Research point – Look at the work of some of the 17th century Dutch still life and flower painters

There are a number of different elements to this task which is why I have decided to break them down into manageable sections. I will commence this research point by looking at a still life by the celebrated 17th century Dutch still life and flower painter Rachel Ruysch.

- I will make notes on paintings that I especially admire and discover more about the techniques that were employed at the time.
- I will research at least one painting that has iconographic significance and highlight which of the depicted objects carry particular meanings and describe those meanings in more detail.
- I will also explore the development of the still life through the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries and I will also examine how traditional still life subjects were interpreted in early Cubist paintings by artists such as Cezanne and Picasso.
- Finally, I will examine how contemporary artists such as Ann Witheridge are exploring this genre. Her oeuvre interests me as I admire her style and overall approach. She’s also trained me to draw and paint and as such I am familiar with the techniques that she uses.
Describing and relating *Flowers in a Vase, 1698, Rachel Ruysch* (in the form of three separate spider diagrams)

![Spider diagram 1 of 3](image)

**Research point**
- Look at the work of some of the 17th century Dutch still life and flower painters. *Flowers in a Vase, 1698, Rachel Ruysch.* A spider diagram analysis created 16th January 2017 by Lucy Dean.

**Figure 2 Spider diagram 1 of 3**
Describing and relating *Flowers in a Vase, 1698*, Rachel Ruysch (in the form of three separate spider diagrams)

![Spider diagram for Flowers in a Vase, 1698, Rachel Ruysch](image)

*Figure 3 Spider diagram 2 of 3.*
Describing and relating *Flowers in a Vase*, 1698, Rachel Ruysch (in the form of three separate spider diagrams)

**Research point**

**Figure 4 Spider diagram 3 of 3.**
Describing the processes and techniques of *Flowers in a Vase* by Rachel Ruysch

**What type of artwork is it?**

*Flowers in a Vase* is an ambitiously composed still life with iconographic significance. At first glance, the viewer could be forgiven for assuming that the still life was simply a beautiful rendition of an assemblage of flowers and insects. However, the subject matter and its manner of representation indicate that there is more to this image than initially meets the eye.

**How do I think it was made?**

I believe that Ruysch produced *Flowers in a Vase* via the Renaissance and Old Master techniques of encasing the image first in a simple box-like structure in order to accurately render the proportions. Once achieved, the artist could then progress to the next stage of the drawing process by identifying the essential lines and volumes. Finding the largest shadow shapes first ensures that everything remains in proportion and true-to-life. The Encasement system is a highly effective method for painting and drawing as it greatly reduces the risk of error. It also helps the artist to identify the key proportions and lines within the first initial eight strokes. Once this has been achieved, the artist can then begin massing in the all-important volumes. The dark background would have been a very useful optical device for the artist as although the composition is extremely complex; the dark ground works in a similar way to charcoal (Nick Bashall, 2006-2015).

In classical drawing ateliers it is traditional to mass/fill in the background in a dark medium (for drawing it is charcoal; whilst for painting it would be dark oil paint). Once the background/or shadow shapes have been filled or massed in; the artist can then step back and review the work to see if any changes need to be made. Throughout the process of drawing/painting Ruysch would have stepped back in order to assess the aesthetic success of her piece. With her extreme attention to detail, I am certain that she made numerous revisions to the canvas during the painting process. The process for drawing always follows these criteria (Lavender Hill Studios, 2004-2015):


Once Ruysch had discovered the main shadow shapes she would have begun to develop the chiaroscuro (the tonal values). Once the key tones have been identified; then the final stage is colour. Colour is the most difficult to achieve as it differs from person to person (as we all view colour in a slightly different
way); and also colour changes according to the time of the day (as the light changes); and also the atmospheric conditions (e.g. overcast, full-sunlight etc.) can also play a part (Ann Witheridge, 2006-2015).

Can I see any evidence of how the artist's hand moved? Was it produced quickly and energetically or slowly?

I believe the artist worked in a painstaking manner as this is a remarkably beautiful work. The still life itself is a tour-de-force as the botanical details are staggering to behold. The canvas seems to awaken and breathe life itself due to the myriad use of imagery and detail. Please note that my photograph of the still life is the best I could achieve; although it fails to do the original justice. Other examples of her work can be viewed online on the National Gallery website and on the website of the Rijksmuseum. (Please see my bibliography for more information).

