



Christoffel van den Berghe, *Still Life with Flowers in a Vase*, 1617. Philadelphia Museum of Art. John G. Johnson Collection, 1917. 37.6 x 29.5 cms. Photo Google Art Project. Wikimedia Commons / Public Domain.

UNFREEZING TIME

Patricia Fara*

The camera supposedly never lies, but a picture certainly can. These flowers are displayed in sharp-focus detail, and they impart an impression of photographic reality.

At the bottom, towards the left of the stone sill, a peacock butterfly perches momentarily with its wings outspread ready for flight, as if immobilised by a high-speed shutter; at the diagonally opposite corner, another insect hovers, apparently suspended in mid-air while it sips some nectar.

Once you realise that this is not a

photograph but a seventeenth-century oil painting (on copper), it becomes clear that an illusion is being perpetrated. In actuality, the flowers in this bouquet flourish at different times of year, and could never have been arranged simultaneously in a vase. Along with the butterflies, each one had to be painstakingly painted over a long duration, its design and colour checked against the original. Rather than being a snap-shot of a single instant, this picture symbolises the passing of time and the brevity of life.

The tulips, roses and other cultivated blooms stand stiffly on their stalks, in deliberate contrast with the wild specimens pushed in rather randomly between them. Like other artists of this period, Christoffel van den Berghe was interested in showing the order artificially imposed on the natural world by humanity. His picture is designed to remind its viewers that chaos will return, that pleasures are only temporary, that life itself is fragile. One withered rose has already fallen from its place, and the caterpillar crawling across the bottom will eventually be transformed into a splendid butterfly that may be beautiful, but whose existence is merely transient. Nearby lie some empty shells that once contained living creatures, as well as two delicate porcelain ornaments from China that could very easily be broken.

Instead of decorating a home, these objects are confined within a tomb-like stone niche, whose chipped edge provides further testimony that decay lies all around. Many similar reminders of mortality were painted during the Golden Age of the Dutch Republic. Over the previous few decades, Holland had become an important centre for growing tulips, themselves emblematic of wealth and worldly preoccupation. By reinforcing puritanical emphasis on avoiding frivolity, such still-lives powerfully conveyed a moral message, yet also managed to avoid the Protestant embargo on explicitly religious imagery.

With their elaborate patterns of stripes and distinctive petal shapes, the three tulips in this picture are redolent of elapsed time. Each individual bloom will last for about a week, but these specialised varieties could only have been created after many years of careful, specialised breeding. Originally imported

from Turkey, tulips rapidly became fashionable because their petals were tinted with an intensity previously unknown in Europe. But these vivid streaks are due to local propagation techniques that relied on transmitting a virus carried by the bulbs. The process is unreliable, expensive and can take many years to complete: after a plant flowers, its bulb dies, and is replaced by a new one accompanied by a few buds – and it is these buds that have to be cultivated.

Bulbs became a luxury item in Holland that could be sold at a great profit, but that also brought great losses. Canny opportunists realised that they could take advantage of time by betting against the future, and financially astute tulip traders joined the ranks of the world's leading investment innovators. From June to September, bulbs could be safely dug up for sale on the open market. But there was a second option: buyers and sellers began signing formal notarised contracts agreeing to complete the deal only at the end of the season. When a grower promised to develop a particularly unusual and enticing specimen, its price rose sharply as speculative purchasers competed for ownership. While actual bulbs were becoming a major export (fourth after gin, herrings and cheese), virtual ones were attracting escalating sums of money, repeatedly exchanged between owners who never came near a real plant until the sale was effected. At the peak of this tulip mania, a single bulb could be worth roughly the annual salary of a skilled labourer.

Less than twenty years after this picture was painted, the Dutch tulip bubble suddenly burst when an outbreak of bubonic plague kept buyers away from the auctions. Like a beautiful butterfly that lives for a day, or blooms that last for only a week, the delights of easy wealth soon melted away. Time is multiply encapsulated in this deceptive picture that looks as if it had been completed yesterday.

Dr Patricia Fara is an historian of science and has been President of the AHS since 2016. This is the third in a series of short articles in which she discusses a number of images, each illustrating a different way of incorporating time and its passing within a picture without showing a clock.