

Decoding Baroque Still-Life

Capstone Project

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Abstract

If one takes art as a form of communication or a visual language, it could be stated that it holds a profound place in human life, because of its ability to convey and also reveal complex ideas. Interpretations of art are different, including that of still-life objects, because besides including aesthetic quality and simplicity, still-life art can be perceived as an unexpected treasure. Unfortunately, Still-life paintings were considered less prestigious before the 17th century, because the highest ranks were given to historical paintings - that is, Biblical and mythical scenes, as those were considered more morally and intellectually significant (Scheinder, 2003). Because still life paintings included still objects, such as flowers, fruits, and everyday items, and did not include complex ideas, the painters as well, were underestimated.

“Seen as a decorative type of painting, and hence being condemned to the lowest rank in the hierarchy of genres, the still life’s depth is often missed” (Esparza, 2023).

When we think of still-life, our initial thoughts might often exclude human presence. Unlike literature, where readers can easily envision human characters, or landscape paintings where artists can mentally incorporate human figures, still-life compositions seem devoid of human interaction. This absence of human presence may initially lead to the perception that still-life subjects are overly simple.

In the selection and arrangements of objects, the artist's mood is reflected in the artwork, as still-life painters are not only concerned with the appearance, instead, they are concerned in what is contained in it. Nothing can be apparent to an eye, and sometimes it takes time to grasp where the artist's inspiration comes from, and most of the time, it can come from the most basic days of human life. My main objective is to reveal the hidden within baroque symbolism with a particular focus on the still-life genre. It is important to emphasize the significance of common subjects artists used in still-life, and the differences of combinations they create. In this way, it would be possible to get in dialogue with baroque with its visual language, recognize the common details and elements from still-life artworks, and understand the significance of appreciating visual communication and Baroque symbolism.

The Deeper Significance of Still Life

“One man's indulgence is another's necessity, while a third is wholly unconcerned about that object's economic status. And who, after all, decides what is or is not a luxury?” (Honig, 2020)

Still life can be perceived as a “beneficial” form of art - no need to hire models, no need to travel and spend money creating art. For instance, during the 1930s, Edward Weston - a poor photographer, decided to create still-life photographs by using simple objects, such as fruits and vegetables (Ackley, 1982). However, besides finding simple answers to the question whether still life is a result of poorness, dullness, or simply lack of ideas, it is necessary to acknowledge

one thing - besides its “dullness”, still life has always represented significance. It has represented more than the objects it includes. Not only it depends on the different representations which the viewer might have while enjoying the still life art, but it also transfers everything about the artist - the author of the paintings. One should take into account these questions - Which objects the artists found significant to use? Why? What ideas did they aim to transfer with that, and does it really have to do with the objects they included?

Still-life remains open to interpretation and appreciation despite its underrated status, which is often attributed to its lack of overt religious or historical themes. While, as mentioned above, some may perceive still-life as devoid of deep symbolism due to its lifelessness, and as Bryson (1990) mentioned, the art turns out to be underappreciated, though actually encompasses a rich variety of interconnected subjects, though sometimes not apparent to the eye. By examining it through the lens of common subject interpretations of its time, we can uncover its precise meaning and significance.

The word “still-life” was first used during the mid-17th century and we first can see it in Dutch inventories. The term was still competing with other terms that were considered as variants at that time. For instance - “Fruytage” - (a fruit piece), “banquet” (banquet), and “ontbijt” (breakfast) (Scheinder, 2003). Later, the Dutch word “stilleven”, that meant inanimate object (or, immobile nature), was first used by German artist and art historian Sandart, and roughly a century later, Du Pont de Nemours used the phrase “inanimate things”, and the descriptions went on. A Year later, Jean-Baptiste Descamps also referred to the phrase as “immobile objects” (Scheinder, 2003).

The “Baroque Drama”

Baroque was previously defined as an expression of emotional intensity and psychological imbalance, seen as a reaction to the societal upheaval between 1590 and 1640. Similarly, six years later, Chaunu, a historian affiliated with *Annales*, described the baroque era in terms of tragic conflict, attributing it to the decline of economic prosperity and unexpectedly, a "crisis of consciousness" that results from challenges to traditional cosmological beliefs posed by natural philosophers (Menashe, 1965).

Lebeque, a scholar who influenced Mousnier - a french historian of an early modern period, perceived the Baroque style as a way of representing freedom from constraints and irrationality. He also identified a "Baroque crisis" differently from Mousnier, and referred to the fading of the style in France between 1635 and 1640, paving the way for classicism. This viewpoint is still repeated by other scholars, often examining different countries, who have similarly observed a notable shift in style around the mid-seventeenth century. For instance, Clark (1922), on page 248 of his book “The Seventeenth Century” , emphasized the emergence of clarity, harmony, and purity in literature, accompanied by a decrease in "vulgarity and violence," while painters shifted towards more restrained compositions, moving away from grandiosity.

However, it is essential to note that Baroque is a rich word with lots of associations. Extremely rich, dramatic, and luxurious era full of emotions. Baroque still life can be easily distinguished when the key characteristics are identified - the technique of dramatic lighting (chiaroscuro and tenebrism), the very different and dynamic arrangements in the composition, textures, details, as well as luxurious objects. All of these describe what Baroque means - it

comes from the Portuguese word “Barocco”, which means “The raw pearl”. In other words, the irregular, extravagant, bizarre, complex (Zamora, 2010).