How long do I think it took to make?

I think the painting required a considerable amount of time (probably several months) as the artist must have painted directly from life. The details are incredibly life-like and are extremely convincing. *Flowers in a Vase* is definitely a labour of love. I think the artist had many breaks during the process of creating this oeuvre, as although it is highly detailed it is thoughtfully composed. It essentially avoids appearing overworked, which is no mean feat in an image as complex as this!

Do I think other people may have helped the artist make it?

I think it is unlikely that the artist had any help except perhaps with regards to the framing of the image. Her father was a botanist and I think it is highly likely that she shared his interest in botany and the beauty of plants and flowers. Like many of her contemporaries, Ruysch elected to specialise in the genre of flower painting and managed to achieve fame in her lifetime; which is a remarkable accomplishment for a female artist of this period (Rijksmuseum, n.d.).

How is it displayed?

*Flowers in a Vase* is a framed canvas, although I've been unable to source any information about the frame itself. Some of her other works are on display in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and at the National Gallery in London.
Interpreting *Flowers in a Vase* by Rachel Ruysch

**What do I think is happening in this art work?**

Although this is a still life of flowers; I believe the artist was attempting to convey an iconographic viewpoint. Her attention to detail is impressive and I think it demonstrates her skill and ambition as a painter of flora and still lifes.

**Where and when was the artwork created?**

This artwork was produced in the United Netherlands during a period of stability and wealth in the newly independent Dutch republic. The United Netherlands and its provinces had recently achieved autonomy from Spain after many years of religious strife and conflict. This caused a great flourishing in the arts as artists sought to create works of art for the rapidly expanding merchant classes (Rijksmuseum, n.d.).

**What do I know about that place and that period in history?**

The Dutch Golden Age coincided with the end of the Thirty Years War and the decline of Spanish rule. For thirty years Holland and the other six provinces of the United Netherlands had rallied against Spanish autocracy. The Spanish ideal of “one king, one law, one faith”, imposed by King Phillip II of Spain, had caused the persecution of many religious groups all over Europe; in particular Jews and Protestants; many of whom were offered asylum in the new republic (Honour & Fleming, 2009).

The rise of the Dutch republic revolutionised seventeenth century Europe as free-thinking, philosophical ideas; and religious and political tolerance became the established norms. Also, the celebrated philosophers such as the Frenchman Rene Descartes and the Portuguese Jew Spinoza; settled in the new republic to draft and publish their works; and to spread their radical ideas. Initially, Descartes’ famous treatise of “I think therefore I am” was a slow burner; but gradually his ideas were adopted throughout Europe. Furthermore, the power and influence of the aristocracy was greatly weakened after the fall of the Spanish and so a new class emerged from their midst (Honour & Fleming, 2009).

The new republic became an economic and social powerhouse due to expansive trade with the rest of the world. Thus a new social class was established and comprised wealthy merchants, bankers, shippers and manufacturers. This new class created a new demand for easel paintings which were intended to adorn their homes and show off their riches. In fact, they enthusiastically collected works which encompassed a wide variety of imagery such as: landscapes, seascapes, portraits, low-life scenes, still life and many more genres besides. Interestingly, there was very little demand for altarpieces or for works of an overtly religious nature; as the majority of people purchased art which was realistic and true-to-life. The new republic was unique in Europe at the time as it...
was surrounded by other less democratic and tolerant states. In the United Netherlands huge social, cultural and political changes were occurring due to an influx of people escaping religious persecution elsewhere, and also due to challenges to the long-established authoritarian figures. The princes of Orange who for many years had ruled the United Provinces as governors, had their powers severely restricted during this period, to enable others to thrive and prosper. The Dutch were also unique as they based their economy on commerce, rather than agriculture; and their foreign policy was of a defensive slant rather than an aggressive one (Honour & Fleming, 2009).

Do I think the artwork is influenced by this?

I believe that the artwork was indeed influenced by all of the aforementioned socio-political and cultural changes in the new republic; as the work is sublime and the artist herself was much patronised and celebrated during her lifetime (Rijksmuseum, n.d.).

What do I know about the artist, their life, influences and art practice?

