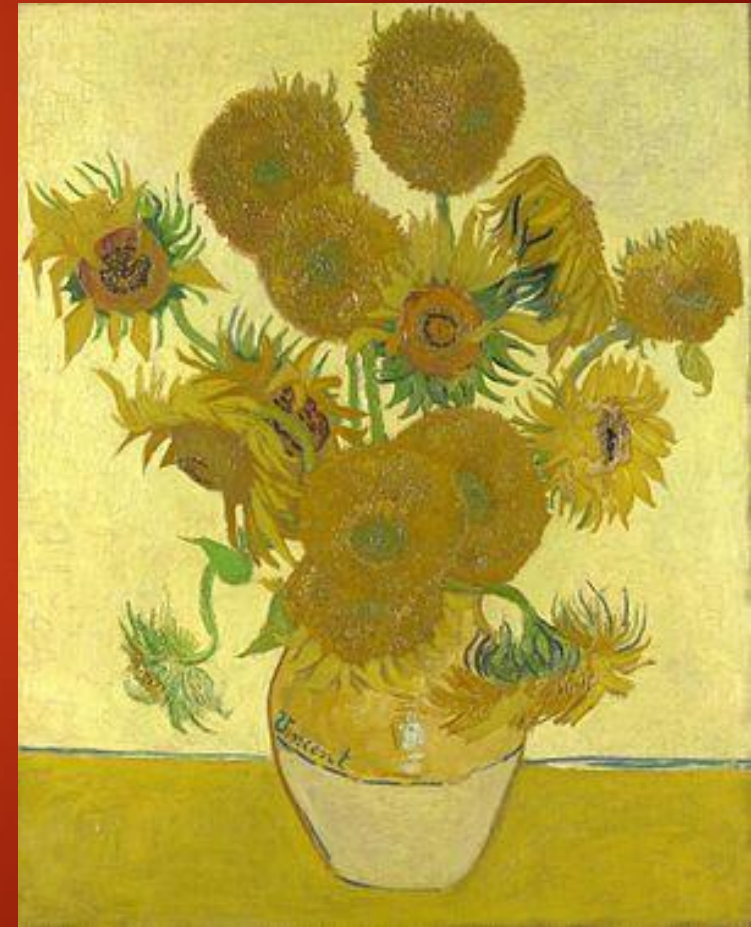


Still Life History

BY AWAIS NAQVI

the touchstone of painting

- ▶ Edouard Manet once called still life “the touchstone of painting.” Characterized by an interest in the insentient, this genre of art has been popular across movements, cultures, and periods, with major figures like Paul Cézanne and Pablo Picasso sharing the Impressionist artist’s view.

