

From ‘dead-standing-things’ to ‘still life’ Defining a new genre in British art

By Caroline Good

Defining ‘still life’

In 1658, the author William Sanderson writing in *Graphice. The use of pen and pencil. Or, the most excellent art of painting* drew attention to some artists of “Particular Masterie”:

...For *Flower-pots* and Paintings of that kind, *Brugel* and *Dehem* were excellent: but now *Paulus Seagers* is best of all, a rare Artizan, and *Van Thewlin* of *Antwerpe*, his Imitator.

And in dead-standing things, *Little-House*, a *Dutchman*.¹

By ‘*Little-House*’ Sanderson here refers to Simon Luttichuys, an artist born in 1610 to Dutch parents living in London. Luttichuys went on to work primarily as a painter of still life subjects, but over time has become an obscure figure, with his name and works little known in Britain. Sanderson’s reference suggests this was not always the case, but more importantly it draws our attention to wider ideas about still life painting as a genre at this time.

Sanderson does not use the term ‘still life’ when referring to the type of painting produced by Luttichuys, rather employing the term ‘dead-standing-things’. Quite simply, this is because the term did not yet exist, and the genre now known as still life had yet to receive a recognisable English name.

In describing the still life genre as ‘dead-standing-things’, Sanderson’s writing looks to the Continent for guidance. In the first half of the century the Dutch referred to still life works as ‘*stilstaende dingen*’, which today translates as ‘still-standing things’. It was only from 1650 onwards that the modern Dutch term ‘*stilleven*’ was introduced, meaning ‘inanimate object’ or ‘immobile nature’. Similarly in France the term ‘*choses inanimées*’ meaning ‘inanimate things’ was used to describe still life subjects, but in Italian the name for the genre was somewhat different - ‘*natura morta*’ translating as ‘dead nature’. The French term then changed to ‘*nature morte*’ at the end of the eighteenth century, a description still used for the genre today.

Sanderson’s ambiguous term ‘dead-standing-things’ appears to be cobbled together from these various foreign sources, exemplifying how attempts to define the discussion of painting in England trailed behind examples already being set in Continental Europe. As the century progressed, Sanderson’s attempt to define the genre of still life was forgotten as English writers came to adopt the Dutch term ‘*stilleven*’, directly translating this into English as ‘still life’.

The Dutch-Anglo cultural exchange

The adoption of the Dutch term into the English language can be seen as part of a widespread cultural exchange which gathered pace between the two countries throughout the seventeenth century. Following the Restoration of Charles II, English

¹ William Sanderson *Graphice. The use of pen and pencil. Or, the most excellent art of painting: In Two Parts* (Robert Crofts: London, 1658) p. 19.

culture for painting was radically transformed by an increasingly visible presence of overseas artists in England. An abundance of foreign painters, largely from the Netherlands, followed in the wake of royalist exiles that had resided there during the Civil Wars and Interregnum (1638-1660) and had become acquainted with the country's art market. In the following decades as the economic conditions in the Netherlands continued to decline the Dutch community in England increased rapidly and vigorous artistic and intellectual links flourished.² Notably, in contrast to the first half of the century, many artists stayed and made (with varying success) their career, or the final part of their career in England.

The effect of this cultural exchange on England's art world is documented in the 'ESSAY towards an *English School*, With the *Lives* and *Characters* of above 100 PAINTERS'.³ Written by the gentleman poet and painter Bainbrigg Buckeridge it was published in 1706. Arranged alphabetically the 'Essay' is furnished with the lives of nearly a hundred painters who either were born or had worked in England since the arrival of Hans Holbein the younger in the 1520s. In contrast to much of the artwriting being published in England at this time, which focused on the achievements of the Italian and French schools, Buckeridge's 'Essay' is concerned with the painterly practice that had taken place in England during the previous centuries. As a result his 'Essay' is particularly receptive to the large number of foreign artists working in England. Of the ninety-nine painters included by Buckeridge, no fewer than fifty-four were foreigners. Of these fifty-four, forty-three were active in England during the second half of the seventeenth century – the majority (around thirty-five, or one-third, of the entire 'English school') having travelled from Holland or northern Germany.