- The artist was from a remarkable family; her grandfather was the famous Dutch architect Pieter Post who designed many of the buildings in Amsterdam.
- Her father Frederik Ruysch was a celebrated scientist who was famous for his studies of botany and anatomy; particularly human anatomy. Frederik Ruysch was also renowned for his collection of natural curiosities; some of which comprised human and animal specimens. He was an expert in the preservation of human, animal and insect specimens and his collection was so well-known that he famously sold it to the Tsar of Russia, Peter the Great (WN, 2017).
- Her father Frederik was also an artist and published drawings of his specimens alongside his research. He encouraged his daughters (Rachel and Anna) to pursue their interest in art and the minutiae of the natural world. This period was a time of great interest in the study of the natural world and this was to influence their entire family (WN, 2017).
- Ruysch herself painted from her teens until well into her eighties and enjoyed a long and illustrious career. At her height, she was elected court painter to the Elector Palatine of Bavaria. During this period she moved with her family to Dusseldorf in order to pursue her career. Wisely she also continued producing works for her Dutch patrons alongside the commissions for the Elector Palatine (Rijksmuseum, n.d.).
- Aged fifteen she secured an apprenticeship with the flower painter Willem van Aelst. He was famous for experimenting with unusual compositions and his influence on Ruysch is clear as both artists produced still lifes which incorporated obvious diagonals. Their work set them apart from their contemporaries as it was asymmetrical and thus appeared to be more spontaneous and life-like. Ruysch’s work was popular and much in demand though due to its theatricality and attention to detail. Her colour harmonies also serve to reinforce the beauty of the natural world (WN, 2017).
Was the work originally intended for display or for some other purpose?

I believe the work was originally intended for display in someone’s home. The primary reason for Ruysch’s success is partly due to the reason that she perfectly understood what her patrons expected from her; and they knew that if they purchased a work from her then it would be of a sufficiently high quality. Her name and connections must have proved invaluable as a means to sell her work. Also, like many of her contemporaries she specialised and thus everyone knew what to expect from her. In her time, at auctions her work regularly outsold Rembrandt’s and usually sold for at least twice its value. So it was clearly very well received and appreciated in its day (WN, 2017).

How does it compare to her other works?

*Flowers in a Vase* is certainly on a par with her other works such as the later work *Fruit and Insects*, 1711. Although I admire the latter as it truly evokes an autumn harvest with its charming arrangement and warm colours. Both compositions are incredibly life-like and are highly ambitious (WN, 2017).

Evaluation

To conclude, I can classify the artwork as an exceptionally fine still life of flowers. The objects depicted are recognisable, thanks to the artist’s talent and careful attention to detail. The manner of representation is both natural and realistic as she has painstakingly recreated all of the petals of the peonies and duplicated the features of the insects. I believe that this canvas contains iconographic emblems as the sample of wheat would have been immediately recognisable to Christian onlookers. Traditionally, a morsel of wheat/bread represented the body of Christ (as in the Eucharist) (WN, 2017). The floral details and leafy foliage could also be metaphors for the brevity of human existence and also as a nod to the memento mori still life. Memento mori still lifes remind viewers that: “remember you must die” (Tate, n.d.). That is to say, that these sorts of paintings contained moral messages which were intended to remind viewers that time here on Earth is brief; therefore one must remember to enjoy the pleasures of life also.

The still life itself is luxurious in terms of its lush and verdant arrangement and it could be interpreted as a reference to the Garden of Eden. In the bible Eden is described as a lush and verdant setting full of temptation (Eve and the apple). So *Flowers in a Vase* is perhaps a metaphor for life itself, enjoy your life while you have it, for it is brief. But isn’t life wonderful? (Tate, n.d.).

The subject of the still life is certainly familiar to me and many artists have explored it through the ages. It reached its height during the Dutch Golden Age as it was elevated by the many different genres which were created at this time (Honour & Fleming, 2009).

I believe if the work was changed it would have a transformative effect on the composition. For example if tulips were added instead of lilies this would greatly alter the appearance of the painting. This is because Ruysch clearly invested a significant amount of time in the set-up and assemblage of the objects. I would
be interested to view the work in tempera though as this is a centuries old technique; though the values and colours would appear far flatter than their oily counterparts.

I think the overarching reason for the success of Ruysch’s work is that it was always intended to be displayed in the homes of her patrons; and as such, it suits the domestic environment. In spite of this, I've had the pleasure of viewing her work in-situ in the Rijksmuseum and it certainly holds its own. It was a delight to view some of her still lifes in a gallery of international renown. Her work clearly remains much admired today and is still regarded as important, as it hangs beside other famous works from the Dutch Golden Age (Rijksmuseum, n.d.).
The development of the still life during the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries:

The eighteenth century: Jean-Baptiste Chardin

*The Skate* is a remarkable canvas by Chardin as it’s a celebration of textures.