This simple, yet complex interpretation itself requires a deep understanding of symbolism. And that is precisely the essence of art - its intricate nature, not easily accessible or universally understood, allowing for personal interpretations. This is why still life often gets underrated - it's perceived as lacking depth or a narrative element. Despite this perception, creating a detailed still life artwork involves careful consideration of composition, color usage, and textures. Over time, new artistic trends emerge, leading to fluctuations in genres, as is natural in the evolution of art. However, many contemporary artists endeavor to keep the still-life genre relevant by drawing inspiration from, creating, or even reinterpreting early still-life masterpieces.

It's really important to focus on still life during the Baroque period because it stood out on its own and was closely connected to the spirit of that time. It didn't just show emotions and subjects, but also captured important aspects of history and culture, being a ground for artists to experiment and transfer the ideas of the time to the canvas. During the Baroque period, the genre of still life gained popularity. In places such as the Dutch Republic, where religious subjects were less favored due to the beliefs of Protestant, artists started to prefer genres such as landscape painting, portraiture, and still life (Simpson, 2020). Baroque still life painting thrived during this time, with artists creating detailed compositions that captured the beauty of everyday objects. One reason for the rise of still life painting in the Baroque era was its versatility and accessibility (Sagal, 2021). However, what sets still life apart in this period is its reflection of

broader cultural and intellectual trends. Many still life artworks integrated symbolic elements to convey moral or philosophical concepts such as reflections on life's fleetingness, the emptiness of worldly endeavors and the inevitability of death. And these concepts aligned with the Baroque focus on striking contrasts of light and shadow, the interplay between life and death, and the goal of awakening powerful emotional responses from viewers (Bruno, 2006).

The Concept of Vanitas: “Memento Mori”

The Baroque era, especially in still-life paintings, often focuses on how short life is, reflecting the concerns of Dutch Calvinist society about their wealth. The basic idea is that Dutch Calvinist society felt uneasy about their wealth because it was so obvious. Simon Schama expanded on this idea and gave a wider view of Dutch culture, however, this notion was already there in earlier studies, especially in how they looked at still life paintings, but his important work expands on this idea, giving a broader view of Dutch culture (Schama, 1982). But this idea was already present in earlier studies, especially when looking at still life paintings.

Iconography tends to criticize material desires, while cultural criticism deals with how market values affect daily life. As a result, the quintessential Dutch still life emerges as the vanitas, which symbolizes the fleeting nature of worldly pursuits. Through the vanitas, people are encouraged to focus on spiritual matters rather than temporary desires. It serves as a lesson against putting too much value on earthly possessions, reminding us of our mortality and the importance of spiritual growth. Ultimately, the vanitas embodies the negotiation and criticism seen in Dutch Baroque still life, encouraging reflection on the impermanence of life and the significance of spiritual devotion over material concerns (Honig, 1998).

Mystical Metaphors: From Object to Symbol

“Nothing can be apparent to an eye, and sometimes it takes time to grasp where the artist's inspiration comes from, and most of the time, it can come from the most basic days of human life.”

In the path of analyzing Dutch still life paintings, the relationship between material objects and their economic value as commodities is becoming evident. However, it is equally imperative to acknowledge that not all objects within these compositions are confined to the realm of commercial exchange. As Honig (1998) mentions, objects have their lives, and their biographies. She brings an example of items, like seashells or letters, that might unexpectedly acquire commodity status, while commercially crafted goods can assume alternative roles, transferring their exchange value to a secondary consideration (Honig, 1998). While historians often scrutinize Dutch still lifes through the lens of commodification, a more nuanced inquiry revolves around the contextual prioritization of economic aspects within these compositions. Frequently, the answer deviates from a sole focus on economic exchange. Dutch still life art embodies multifaceted layers of symbolism, cultural context, and aesthetic expression, inviting scholarly interpretations that extend beyond economic paradigms.

The Baroque Era was a period of religious transformation, with the Catholic Church responding to the Protestant Reformation by prompting artists to convey religious messages through their creations. In contrast, the middle class showcased its affluence by acquiring and exhibiting artworks. And these privately owned pieces, akin to religious art, aimed not only to

entertain but also to educate. Moreover, art served as a vehicle for elevating the artist's standing, as they utilized allegorical figures to showcase their proficiency in their chosen medium.

In an era when literacy rates were low, complex concepts could be transferred through evocative or thought-provoking visuals. Even for those literate individuals, the images/artworks of allegories served to reinforce the conveyed messages, and sometimes these underlying themes originated from the artist themselves, while in other instances, patrons commissioned specific messages. Therefore, to comprehend the conveyed ideas and the manner in which the imagery and iconography in Baroque paintings conveyed such intricate concepts, a nuanced understanding of Baroque iconography and symbolism is indispensable (Zucker, 2013). Traditionally, still life artworks also abound with veiled symbolism - that is, a visual language employing ordinary objects to convey deeper meanings. And of course, among the most renowned examples of still life paintings are the meticulously detailed and symbolically rich works of the Baroque Era.



Still-Life: Basket of Fruit (1599-1600) by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio

Fruits have been among the most commonly depicted subjects in still-life paintings throughout history. Beyond providing artists with a rich array of colors and textures, a basket of fruit holds various religious and mythical connotations. For example in Christianity, apples symbolize temptation and knowledge, referencing Eve's consumption of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. Grapes are associated with Bacchus, the Roman god of wine, and evoke themes of pleasure and indulgence. Pomegranates, linked to Persephone, the Greek goddess of spring and the underworld, carry their own symbolic significance. So, the following artwork - Caravaggio's "Still Life: Basket of Fruit", exemplifies this tradition, presenting a seemingly ordinary basket of fruit with striking realism. And upon closer inspection, viewers may discern signs of decay and infestation, potentially reflecting the artist's commentary on the tumultuous

religious landscape of Italy during the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation (Kramar; Filipova, 2012).



