

OUT OF HOURS

Text example 2

Collection Displays | Still Life/Object/Real Life | **Memento Mori**

The still life genre has often been used by artists to represent themes of mortality and transience.

The term *Memento Mori* derives from a Latin phrase, meaning '**Remember that you must die**'. It is often used to describe a type of still life painting, also known as *Vanitas*, from the Latin word for 'vanity' or 'futility', that portrays the brevity of life and the folly of material excess. Such paintings are particularly associated with the Dutch artists of the seventeenth century who depicted skulls, shells, candles, decaying fruit and flowers as symbols of mortality, often accompanied by books, musical instruments and mirrors that suggest the fleeting nature of earthly pleasures.

Artists in the twentieth century have revived many of the key pictorial devices associated with *Vanitas*. Picasso found new resonance in the traditional emblems of the skull and candle, using them to echo the unease and anxiety of Europe after the Second World War. Contemporary artists such as Damien Hirst and Tim Head have incorporated actual objects symbolising **death and decay** in their work. The paintings of Patrick Caulfield integrate realistic examples of *Vanitas* imagery within a more abstract framework, while Keith Edmier creates a bouquet of roses to mourn the lost innocence of a generation. In Sam Taylor-Wood's *Still Life* (2001), the *Memento Mori* is brought chillingly up to date, using time-lapse photography to show a beautifully-composed bowl of fruit succumb to **putrefaction and decay**.

Text written by Susan May