The artist delights in expressing various different types of effects such as: fur (the kitten), layered cloth, slippery fish (the skate), bone (the skate), oysters and brickwork.

I believe his work demonstrates his ability to render varied surfaces and assemble them in an interesting and innovative manner. Thus this would have appealed to the various academics who determined his future progression as an artist.

In their day, Chardin’s still lifes were mistaken for Dutch old masters, due to their restrained colours and his predilection for ordinary middle class subjects (Rowling, 1987).

Chardin’s fame as an artist increased due to a combination of factors. Firstly, engravers popularised his genre subjects and eventually the court preference for the Rococo style and taste went out of fashion. He became the master of the still life and genre paintings due to the simplicity of his compositions and his influence on later generations of painters. Artists such as Manet and Courbet were influenced by his interesting choice of subjects and his passion for replicating everyday middle class life (Read & Stangos, 1984).

*The Skate* secured him a place at the French Academy, as he managed to elevate the superficial genre of the still life to the high standards expected by the Academy (Rowling, 1987).

In their day, Chardin’s still lifes were mistaken for Dutch old masters, due to their restrained colours and his predilection for ordinary middle class subjects (Rowling, 1987).

*Figure 8 The Skate, 1728, Jean-Baptiste Chardin (Rowling, 1987:p.148-49).*

*Figure 9 The Copper Urn, c.1734, Jean-Baptiste Chardin (Rowling, 1987:p.148-49).*
The nineteenth century: Paul Cezanne (early Cubism) and the twentieth century: Pablo Picasso (Cubism)

In *Still life with Apples and Biscuits* Cezanne presents an alternative reality. Like a magician, he carefully presents an assemblage of apples which at first glance appear convincing and life-like, but are in fact distortions of reality (Harris, 1996).

Cezanne distorts our sense of perspective by painting the apples based on different studies, and subsequently puts them together to create one unified whole. The distortions arise due to his interest in flattening the picture planes; and instead creating perspective by using warm and cool colours. The reasoning behind this is because when we visualise warm colours they appear closer to us (they are used for emphasis). While cool colours appear to recede, thus creating an impression of distance (Harris, 1996).

Cezanne revolutionised painting and the genre of still life as he influenced later artists such as Picasso and Braque. So we have Cezanne to thank for the beginnings of Cubism.

The whole painting seems to shift and pulsate as all of the different elements of the background, wallpaper, table and still life objects are fragmented; and scattered about like a set of playing cards on a table. The letters “JOUR (day)” are featured on the cover of a newspaper, but like everything else in the image they are skewed. The word instead reads “jeu” or “jouer” which mean game and to play in French; thus this canvas is a play on words and represents Picasso’s playful nature. Other Cubist items are incorporated such as pears, drinking glasses and playing cards (a reference to Mallarme) (Penrose, 1991).

In *Still life with Cards, Glasses and a Bottle of Rum-‘Vive la France’*, Picasso plays with our sense of perspective and suspends our view of reality. He utilises many different elements to poke fun at the image as whole. For instance, he utilises objects such as a cup on the left to proclaim the message “Vive la France”, a nod to his conscription in the French army during World War I (Penrose, 1991).
In *Untitled Still life*, Ann explores the beauty and simplicity of the still life genre. Her painterly style beautifully compliments the restrained elegance of the overall painting, and suits the curvilinear lines of the jug and the garlic.

A strong sense of perspective is created via the implementation of the sight size and the Encajar (Encasement) method of drawing and painting (Ann Witheridge, 2006-2015).

I admire Ann’s work as she trained me to draw and paint from life, whilst I was studying at Lavender Hill Studios in London.

I admire her varied brushstrokes, as the gentle feathering in the background enhances the jug and brings it to the fore. The rougher brushstrokes in the foreground are successful as they accurately convey the edge of the table. This in my view is still life at its very best (Ann Witheridge, 2006-2015).

I commend Ann’s restraint and the simplicity of her still life, which I believe is very much still life at its very best (Ann Witheridge, 2006-2015).

Figure 11 *Untitled Still life*, 2016, oil on canvas, Ann Witheridge (Ann Witheridge, 2017).
Bibliography