Still-Life with a Skull (1671) by Philippe de Champaigne

The painting "Still-Life with a Skull" by de Champaigne falls into the category of Vanitas - a genre intended to prompt contemplation on the fleeting nature of life and the superficiality of worldly pursuits. In the composition, symbolic objects convey profound messages. For instance, a skull signifies the inevitability of death, a tulip symbolizes fleeting glory, and an hourglass represents the relentless passage of time. And these objects are carefully arranged on a stone block, with the skull positioned centrally, compelling the viewer to confront their mortality. Next to the skull, a tulip sits in a small bowl of water, embodying the transient nature of beauty, from bud to brief bloom to eventual decay. Meanwhile, the hourglass serves as a reminder of the finite

nature of time, each grain of sand marking the irreversible march towards oblivion. (Dictionary by Hall; Clark, 1974).



Still-Life with Venetian glass, Römer wine glass and a candle (1607) by Clara Peeters

In vanitas still life paintings, candles are frequently featured to symbolize the inexorable passage of time—diminishing as they burn until they are extinguished entirely. A burning candle signifies illumination, truth, and knowledge, while a spent one represents loss and mortality. Within Christianity, a brightly burning candle often conveys faith in God or the presence of Christ's light. Occasionally, oil lamps or other recognizable sources of light are employed to symbolize the human soul. In Peeters' "Still-Life with Venetian Glass, Roemer Wine Glass, and a Candle," each object is meticulously rendered, showcasing her technical prowess and adeptness

at capturing light and reflection. The Venetian glass, adorned with intricate designs and delicate contours, commands attention with its elegance. The Roemer wine glass, characterized by its green hue and rounded shape, provides visual contrast and intrigue. Positioned in the background, the candle emits a soft, ambient glow that enhances the painting's atmosphere. Peeters' selection of objects carries symbolic weight, embodying themes of opulence, indulgence, and transience commonly explored in Baroque still-life paintings. The Venetian glass, imported from Italy, embodies notions of exoticism and luxury, while the Roemer wine glass evokes conviviality and pleasure (Brusati, 1990). As noted, the candle's fleeting flame serves as a poignant reminder of the passage of time and the ephemeral nature of existence.



Still-Life with Flowers (750s) by Rachel Ruysch

This beautiful bouquet of blooming flowers symbolizes vitality, faith, progress, and influence (Hall; Clark, 1974). Conversely, wilting flowers serve as reminders of the fragility of

life, impermanence of material possessions, as well as the transient nature of beauty. Specific flowers carry nuanced meanings: For instance, nightshade conveys danger or deceit, daisies signify innocence, poppies evoke notions of sleep or death, and red roses symbolize love and allure (Hall; Clark, 1974). Within Christianity, a red rose represents the sacrificial blood of Jesus Christ, while a white lily embodies purity and the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary. Rachel Ruysch - a celebrated still-life painter of the Dutch Golden Age, has achieved international fame for her detailed floral compositions as she deliberately depicted combinations of flowers that would not naturally bloom together, aiming to showcase her extensive botanical knowledge. According to Albertson and Centeno (2019), each bouquet she painted was crafted to convey a wealth of information, whether through the selection of specific flower types or their various stages of bloom.

The opposing forces of Baroque: Dualism

“Truth and falsehood, light and dark, reason and passion, spirit and flesh...”(Braider, 2004). All of these and not only, existing right next to each other, or in a distinct set of themes. During the Baroque era, the theme of dualism existed everywhere - in architecture, literature, and even in religion and politics, and it could be found in art as well, where there was a strong tension between the two extremes (Rehder, 1962). Still life art is not eliminated from that list. This was done not only for expressing visual contrasts, or emphasizing “visual drama”, but also for transferring philosophical ideas and bringing forward spiritual themes.

Finding order in chaos, or creating chaotic situations when everything is in order. Creating illusions while imagining reality, struggling between vice and virtue, falling in the cycle of life and death. Those were exactly what some Baroque painters did with still life - numerous

contradictions were included to create that complex, but at the same time clear depictions. And here, between the clear and complex, dualism is also present.

Shades of the Baroque: The Artistry of Light and Shadow

Different from the previous style of Mannerism in the late 16th century, which elongated the human body, bleached the palette, and received support from the elites, Baroque artists chose to depict figures with Naturalism and added dramatic elements including a limited palette, the extreme contrast between light and dark, and diagonal composition. Unlike the Renaissance master Leonardo da Vinci who used chiaroscuro, the gradation of light and shadow, Caravaggio invented tenebrism, which is the use of large dark areas in paintings together with one light source (Willett, 1991). Both chiaroscuro and tenebrism are artistic techniques that were utilized during the Baroque period that followed the Renaissance. However, chiaroscuro has its roots in the Renaissance and continued to be employed and further developed during the Baroque era.