Within the 'Essay' Buckeridge documents numerous foreign painters who applied and adapted themselves to the English market, whilst also introducing new genres that rapidly gained in popularity amongst different ranks of society. The Dutch painter Adrian Hondius, for example, had already made a career in history painting in Rotterdam. In London, however, Buckeridge relays that there was little appetite for the genre. The 'Essay' describes how he adapted his practice to suit the English market, and found success instead with paintings of hunters, dogs, and game in landscape.

The 'Essay' further documents how in the seventies and eighties a new taste for still lifes, flowers and fruits (arguably itself a result of the Dutch-Anglo exchange) was answered by the Dutch-men Pieter van Roestraten, Simon Verelst, Gaspar Smitz, and Jan Frans van Son. Roestraten, according to Buckeridge, was an "excellent Master...in Gold and Silver Plate, Gems, Shells, Musical Instruments, &c. to all which he gave an unusual Lustre in his Colouring".⁴ Smitz, on the other hand, held "a particular Talent for Painting Fruit and Flowers".⁵

² This is in some ways remarkable at a time when the two countries were sporadically at war with one another. Yet many Dutch citizens would have been anxious to seek refuge at the time of the savage onslaught on their homelands particularly by the armies of Louis XIV in 1672. See *Dutch and Flemish artists in Britain 1550-1800* (Primavera Pers: Leiden, 2003); Lisa Jardine *Going Dutch: How England Plundered Holland's Glory* (Harper Collins: London, 2008).

³ Bainbrigg Buckeridge, *ESSAY towards an English School, With the Lives and Characters of above 100 PAINTERS* (London, 1706).

⁴ Buckeridge, p. 460.

⁵ Buckeridge, p. 463.

Widening forms of patronage and distribution

Buckeridge's 'Essay' is also useful in what it tells us about the way paintings were produced and distributed at this time. Buckeridge saw England's patrons as playing a crucial and influential role in encouraging and, at times, enabling the practice of many of the painters included in his 'English School'. Prior to the Restoration, almost all of the artists included in the 'Essay' are associated with royal or aristocratic milieus. However, after 1660, and particularly from the 1670s onwards, we begin to hear of 'the lower ranks of the *Virtuosi*', country gentry, clergymen, merchant traders and the 'more waggish collectors' amongst the variety of enthusiasts that testify to a lively and multifarious culture of buying, selling, and commissioning paintings. Only a handful of artists enjoyed the lucrative patronage of the Restoration court. Many others established themselves with varying success, within London's ever-expanding portrait industry, or by producing fruit and flower pieces, landscape over-mantels, or depictions of fish and fowl for the capital's fashionable interiors.

By the close of the century therefore, a wide range of variation in the possible relationship between an artist and client existed in England. Buckeridge's 'lives' relay how the most eminent painters were brought to England, housed, protected, and introduced into elite aristocratic and courtly circles where they could find work amongst the rich nobility and gentry. At this end of the scale the painter was lodged in his patron's palace or stately home and worked exclusively for him and his friends. This certainly appears to have been the case for one of the most highly esteemed flower painters from the period represented in the display - John Baptist Monnoyer. Born in Lille he had studied in Antwerp before establishing himself in Paris as the leading flower painter, where his works were greatly admired and collected by Louis XIV. According to Buckeridge, Monnoyer then travelled to England at the invitation of Ralph Montagu, later 1st Duke of Montagu. Here he was employed "to adorn his magnificent House in Bloomsbury, where a great variety of Flowers and Fruit of this Master are to be seen".⁶ These works were considered by Buckeridge to be "those of his best Performance."⁷ Further commissions followed with "Lord Carlisle", "Lord Burlington", and "other Persons of Quality" that included a still life piece for Queen Mary at Kensington House.⁸

The working methods of all the artists represented in the display do not, however, conform to this model. The practice of Edward Collier in particular appears, at first sight, to be strikingly similar to that of today: the artist painting a picture with no particular destination in mind in the hope of finding a casual purchaser. When his works of similar subjects are viewed together it becomes immediately apparent that the artist repeatedly used the same objects, altering only small details that were necessary to revise or update his paintings. Such repetition enabled Collier to produce his works on a large scale, feeding an evident demand on the English Market.

