

Cornelis Norbertus Gijsbrechts

Born in Antwerp, active between 1657 and 1675

A Vanitas Still Life with a Skull crowned with an Ear of Corn, a Pocket Watch, Documents and Music Sheets

Oil on canvas

94 x 121cm (37 by 48 in.)

Signed and indistinctly dated: CNs GijsBrechts A.

Provenance:

Private Collection, Mechelen, Belgium
as *Monogrammist CND*

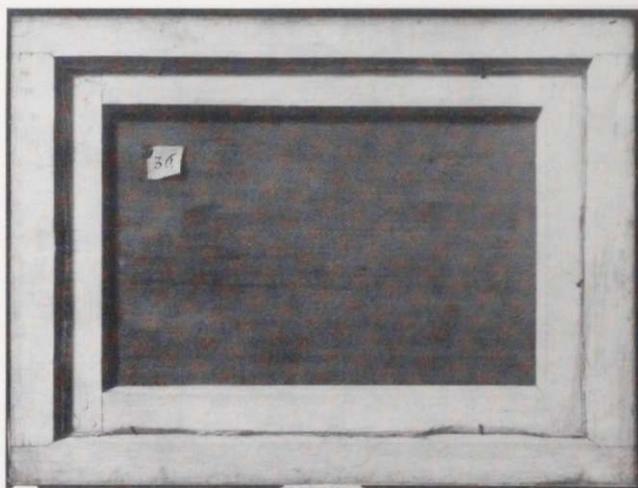
Literature:

Braun (1994) no. 1.2.1

There are few secure biographical data available on Cornelis Norbertus Gijsbrechts. Presumably he was born in Antwerp. Neither his date of birth or death are known. Documents from 1659/60 of the St. Luke Guild in Antwerp bear his name. After 1660 Gysbrechts moved to Germany and might have worked in Hamburg from 1665 until 1668.¹ Gysbrechts' stay in Copenhagen is documented. He worked from 1668 until 1672 at the court of the Danish kings Frederick III and Christian V. Following this period his trace is lost. The only known and dated paintings after that are from 1675.

All his life Gijsbrechts has paid special attention to the transience and the false glamour of worldly goods and their pleasures, to the *Vanitas* and the *Trompe-l'œil*. In the beginning of Gijsbrechts' artistic career *Vanitas* still life paintings were his focal interest. A skull crowned with an ear of corn resting on documents composes the centre of the *Vanitas* often surrounded by a candle, an hour-glass, a pocket-watch and flowers. Apart

from *Vanitas*, Gijsbrechts also depicted *trompe-l'œil* paintings which create an illusion by deceiving the eye of the beholder, who then cannot distinguish between painting and reality. Gijsbrechts also combines these two types of paintings by integrating a *Vanitas* into a *trompe-l'œil* (pl.3).² No other contemporary painter went to this extreme and with his *trompe-l'œils* invented the most exceptional compositions (pl.1).³



Pl. 1 Cornelis N. Gijsbrechts, *Trompe-l'œil of an Over-Turned Canvas*, oil on canvas 66,4 x 87 cm, unsigned, Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst, Inv.no. 1989

Vanitas still lives combine the image of vanity and transience of worldly goods with a *Memento Mori* recalling the uncertainty of the time when death arrives and of The Last Judgement. It advises to always be prepared for death and to live a pious life under the aspect of eternity.

- 1) Füsslis Künstlerlexikon (1806)
- 2) Braun (1994) no.1.1.23.
- 3) Braun (1994) no.1.3.5.