For still life paintings, it was important to give subjects volume and depth that would create a sense of three-dimensional painting and make the artwork seem more realistic. The artists felt the need to model forms using light and dark that could create an illusion of space. To further enhance the dramatic impact, many well-known artists of the Baroque era (such as Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Vermeer, and others) implemented the technique of chiaroscuro, (sometimes in an exaggerated form), aiming to create harmonious and balanced composition, while keeping it far from extreme (Valentiner, 1936). As mentioned by Varriano (2010), Caravaggio was the artist who “exaggerated” the chiaroscuro in the High Renaissance and

Mannerist paintings with almost avoiding using all the other light sources in a painting but one. Because of that, early writers pointed out this dramatic use of color and criticized Caravaggio on his coloring.

For instance, In 1621, Giulio Mancini - an Italian physician, criticized Caravaggio's use of color as artificial and unnatural, noting a deficiency in resemblance to nature and verisimilitude compared to artists like Carracci and Caravaggio's other contemporaries. He stated that Carracci, for example, employed chiaroscuro to enhance the interplay between light and vibrant colors, whereas in the case of Caravaggio, the works were often deemed excessively dark and lacking in color brilliance. Unlike Carracci, Caravaggio pursued tenebrism, a style characterized by heightened contrast between light and dark, achieved by minimizing brightness and putting the accent on shadows. Thus, it can be concluded that tenebrism - the same 'teneborso', was attained through Caravaggio's exaggerated use of chiaroscuro, and consequently, first appeared in Baroque era paintings. Baroque artists selected an object that they aimed to emphasize in their painting, and filled the rest of the space with shadow. In this way, they aimed to create a "theatrical impact" - the same tenebrism (Lahuerta, 2015). This marked a significant European movement that emphasized darkness alongside light as a crucial symbolic element. To understand the origins of tenebrism, we have to delve into the medieval theories of light that are linked with the concept of the "aesthetics of light," according to many contemporary scholars.

During the 12th, 13th, and 14th centuries in the Christian realm, light was regarded as the primary essence of existence, permeating the entire universe (Rzepińska, 1986). Robert Grosseteste's statement, "Omnia esse unum ab unius lucis perfectione," perfectly captures this belief. According to this worldview, the world occupied the central position amidst concentric

spheres of light, each increasing in brilliance, forming the “celestial” heavens. These heavens symbolized the spiritual realm, characterized by the divine light coming from God. And conversely, darkness and shadow were generally viewed negatively, associated with notions of evil, negation, absence, and sin, thus carrying an unfavorable connotation (Rzepińska, 1986).

During the Renaissance, there was a gradual shift in the perception of this stereotype. While light remained highly esteemed, darkness began to be viewed differently, described by Alberti as "a heavy inert matter" (Alberti, 1950). According to Alberti, beauty resided in brightness and the graceful forms it illuminated rather than in obscure, inert substances. As a humanist and art theorist, Alberti also remarked that "by nature we like bright things" and advised against creating "black and terrible works." Leonardo Da Vinci notably advanced the understanding of light and shadow, extensively studying the effects of concentrated light, or 'lume particolare', in his notes. However, he refrained from applying this knowledge in his paintings, cautioning against its use due to its strong contrast and limited utility for painters. Subsequently, Lomazzo introduced a classification system that included primary and secondary lights, or, “lumi primari, e lumi secondari”.

The concept of “lumi primario”, as introduced by Lomazzo (1973), refers to a primary source of light and manifests in three forms: natural light - from the sky or the sun, divine light - emanating from angels and divine figures, and artificial light generated by humans - such as fire, torches, or candles. As Rzepińska (1986) mentions, this concept holds significant importance, particularly in the formal structure of religious painting, and painters have furthered and refined it by enhancing contrasts and intensifying darkness.

The significance of light and dark in Baroque painting extended beyond purely artistic concerns, impacting the intellectual landscape of the era, including realms such as religion, philosophy, and natural science. It appears to have been a unique period in European cultural history, marked by extensive speculation and the elevated importance of shadow and dark, unparalleled in earlier or later epochs. By the end of the 16th century, the theology of darkness reached its pinnacle and found its most profound expression in the writings of St. John of the Cross (Kariatlis, 2012). In there, both the Jesuit and Carmelite Orders advocated for darkness as conducive to contemplation, viewing it as a positive element in spiritual life. And through a renewed interest in Hebrew Biblical studies, the representatives of the Church and religious orders encountered Judaic mysticism, where darkness was understood as a divine attribute, just as light was (Kariatlis, 2012).

So, In Baroque art, tenebristic darkness emerged as a favorable element, holding significance both iconically and symbolically, thus shaping a new aesthetic. Darkness was seen as complementary to light, enhancing its brilliance and grandeur. The religious, cosmic, alchemical, and existential symbolism associated with light and darkness was not confined to specific iconographic subjects but permeated the entire visual composition of works by artists like Tintoretto, Caravaggio, Georges de La Tour, Rembrandt, and Spanish artists. And this technique of tenebrism was implemented by the artists in still-life art as well.

Qualitative Research

To investigate the perception of still-life art among Generation Z, a research study was conducted with specific inquiries. Some of the questions that I included in the survey were open-ended, and prompted thoughtful responses. Others required straightforward answers. Prior to administering the questionnaire, an assessment of participants' art knowledge was asked, which eventually revealed that the majority rated their familiarity with art at a moderate level, similar to the overall average. Participants were asked to provide words and phrases associated with still-life paintings, and provided me with surprisingly precise responses. Among the most noteworthy answers was one describing still life as **"boring but fundamental,"** while another characterized it as **"vibrant, impressionistic, dynamic."** These divergent perspectives highlight the concept of dualism within participants' perceptions. For some, still life evokes notions of beauty, nature, and artistic skill, whereas for others, it conveys a sense of lifelessness, darkness, rawness, and isolation. Such different viewpoints underscore the need to reconsider still-life art as a subject worthy of deeper exploration, offering insights into the diverse questions that arise along the journey.