In between these two extremes there were a number of gradations involving middlemen, dealers and dabblers as well as the activities of foreign travellers and their

⁶ Buckeridge, p. 401.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

agents. In the diversity of artists represented in the display we find therefore an intriguing narrative of the variety of still life painting taking place in seventeenth century England. Furthermore if we consider them together in broader terms, they can be seen to represent the early formation of the modern London art world.

The artistic value of still life

While the number of still life works and artists grew rapidly in the closing decades of the seventeenth century, other forms of artwriting from the period were less receptive to the genre. William Aglionby suggested in his *Painting Illustrated in Three Dialogues* (1685) that still life subjects should be valued less than portraits of people, “because those things are but the still Life, whereas there is a *Spirit* in *Flesh* and *Blood*, which is hard to Represent.”⁹ This pejorative opinion of the genre was addressed again by Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury in his *Judgment of Hercules* (1713), where he described still life as “the last and lowest degree of Painting.” In 1719 the artist Jonathan Richardson expanded on Shaftesbury’s curt statement, suggesting in his *Two Discourses* that,

A History is preferable to a Landscape, Sea-piece, Animals, Fruit, Flowers, or any other Still-Life, pieces of Drollery, &c.; the reason is, the latter Kinds may Please, and in proportion as they do so they are Estimable, and that is according to every one’s Taste, but they cannot Improve the Mind, they excite no Noble Sentiments; at least not as the other naturally does: These not only give us Pleasure, as being beautiful Objects, and Furnishing us with Ideas as the Other do, but the Pleasure we receive from Hence is Greater (I speak in General, and what the nature of the thing is capable of) ‘tis of a Nobler Kind than the Other; and Then moreover the Mind may be Inrich’d, and made Better.’¹⁰

Richardson’s comments – like those of Aglionby and Shaftesbury – follow the academic tradition that came out of the French Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture in the second half of the seventeenth century. The French Academy’s educational practices and published writings established a hierarchy of value given to the different genres of art. Mythological, historical, or Biblical subjects were the most valued; next came portraits and painted scenes from everyday life, followed by landscapes. Below this was still life painting, which was seen as the artistic genre of the least merit since it was regarded as a mere recording of inanimate objects. The Academy’s views were frequently adopted in art writing of the period across Europe well into the eighteenth century, profoundly affecting critical characterisations of still life as a genre.

In the famous engraver and antiquary George Vertue’s account of Monnoyer, these principles can be seen in action. According to Vertue, on arriving in Paris in 1663 Monnoyer was ‘received into the academy with applause; and though his subjects were not thought elevated enough to admit him to a professorship, he was in consideration of his merit made a counsellor...’¹¹ Even the most accomplished still

⁹ William Aglionby, *Painting Illustrated in Three Dialogues, Containing some Choice Observations upon the Art. Together with the Lives of the most Eminent Painters, from Cimabue, to the time of Raphael and Michel Anegelo. With an Explanation of the Difficult Terms* (London: 1685) pp. 22-23.

¹⁰ Jonathan Richardson, *Two discourses. I. An essay on the whole art of criticism, as it relates to painting ... II. An argument in behalf of the science of a connoisseur; wherein is shewn the dignity, certainty, pleasure, and advantage of it* (London, 1719) pp. 44-45.

¹¹ Horace Walpole, *Anecdotes of painting in England; with some account of the principal artists; and incidental notes on other arts; collected by the late Mr. George Vertue; and now digested and published from his original MSS. II* (1762) pp. 217-218.

life painter, therefore, could never surpass the achievements or merit of a history painter.

The growing value of still life painting in England

Whilst influential, the judgements made by the French Academy on the value of still life painting were subject to constant dispute and redefinition. Indeed, the ways in which these views on still life were interpreted and contested in England was crucial to the development of a new discernibly English identity for still life painting.