cat. no. XVI

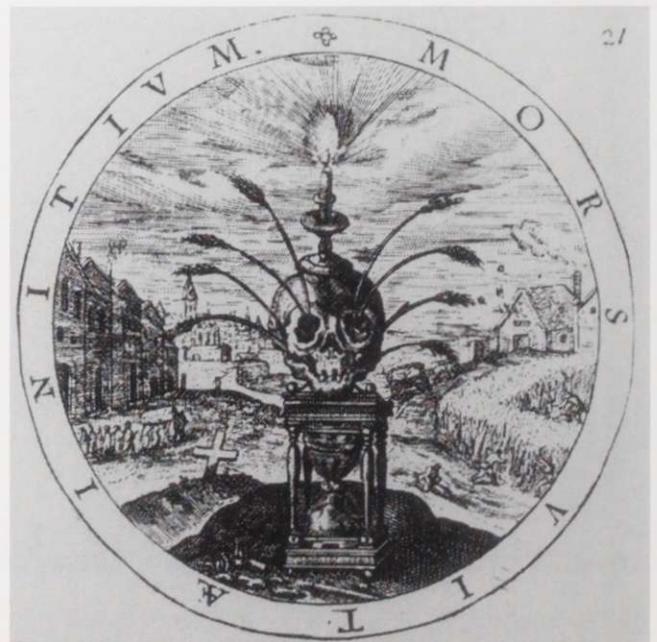
This painting by Cornelis Gijsbrechts is an especially beautiful *Vanitas* still life from the second half of the seventeenth century.⁴ Contemporary *Vanitas* painters include Edwaert Colyer, Vincent Laurensz. van der Vinne, Jan Vermeulen, Jan van der Heyden, Franciscus Gijsbrechts and others. Paintings by these artists reveal two important aspects: on one hand all these artists find their prime orientation in *Vanitas* still lives, which were executed between 1620 and 1650 in Leiden⁵ - by Rembrandt, de Gheyn, de Heem, the Steenwijk brothers or David Bailly - on the other hand it becomes evident, that Leiden is no longer the geographical centre of *Vanitas* still life painting. Pictures of this kind are now painted at different places. In the exhibition catalogue *Les Vanités* of 1990, Jacques Foucart pointed out that with the increasing popularity of this subject, the *Vanitas* still life crossed geographical and religious frontiers.⁶

Our *Vanitas* depicts a skull crowned with an ear. The two remaining teeth of the skull touch the face of an open pocket watch with a red ribbon. A bouquet with roses, tulips, a sunflower and other flowers, a globe, an open illustrated book, a violin and a candle surround the skull. Covered by the skull, a document and some music sheets are bending over the table's edge. On the left side one finds a large shell, an hour-glass, a palette with brushes, and a painter's stick. Behind the shell there are a wicker bottle and a glass filled with red wine. At the foot of a column in the background lie a cockle with soap bubbles and a straw. A soap bubble is hovering above it. Almost all the objects allude to the limited time in a person's life. Painting and music are as vain as the beauty of flowers and the science conserved in books. The sand in an hour-glass sinks to the bottom, a candle burns out, soap bubbles burst.