When participants were asked to identify a crucial aspect of their daily lives, the overwhelming majority of them cited the same item: their phones - an unsurprising response given the prevalence of digital technology in contemporary society. Along with the digital essentials such as laptops, watches, and headphones, participants also highlighted coffee as an indispensable part of their daily routine, as well as the sofa, where they relax and engage with the mentioned items. These observations offer insights into the interconnected nature of daily routines for Generation Z, and shedded light on their rapid decision-making processes when prompted to honestly reflect on their everyday essentials. This was not only interesting for me, but also quite useful for my creative project.



"Still life" (1630) by Georg Flegel

In addition to the topics mentioned above, three different artworks were chosen for the respondents to shortly analyze. The first piece - the "Still Life" by Georg Flegel, was analyzed with various interesting characteristics. Here, again, we go from very simple - "Maybe it's dinner time", to "Two parallel realities, which are intersecting with each other, but at the same time still separate". For some participants, the artwork represented calmness. For others - melancholy or death. This is what still life art does with its complexity - it confuses, makes people think and come up with so many interpretations.



“Still life with Skull and a Writing Quill” (1628) by Pieter Claesz

An artwork chosen to follow Flegel’s masterpiece was “Still life with skull and a writing quill” by Pieter Claesz, where associations with art, death and poetry were experienced by the participants. Similarities were found in the answer blocks, where they mentioned about “A miserable pain of being a writer”, “Dying literature and writers not being appreciated enough”, “A dead thinker, or a preservation of a great thinker. Interconnected symbols”. And for this specific artwork, which is simple, and because there are less objects and the message is more straightforward, the answers of the participants aligned to each other. However, still, not to the point that the answers wholly included the same meaning.



“The Afternoon Meal” (1772) by Luis Melendez

The final piece put to be analyzed - “The Afternoon Meal” by Luis Melendez, was put to a discussion. For some eroticism, for others abundance and prosperity, for the majority - calmness and balance. Among all the right answers, it seems like the most accurate was found - “The fruit may represent the fleeting nature of life, as fruit tends to rot. Bread and wine represent the body and blood of Christ. This is a warning about **shortness of life** and dedicating oneself to spiritual things rather than material.” And this exactly refers to the concept of vanitas, which reminds us about the end of life.

Visual Methodology

With utilizing visual methods to analyze the still life art of Baroque era, I aimed to uncover the symbolic richness and thematic depth that were included in the masterpieces of the time.

My approach involved a thorough study and “deconstruction” of Baroque still life artworks, examining the arrangement of objects, use of light and dark, and symbolic motifs embedded within each of the compositions I studied. Through this visual analysis, I gained insights into the underlying themes of transience, abundance, and the fragility of life that permeate Baroque still life art. With these insights as my guide, I set out to recreate the “essence” of Baroque still life through photography, employing visual methods. I carefully selected objects and arranged them in compositions that echoed the themes and motifs found in classic still life paintings.

With using lighting, composition, and careful attention to detail, I aimed to imbue my photographic recreations with the same sense of drama, richness, and depth that characterizes Baroque still life art. Each photograph became a visual narrative, inviting viewers to engage with layers of meaning and contemplate the timeless themes explored by Baroque artists. As those were planned to be creative recreations, each of the photographs, no matter the subject, included a mixture of the Baroque and the modern world. The subjects included modern colors, items, even modern issues - that is, what the world might be facing nowadays and what connects with present-day audiences. By engaging in visual analysis and recreation, my aim was to honor the lasting impact of Baroque still life, which has become my inspiration since the beginning of my journey in arts.

Several sources have been used for broadening my understanding in the process.

"Mirrors, Messages, Manifestations"(1969), written by Minor White, was all about the

metaphorical significance of light and dark, suggested by a photographer with a spiritual approach to her chosen sphere. Similarly, Susan Sontag's book "On Photography" (1977) discussed about another important aspect - the role of light in shaping perception and mood in images, which, again, was necessary for my creative part.

For gaining even stronger understanding in photography, mainly - recreating in a Baroque theme, the book "Dutch Seventeenth-Century Genre Painting: Its Stylistic and Thematic Evolution" (2004) by Wayne Franits - an expert on Dutch art of the Golden Age, suggested useful information about the components of Baroque Art and their implementation, and more specifically, discussed about chiaroscuro. And of course, when talking about more narrowed discussions on Baroque still-life, Schnieder's "Still Life"(2003), which explores still life from antiquity to Baroque period, is absolutely necessary for a student like me who strives to reach to the symbolism and the artistic techniques that aim to convey deep ideas and hidden messages. For analyzing the symbolism in the recreated artworks, I specifically used the two dictionaries of James Hall - "The Illustrated dictionary of symbols in eastern and western culture" (1996), and "Dictionary of subjects and symbols in art"(1974), which were essential for an accurate analysis of symbols that would give a reference to Baroque era.

For editing my photographs, which included deciding on the light and dark, as well as transforming the sharpness of my photographs into artistic brush strokes, I used Adobe Photoshop. For additional support I needed for my graphic design and editing skills, I went through Valentine's "*The hidden power of blend modes in Adobe Photoshop*" (2013), as well as Swerzenski's "Fact, fiction or Photoshop: Building awareness of visual manipulation through image editing software" (2021). Those two informative sources were key in understanding how

to make my photographs even more impactful, and how to further enhance the elements I aim to emphasize when mentioning about symbolism.