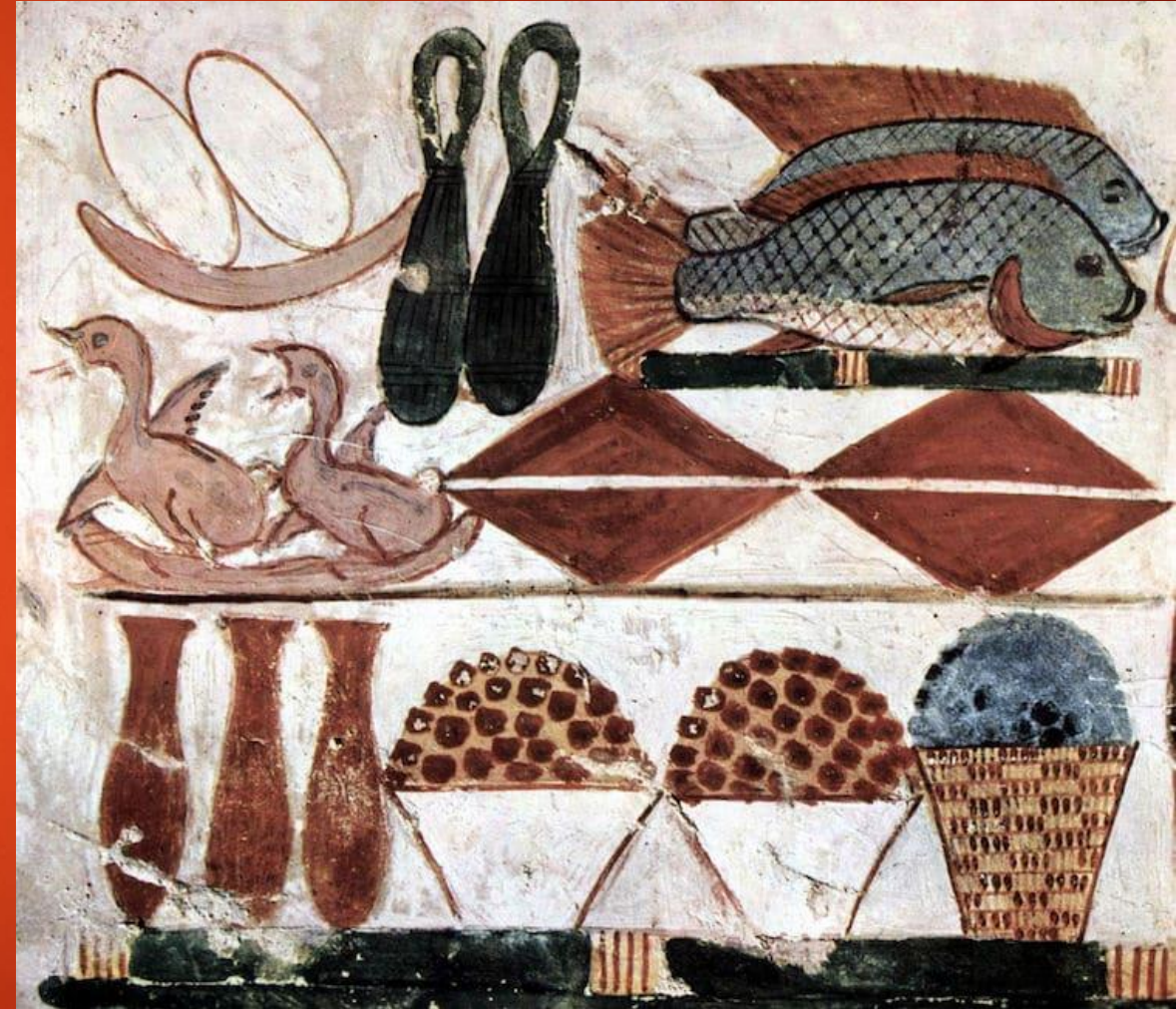


Still Life Definition

- ▶ A still life (also known by its French title, nature morte) painting is a piece that features an arrangement of inanimate objects as its subject. Usually, these items are set on a table and often include organic objects like fruit and flowers and household items like glassware and textiles.
- ▶ The term “still life” is derived from the Dutch word stilleven, which gained prominence during the 16th century. While it was during this time that the still life gained recognition as a genre, its roots date back to ancient times.

History

- ▶ ANCIENT ART
- ▶ The earliest known still life paintings were created by the Egyptians in the 15th century BCE. Funerary paintings of food—including crops, fish, and meat—have been discovered in ancient burial sites. The most famous ancient Egyptian still-life was discovered in the Tomb of Menna, a site whose walls were adorned with exceptionally detailed scenes of everyday life.



- ▶ Ancient Greeks and Romans also created similar depictions of inanimate objects. While they mostly reserved still life subject matter for mosaics, they also employed it for frescoes, like *Still Life with Glass Bowl of Fruit and Vases*, a 1st-century wall painting from Pompeii.

