

PAN

AMSTERDAM

JONATHAN F. KUGEL'S CABINET DE CURIOSITÉS CONTEMPORAIN



Nature Morte & Vanitas

STILL LIFE WITH VANITY

German School, circa 1740 - 1760

oil on canvas – 60 1/2 x 47 1/8 in. – 153.8 x 119.7 cm.

inscribed (center right, on sheet of paper): ' Der Prediger Salomo / mi i kapitel v 2 / Es ist alles ganz eitel, sprach / der Prediger, es ist alles ganz eitel ze.'

"The Preacher Solomon / in the 1st chapter, verse 2 / Everything is completely vain, said / the Preacher, everything is completely vain."

PROVENANCE:

- Christie's Old masters paintings – 26 - 27 Janvier 2021, lot 65

- Collection: MR. & MRS. JOHN H. GUTFREUND 834 FIFTH AVENUE - Bukowski's, Stockholm, 24-26 November 1993, lot 341

"Solomon's wealth surpassed the wealth of all the kings of the earth." (1 Kings 10:23)

This biblical quote encapsulates the essence of vanitas paintings, a genre that flourished in the 16th and 17th centuries and has endured to this day. While the passage might initially evoke images of

opulent treasures, the true message lies in Solomon's wisdom: recognizing the spiritual and religious as far more valuable than worldly possessions.

The inscription,

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directly quoting Ecclesiastes, announces the central theme of this imposing 18th-century German Memento Mori painting.

A skeletal figure, adorned in a velvet and fur cape, sits amidst a lavish array of objects: books, vessels, silverware, porcelain, military paraphernalia, flags, musical and scientific instruments, and caskets filled with gold and jewelry. These symbols of human achievement, wealth, and knowledge are juxtaposed with more poignant symbols of mortality, such as a clock, sundials, and wilting flowers.

The composition's ascending structure from bottom left to top right reinforces the message: Only the spiritual counts; the rest is vanity. The tone is further enhanced by the gothic architectural backdrop.

More discreet symbols include roses (often associated with love and beauty but also vanity and fleeting pleasures), snakes escaping from a book (symbolizing knowledge, temptation, or sinful curiosity), and candle (representing the human soul and the transience of life). Jewelry symbolizes the temporal nature of beauty and the sin of narcissism, while earthly riches, though important in life, hold little meaning once life is over.

The paintings (of King Solomon ?) on the left and right sides of the composition add another layer of symbolism. The triumphant King (on the left) might represent the pinnacle of human achievement, while the painting of the judgment of a poor man (top right) could symbolize the ultimate reckoning and emphasis on the fear of God and spiritual redemption is a key element of its message.

German vanitas paintings, while sharing common themes with their Northern counterparts, often incorporate unique elements reflecting the region's cultural and religious landscape. The Black Death and the Reformation and Counter- Reformation influenced their development, as people sought solace in the afterlife and emphasized the spiritual over the material. A notable feature of German vanitas paintings is the frequent inclusion of the full skeleton, a nod to the Danse Macabre.

The painting suggests that while earthly pursuits may seem important, they are ultimately meaningless compared to the eternal consequences of our actions. Yet, it is also a testament to the beauty and artistry of the period, as well as the celebration of wealth and success.

Condition Report:

Re-canvased

Old restoration

Modern frame