century. Floral still lifes were especially in demand in the early 1600s and by their exquisite execution, subjects and symbolism were addressed to the educated public [1]. However, the main idea of such compositions is a reminder of the transience of earthly life, which invariably ends in death. In art, the theme of Death is timeless and takes centre stage during epidemics and wars, which accentuates the relevance of this study.

PURPOSE

The aim of the research is to analyse the figurative structure of Dutch floral still life in the context of the theme of Memento mori (on the example of Jan Davids de Heem's work "Flowers in a Glass Vase", created in 1683/4).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For artists who created floral still lifes, the source of inspiration was often the Old Testament. Some quotations were interpreted literally, according to the worldview of the time: "Man, who is born of woman, Is short-lived and full of turmoil. He comes out like a flower and withers; he flees like a shadow and continues not" [2]. The key role in such allegorical still lifes depicting luxurious bouquets is given to the symbolism of flowers. Books of emblems, popular in Europe in the XVI-XVII centuries, which described the symbolism of various flowers and plants, helped to understand the multi-layered content of floral compositions. The main theme of such works is Memento mori. One of the still lifes on this theme is Jan Davids de Hem's composition "Flowers in a Glass Vase", created in the early XVII century (Figure 1.).

The figurative structure of the still life is revealed through the binary opposition between Life and Death: in the luxurious bouquet, fresh buds blossoming nearby withering and drooping flowers. Using the language of symbols, the artist reminds about the transience of youth and beauty, senseless waste (the image of lush roses, peonies, tulips, the cultivation of which was considered in Holland one of the most fussy and expensive occupations); points to the brevity of life (wilted withering buds,



broken stems, withered pea pod); warns against sin (snail - a symbol of the soul of a sinner). At the same time, Jan Davids de Hem depicts symbols representing the immortality of the soul (bread spikelets, butterflies) reminds of the possibility of salvation and the atoning sacrifice of Christ (red poppy, which has a dual interpretation depending on the context and can denote death). The path to salvation and absolution through virtue is symbolised by blue iris, and modesty and purity are personified by wildflowers, violets, forget-me-nots, and blossoming tree branches [3].



Fig.1. Jan Davidsz de Heem. Flowers in a glass vase. 1606-1683/4.
The Fitzwilliam Museum

CONCLUSIONS

The basis of the figurative structure of Dutch floral still lifes is allegory. The key technique of embodiment of the Memento mori theme in floral still lifes is allegory, the use of symbols pointing to the frailty of earthly existence, the transience of youth and beauty, and the fact that man's hope for life after death can only be placed on God.

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ПОНОМАРЕНКО М. ГОЛЛАНДСЬКИЙ ФЛОРИСТИЧНИЙ НАТЮРМОРТ: СИМВОЛИ MEMENTO MORI

У дослідженні представлено аналіз образної структури натюрморту Яна Давідса де Хеема «Квіти у скляній вазі», створеного у 1683/4 році. Розкрито символічне значення квітів у живописі нідерландського натюрморту XVI століття в контексті теми Memento mori.

Ключові слова: квітковий нідерландський натюрморт, живопис, Memento mori, символіка квітів.