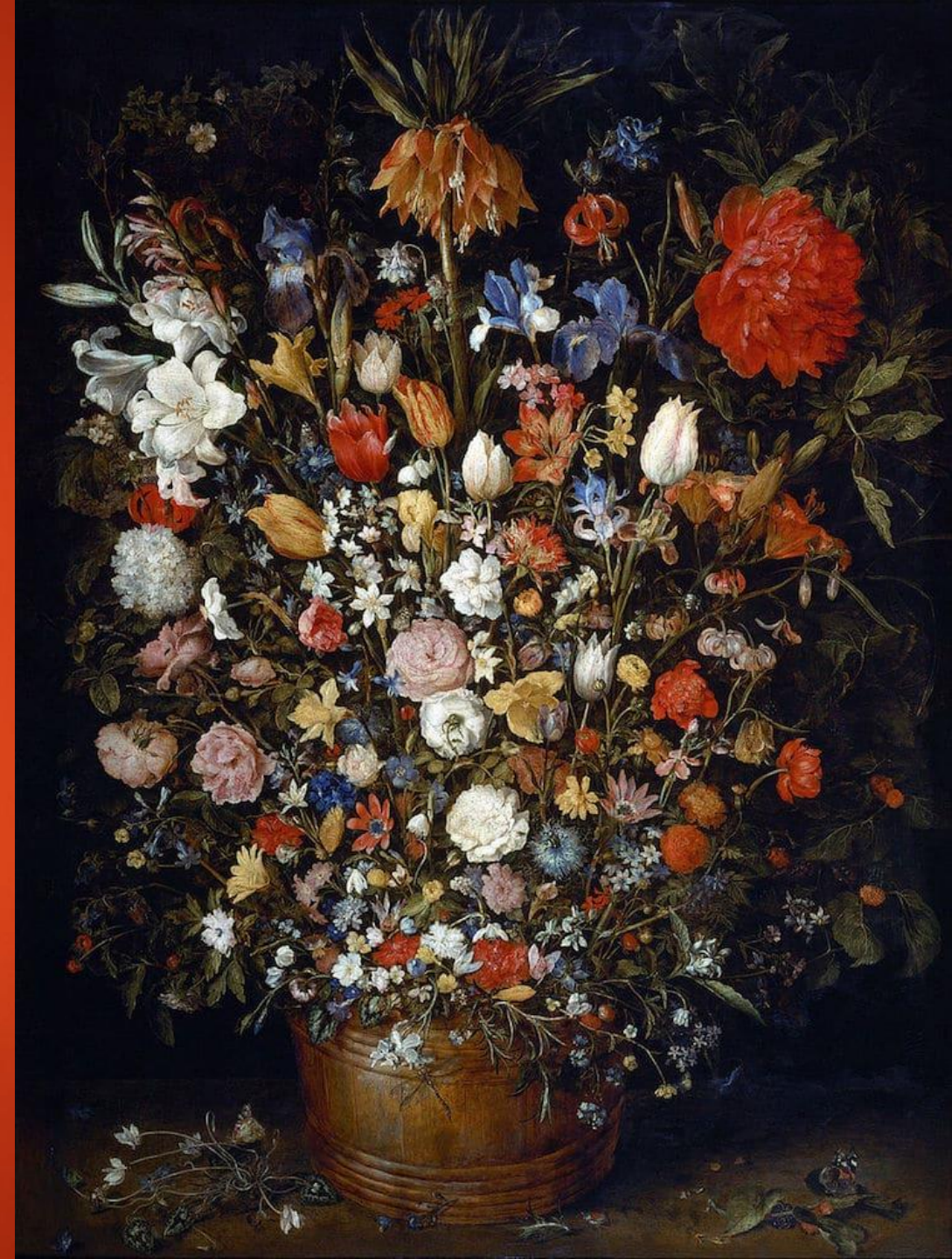


MIDDLE AGES

- ▶ During the Middle Ages, artists adapted the still life for religious purposes. In addition to incorporating symbolic arrangements into depictions of Biblical scenes, they also used them to decorate illuminated manuscripts. Objects like coins, seashells, and bushels of fruit can be found in the borders of these books, including the elaborately decorated Hours of Catherine of Cleves from the 15th century.

RENAISSANCE

- ▶ Northern Renaissance artists popularized still life iconography with their flower paintings. These pieces typically showcase colorful flora “from different countries and even different continents in one vase and at one moment of blooming” (Metropolitan Museum of Art) and often do not feature other subject matter. These paintings rose to prominence in the early 17th century, when Northern Renaissance artists grew increasingly interested in creating realistic studies of everyday items.



Dutch Golden Age

- ▶ Dutch Golden Age artists took this interest in detailed floral art a step further with their vanitas paintings. Vanitas paintings are inspired by memento mori, a genre of painting whose Latin name translates to “remember that you have to die.” Like memento mori depictions, these pieces often pair cut flowers with objects like human skulls, waning candles, and overturned hourglasses to comment on the fleeting nature of life.
- ▶ Unlike memento mori art, however, vanitas paintings “also include other symbols such as musical instruments, wine and books to remind us explicitly of the vanity of worldly pleasures and goods” (Tate).



MODERN ART

- ▶ The still life remained a popular feature in many modern art movements. While Impressionist artists like Pierre-Auguste Renoir dabbled in the genre, it made its major modern debut during the Post-Impressionist period, when Vincent van Gogh adopted flower vases as his subject and Cézanne painted a famous series of still lifes featuring apples, wine bottles, and water jugs resting on topsyturvy tabletops.



The end