In this pleasing challenge, I aim to offer new perspectives on the enduring masterpieces of Baroque art and stimulate a revived appreciation for the visual methods employed by Baroque artists to convey profound understandings of the human experience.

Creative Project: Photography

Photograph 1: “The timeless allure of femininity”



In a fancy gold vase, pretty flowers open up gracefully and show off the natural beauty of femininity. The soft petals are like a woman's gentle curves, displaying nature's beauty at its best. The golden jewelry, with its fancy designs and delicate patterns, shows how elegant and refined women are. It reminds us of the beauty and charm that every woman has inside. Love letters, full of love and longing, tell stories of romance, expressing deep feelings that every woman holds dear. They show how love connects people, like vines growing on a fence, creating strong bonds of dedication and longing. The perfume smells really nice and makes us think of femininity in a sensual and charming way, like a soft whisper in the wind. It tickles our senses and makes us imagine beautiful things, leaving a lasting impression on our hearts. When we look in the mirror, we see the reflection of femininity, reminding us of the beauty and strength that every woman has inside. It's like looking into our soul and seeing the endless depth of who we are.

In Baroque era art, the color gold holds profound symbolic significance, representing wealth, power, and divine majesty. It serves as a visual marker of opulence and grandeur, reflecting the lavish lifestyles of the ruling elite. Beyond mere material wealth, the color also conveys a sense of transcendence, evoking the celestial realm of the divine. Whether adorning religious icons or embellishing the attire of nobility, the usage of color gold in Baroque art shows the status of its subjects and the divine authority they were used by.

Baroque artists have often incorporated mirrors into their compositions to convey deeper philosophical themes, reminding viewers of the impermanence of physical appearance and the fleeting nature of human existence. Additionally, mirrors were associated with the concept of illusion, serving as tools for manipulating perception and challenging the viewer's understanding

of reality. Through the motif of the mirror, Baroque artists explored profound questions about identity, mortality, and the elusive nature of truth.

Jewelry in Baroque art serves as more than simply ornamentation. It is a symbol of wealth, status, and social standing. Beyond the aesthetic appeal, jewelry functioned as a tangible expression of luxury and elegance, and elevates the wearer's prestige and commanding admiration from peers. In the visual language of the Baroque era, the opulent depiction of jewelry served to reinforce the hierarchical structure of society, where ostentatious displays of wealth were not only accepted but celebrated as markers of success and influence.

Flowers in Baroque art appear as symbols filled with layers of meanings. They represent not only beauty, but also fragility and transience, serving as reminders of the ephemeral nature of life. As they were depicted in various stages of bloom and decay, they evoke the cyclical rounds of growth, decay, and regeneration, echoing broader themes of the cycle of life and death. Furthermore, flowers are closely associated with notions of love, fertility, and the natural world, so their vibrant colors and delicate forms evoking sentiments of romance and vitality. Whether depicted in still-life compositions or as decorative motifs in larger works, flowers in Baroque art invite viewers to contemplate the fleeting beauty of existence and the enduring power of nature's cycles, as mentioned above.

Letters also hold a special significance in Baroque art, symbolizing romance, courtship, and emotional intimacy. Those serve as tangible tokens of affection and longing. In the context of Baroque society, where strict social norms governed romantic relationships, letters appeared as means of expressing one's feelings and forging connections across social boundaries. Through

the portrayal of letters in art, Baroque artists captured the tender exchanges and clandestine affairs that animated the lives of their subjects, inviting viewers to glimpse the private dramas unfolding behind closed doors.

Pearls, known to be highly prized in Baroque era, carry profound symbolic significance as symbols of purity, elegance and feminine beauty. Associated with the moon, the goddess Venus, as well as with the concept of perfection, pearls symbolize timeless elegance and refinement. In Baroque art, pearls are often depicted adorning the attire of noblewomen and goddesses, their radiant presence elevating the aesthetic appeal of the composition while “complementing” it with symbolic depth. As symbols of perfection and purity, pearls serve as potent reminders of the pursuit of beauty and excellence that characterized the “Baroque ethos”.

Photograph 2: “The Lost Harmony”



In a lively natural setting, there's one bright red tulip. It stands out strong, showing resilience in a chaotic world, and giving hope in tough times. This shows the nature's ability to keep going even when things are hard.

But next to this beautiful flower, there's a mess. Rotten fruits that were once full of potential now sit forgotten. There's trash everywhere, like plastic bags and paper thrown on the ground, hurting the environment. Amongst this mess, there's a discarded paper coffee cup, showing how society cares more about convenience than taking care of the environment. One big thing we see is half-eaten fruits, which were meant to be healthy snacks, but now show unintended results. They were supposed to be good for us, but now they just show how actions can have bad effects. The eco-friendly paper, bought to help the environment, is now just left behind, showing how people sometimes don't care enough.

In Baroque art, rotten fruits serve as reminders of the concept of "Memento Mori", which reflect the inevitability of death and the impermanence of earthly pleasures. These decaying fruits, with their withered skins and putrid aromas, are themselves symbols of the transience of life and the relentless march of time. With the contrast of the vibrancy of ripe fruits with the decay of their rotten parts, different Baroque artists have tried to underscore the fragility of human existence and the fleeting nature of worldly joys. In this way, rotten fruits function as visual cues that prompted the viewers to contemplate their own mortality and the vanity of material pursuits.