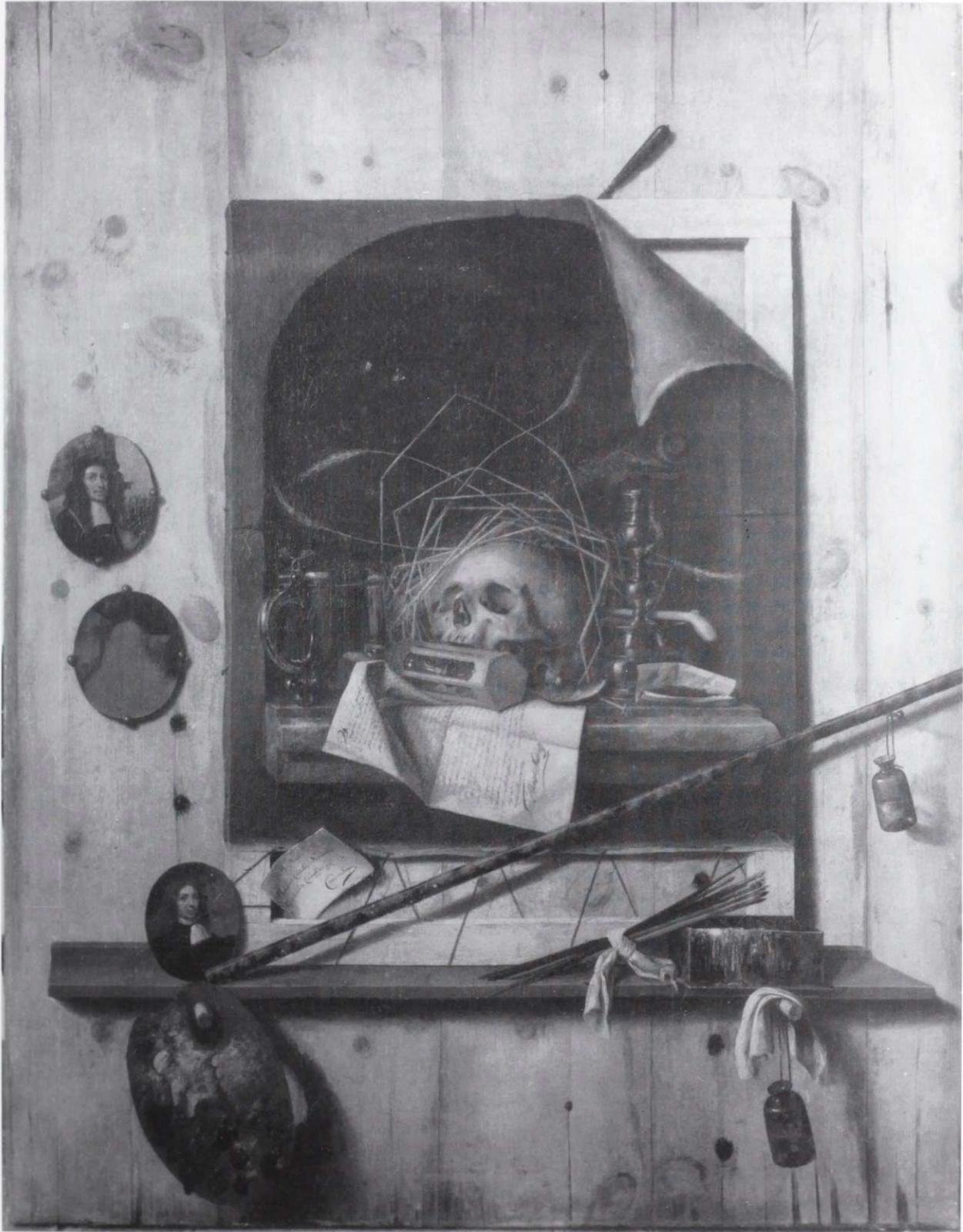
An important iconographical element is the pocket watch in the dialogue between earthly goods and the transience of life. In contrast to the hour-glass, the watch symbolizes *Temperantia*⁷, the right measure under all circumstances of life. *Temperantia* is the correct instrument to lead a pious life on earth and a requirement for the resurrection after death.

A symbol of resurrection is the ear of corn wrought around the skull. The basis for this symbol can be found in the Bible: *If the seed does not drop into the earth and does not die, it stays alone. But if it dies, it produces many other fruit* (Joh.12.24). *The seed does not come alive, if it has not died before* (1.Cor.15.36). Gabriel Rollhagen composed an emblem with a skull, an ear of corn, a candle and an hour-glass under the motto *Mors Vitae Initium* - death is the beginning of life.

Michael Braun



- 4) for an understanding of the characteristics see: Noack (1974) p.74
- 5) compare: Bergström (1956) p. 172
- 6) Foucart (1990) pp.55-68
- 7) Bergström (1956) p.189
- 8) Rollhagen (1976) Sp.1000



Pl. G1

Cornelis N. Gijsbrechts, *Studio Wall with Vanitas*, oil on canvas 152 x 118 cm, signed on the little paper below the Vanitas to the left: A Mons. / Monsieur Cornelius Norbertus / Gijsbrechts Conterfeyer, C.N. Gijsbrechts FA 1668, bought in 1668, Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst, Inv. Stro. 537