Richardson, who we have already encountered as a conformer to the hierarchy of genres, also wrote of the pleasure he afforded from a still life work in his possession. In a passage from his earlier 1715 publication *An Essay on the Theory of Painting* he takes great delight in the skill with which Michelangelo da Campidoglio (1610-70) painted the fruit-piece:

I have many times observed with a great deal of Pleasure the admirable Composition (besides the other Excellencies) of a Fruit-piece of *Michelangelo Campidoglio*, which I have had many Years. The principal Light is near the Centre, (not exactly there, for those Regularities have an ill effect;) and the Transition from thence, and from one thing to another, to the Extremities of the Picture all round is very easy, and delightful; in which he has employ'd fine Artifices by Leaves, Twigs, little Touches of Lights striking advantageously, and the like. So that there is not Stroke in the Picture without its Meaning: And the whole, tho' very Bright, and consisting of a great many Parts, has a wonderful Harmony, and Repose.¹²

Richardson's description of the specific still life subject is unique in the English theoretical literature of the period. His careful analysis concentrates on the composition, distribution of lights, colouring, and painterly effects - the visual elements of a picture which contribute to the spectator's pleasure. This distinction is an important one. Richardson nowhere suggests the moral value of the work. His praise is entirely centered on the pleasurable effects the work has had upon him.

This view does not, therefore, tally with other interpretations of the subject as an artistic genre rich in connotation, social and divine. Still lifes could be seen as depictions of luxury commodities, as collections of exquisite coveted blooms, as reminders of the fleeting nature of time, as emblems of the power of art, as bearers of moral messages from God. Yet here Richardson makes no mention of symbolism or social connotation. Rather, he is interested in light, space, composition, mimetic success. He views the painting as painting, not as a document; he is interested in pictorial values, not social or religious illusions. The fruit piece is subsequently drained of any ulterior meaning in Richardson's account and its value is placed with the arrangement itself.

Richardson's statement should not be taken as proof that no ulterior meaning was ever seen in still life paintings. But it does give an idea of the a different balance of interests in the response to still lifes; it reminds us that paintings, then as now, could be appreciated for the visual satisfaction they gave, as well as for any significance they might have had over and above their pictorial qualities.

Another type of value frequently noted in contemporary literature is the high or low price a particular artist achieved when selling their paintings. According to Vertue, the still life paintings of the artist Simon Verelst fetched prices which were "the

¹² Jonathan Richardson, *An Essay on the Theory of Painting* (London, 1715) pp. 116-117.

greatest that had been known in this country.”¹³ In contrast Vertue also describes William Gow Ferguson as working “very cheap”.¹⁴ In similar terms Buckeridge notes that the flower paintings of Monnoyer bore “a good Price suitable to their great Worth.”¹⁵ Here, the value of still life can be measured through its ability at times to attract high market prices, but this view sits at odds with the ideas of the French Academy who attributed a low value to the genre because of its failure to provide moral instruction or to reflect wider worldly concerns.

Yet as we have seen the negative ideas associated with still life painting in contemporary writing about art does not reflect the realities of the art marketplace. From the 1670s onwards an enormous surge in the number of still life paintings can be traced, the surviving records of English collections, auctions and inventories testifying to a growing appreciation for the genre.

Conclusion: From ‘dead-standing-things’ to ‘still life’

The comments of Vertue, Buckeridge, and Richardson highlight the different ways value is attributed to art. In doing so they demonstrate that however influential artistic criticism may have been in this period, English art lovers and collectors did not always share the tastes and views of the critics. In acknowledging the presence and activities of still life artists in England an important strand within the broader narrative of early modern English art history emerges – one that reaches beyond the elite views favoured by the dominant critics and documents the introduction of the genre into English culture.¹⁶

Returning to Sanderson’s early attempt to define the genre, we can now see the transformation that occurred in England during this period. From the mid-century when the author struggled to find the words to describe the subject, to the early eighteenth century when it had come to be collected and cherished by many, and by others despised and disregarded. Whatever contemporary opinion, by the end of the period still life as a genre had been defined in English culture, its name, as it is still used today, firmly established in the English vocabulary.

¹³ Anecdotes, iii, p. 32.

¹⁴ Anecdotes, iii, p. 99.

¹⁵ Buckeridge, p. 401.

¹⁶ See *Dutch and Flemish artists in Britain 1550-1800* (Primavera Pers: Leiden, 2003); Lisa Jardine *Going Dutch: How England Plundered Holland's Glory* (Harper Collins: London, 2008).