As mentioned, rotten fruits are closely associated with the broader artistic motif of vanitas, which seeks to remind viewers of the vanity and emptiness of worldly pursuits. As

allegorical representations of moral decadence, greed, or the consequences of human folly, these decaying fruits serve as “cautionary” symbols that warn against the dangers of excess and indulgence.

Tulips in general hold a significant place in Dutch culture and art, especially during the 17th century, which coincided with the peak of the Dutch Golden Age and the Baroque period. Dutch still life paintings from this time often featured floral arrangements, including tulips, alongside other objects such as fruits, insects, and luxurious items. Tulips were highly sought after and prized for their exotic beauty, making them popular subjects for still life compositions. In these paintings, tulips symbolized various themes depending on their context. They were often seen as symbols of wealth, prosperity, and the ephemeral nature of life.

The “Tulip Mania”- that booming tulip market in the Netherlands in the 17th century that included tulips with extraordinary heights, was surely influenced art. And because of that, tulips frequently appearing as status symbols in still life paintings, reflecting the prosperity and material abundance of Dutch society during this period (Garber, 2016).

Furthermore, tulips were sometimes depicted alongside other objects in still life paintings to convey moral or allegorical messages. For example, tulips were contrasted with symbols of transience, such as skulls or decaying flowers, to emphasize the fleeting nature of worldly wealth and pleasures. In the case of my recreation, the contrast were the trash and the rotten fruits.

Photograph 3: “The Whispers of Uniqueness”



In a natural setting, surrounded by lots of colorful flowers, there's one rose in the very heart of the composition that stands out. It's so beautiful and vibrant, showing off its petals in a stunning display of beauty and life.

The red rose stands out on its own, showing individuality among all the other beautiful flowers that look the same. Even though it's surrounded by similar flowers, it doesn't let itself be hidden or made less important. Instead, it chooses to grow beautifully all on its own.

This artwork makes us think about one of the top ongoing discussion topics around the world - being unique and being free in expressing ourselves. The rose represents the each one of us - the human spirit , always trying to be true to itself even when there's pressure to be like

everyone else. It reminds us that real beauty comes from being different and having our own experiences, talents, and dreams.

The contrast of the solitary rose against the backdrop of uniform flowers creates a striking visual contrast, that draws the viewer's eye and evoking a sense of drama and tension. This contrast - similar to Baroque chiaroscuro - highlights the tension between individuality and collective identity, and invites the viewers to deeply look at the very delicate balance between the unique and the universal.

Photograph 4: “Sweet Surrender”



In this photograph, I aimed to capture the essence of the vanitas tradition prevalent in Baroque art, employing symbolic elements to evoke contemplation on the fleeting nature of life. With a bucket overflowing with fresh and ripe strawberries in the very foreground, I contrasted their vibrant red hues against the earthy tones of a brownish-gold tablecloth and create a striking visual contrast, which immediately draws the viewer's attention.

The abundance of these berries serves as a celebration of life's transient pleasures that invite the viewers to immerse themselves in their extremely vibrant beauty. However, upon closer inspection, one notices the presence of discarded strawberries scattered across the tablecloth, their once-vivid colors faded and their vitality disappearing. Through these abandoned fruits, I aimed to convey the “fading” nature of earthly existence, similar to what the inclusion of fresh fruits meant in Baroque still life. So, in capturing this moment, my intention was to invite observers to embrace a mindful appreciation of life's fleeting joys while acknowledging and at the same time emphasizing the extremely profound interconnectedness of life and death. Also, during the Baroque period, berries, in this case - strawberries, were considered exotic and highly prized delicacies that were often reserved for the elite and nobility (Opstall, 2014).

Photograph 5: “The Revealed Mysteries”



This photograph seems to have a modern aesthetic though its earthy, “Baroque” color palette. At its center lies a round glass vessel, within which there is an assortment of small shells. Adjacent to the glass, right outside, a large shell rests and commands attention to its presence. Several of the other smaller shells spill beyond the boundaries of the glass. While the photograph may seem contemporary at first glance, its roots definitely delve deep into the rich symbolism of the Baroque era.

The pearl necklaces - the symbols of passage of life in my photograph, fall from the glass with a circular motion. With their circular motion, They give us hints about the possibility of renewal and regeneration, and remind us of the cycle of life.

Besides including the vanitas symbolism, in Baroque art, shells surely carried religious and mythological significance as well. They were sometimes associated with the myth of Venus - the goddess of love and beauty, who was said to have been born from a shell. Shells also symbolized baptism and rebirth in Christian iconography.

Photograph 6: “Coexistence”



In this room, where lights and shadows themselves were the masters of chiaroscuro, the spirit of Baroque is felt. At the heart of the composition there is a dictionary that is a source of knowledge. Every curiosity finds its answer within the pages. The candle here, with its mystical light, is a source that illuminates the table, and lets the reader concentrate on his objects. The rectangular old clock- the silent reminder of the fleeting nature of existence. In the background,

there is an album with pages filled with memories in that frozen time. Each image inside that album tells a story, a fragment of a life that was lived and cherished.

And yet, surrounded by the antiquity and nostalgia, there is a huge contrast - two smartphones. A smartphone, with its turned on by the user that has probably forsaken the treasures of the past simply for the “allure” of the digital realm.

Between the contrast of old and new, this photo captures the truth about the human condition - a march towards progress, often with valuable losses. The smartphone with its endless possibilities has become a modern-day talisman for humanity.

And yet, as the candle still lights the room, and the clock still ticks, one cannot help but wonder - what is lost in this continuous pursuit of advancement? What are the treasures that lie forgotten in the shadows of the digital age? This photo was just a reminder that one should take a break and appreciate the true and aesthetical moments filled with memories.

Photograph 7: “The Rich Simplicity”



In this photograph, my main aim was to capture the essence of a Baroque still life, drawing inspiration from its rich symbolism and opulent aesthetics. With the earthy tones and details I aimed to evoke the luxurious characteristic of the Baroque era.

At the very center of the scene, there is a warm glow spread by the candle. In the Baroque tradition, the candle symbolizes the brevity of life and again, reminds about the passage of time. Surrounding the candle are various elements typically found in Baroque still life artworks - flowers, cups of coffee, and sweets. These luxurious treats add to the feeling of indulgence, and mirror the richness of the Baroque era.

However, in this scene, there is another contrast - a bottle of water positioned on the left side of the table. This bottle of water serves as a symbol of purity and simplicity among this worldly extravagance. Here comes the concept of dualism - in this case, the interplay between the luxury and the necessity.

Photograph 8: “Pleasure’s Evolution”



In my most modern recreation, these contemporary items create a compelling contrast against the backdrop of traditional Baroque still life themes. At the very front of the composition lies a fashion journal with its pages filled with the latest trends and styles. Nearby, the JBL speaker emanates soundwaves and fills the atmosphere with modern rhythms and melodies. A

bottle of whiskey completes the scene with standing as a testament to indulgence and luxury in this contemporary world.

Despite the differences in the subject matter, several concepts are still common to Baroque still life. Firstly, the presence of luxury items such as the whiskey bottle mirrors the opulence often depicted in Baroque paintings, though through a contemporary lens. Similarly, the fashion journal symbolizes the pursuit of beauty and status, similar to the themes of vanity and materialism prevalent in Baroque art.

Of course, this photograph serves as a reflection on the intersection of past and present, tradition and innovation, but there is still a space to think about the fleeting nature of contemporary pleasures.

Photograph 9: “Celebrating Caravaggio”



In this arrangement, I've curated an atmosphere that delves into the layers of symbolism surrounding the art of Caravaggio. There is a book detailing his life and works, prominently displaying his famous painting "Bacchus," where the Roman god of wine holds a grape.

Next to the book, a candle stands with its wick unlit. This deliberate choice to keep the flame extinguished is intentional and hints at the darker aspects of Caravaggio's life and art. It is about the absence of spiritual enlightenment throughout his struggles.

On the other side of the book a bottle of wine stands, and it is a direct reference to Bacchus and the indulgence associated with his worship. But apart from its earthly pleasures, wine also holds deep religious symbolism, especially in Christianity. Here, it becomes a bridge between the mundane and the divine, and invites contemplation on the spiritual implications of indulgence.

In the central part of the arrangement I arranged breads, which are a symbol of sustenance and communion, and thus, carries profound religious significance. Its presence alongside Bacchus and the wine suggests a convergence of earthly and spiritual realms where indulgence meets the divine grace.

With this arrangement, I aimed to explore the complicated part of the interplay of art, religion, and symbolism that defines Caravaggio's legacy. This recreation is a celebration and appreciation of his influence and a testament to the timeless relevance of his themes and motifs even in the modern world.

Photograph 10: “Temptation Under the Glass”



In this modern recreation, I aimed to create an interpretation of the timeless story of Adam and Eve, inspired by the style of Baroque still-life paintings. At the central part of the composition there is an apple crafted from glass - the symbol of the forbidden fruit.

But what sets this arrangement apart is the addition of a transparent glass cover, delicately placed over the apple. This simple act of covering the apple symbolizes the notion of forbidding, as I aimed to mirror the biblical narrative where Adam and Eve are forbidden from eating the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

In drawing this parallel, I sought to explore the complex interplay between temptation, desire, and the consequences of disobedience - themes that I believe resonate deeply with the moral complexities often depicted in Baroque art. With using the glass as for both the material for the apple and the covering, I aimed to add an additional intriguing layer of symbolism and suggest fragility and transparency in the face of temptation.

By connecting this modern interpretation with the traditions of Baroque still-life, I really hope to evoke a sense of continuity and universality in the exploration of these themes across different artistic epochs.

Conclusion: A Few Words

This creative capstone project of recreating Baroque still life in the 21st century has been an immensely enriching experience for me. I have gained a deeper appreciation for the meticulous attention to detail, the masterful use of light and shadow, and the profound symbolism that defines this artistic tradition. By incorporating modern elements and themes into

these compositions, I have been able to bridge the gap between past and present and why not, offer a contemporary perspective on previously explored themes.

By acknowledging and appreciating artistic achievements of past eras, we gain insight into the human condition, explore universal themes and connect with a shared cultural heritage. In an age of rapid technological advancement, I strongly believe that it is essential to recognize the enduring value of historical art forms like Baroque still life and to continue to celebrate and preserve them for future generations.

Through this creative project, I have not only strengthened my artistic skills but also gained a deeper understanding of the complexities of human experience and the power of art to transcend time and space. I really hope that by sharing this project and highlighting the importance of Baroque still life, I can also inspire others to explore the beauty and significance of this timeless artistic tradition.

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