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# Jasper Skulls and Memento Mori

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# Jasper Skulls and Memento Mori

## **Abstract**

The jasper skulls in this Curiosity Cabinet sit on the scale atop the touch-ables table. **Jasper**, a type of impure silica usually a reddish color, is commonly carved for small sculptures, as we see in the skulls.

The reddish tones of both skulls match the overall tone of the cabinet nicely, as well as complimenting the rich medium blue of the walls. Thematically, skulls perfectly align with other objects in the cabinet.

A ubiquitous theme of **curiosity cabinets** in the 16th and 17th century is the inevitability of death. Symbols of this notion in art work are known as **Memento mori** or **vanitas**. Memento mori is derived from Latin, and roughly translates to, “remember you will die.” Vanitas is a related term with similar meaning: all Earthly pursuits are feeble because they are temporary. (*excerpt*)

## **Keywords**

jasper skulls, Memento Mori, Vanitas, Renaissance, Chamber of Wonders, science, knowledge, curiosity cabinets

## **Disciplines**

Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture | Fine Arts | History of Science, Technology, and Medicine | Intellectual History | Interdisciplinary Arts and Media

## **Comments**

Produced as part of a collaboration between Kay Etheridge's course FYS-188: Exploration of the Marvelous: Art and Science in the Renaissance, and Felicia Else's course ARTH 284: Wonders of Nature and Artifice: The Renaissance Quest for Knowledge.

Original version online at <http://wonder-cabinet.sites.gettysburg.edu/2017/cabinet/jasper-skulls-and-memento-mori/>

# Jasper Skulls and Memento Mori

By Kath Paul



Jasper skulls on a scale, Photo credit: Dr. Felicia Else

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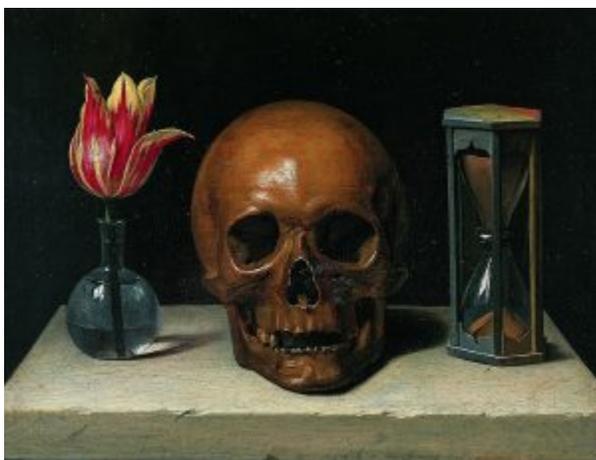
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Memento mori, Photo cred: Dr. Felicia Else

[Memento mori](#) or [vanitas](#). Memento mori is

derived from Latin, and roughly translates to, “remember you will die.” Vanitas is a related term with similar meaning: all Earthly pursuits are feeble because they are temporary.



Vanitas, Philippe de Champagne, 1671. Skulls, flowers, and hourglasses are all common memento mori, Photo credit:

Wikipedia

Examples of memento mori that are common in Renaissance artwork include skulls, for obvious reason. Skulls serve as a blatant symbol of death, forcing the viewer to reconcile his or her own mortality. Other memento mori that are easily recognizable are extinguished candles, flower scenes (especially those including insects such as flies), and time-turners. Each allude to the passed if time and the passing of life.

## Examples of Memento Mori in the Curiosity Cabinet

As mentioned, flowers are a classic memento mori symbol. Once cut from the root, they do not survive long. They decay from a beautiful wonder of nature to a wilted heap. One item in the cabinet is a large painting of lilies, a major part of sixteenth century Dutch culture. Lily collecting and trading was popular enough to influence the economy and societal structure. As flowers, though, they die quickly. Immortalized in a print, they recall to the viewer the fragility of beauty and life.



The Superb Lily, Published by Morpho Butterfly Collection, 16.5 in x 8.25 in x 1.5 in, Gettysburg, Professor Kay Etheridge, Research credit: MEREDITH ELAINE BROWN



Doctor Robert Thornton, June 1st, 1799, the unframed piece is 14.75" x 19.5" and measures 21.75" x 26.5" framed. Research credit:

The use of insects as symbols in painting, as well as collecting of specimen in cabinets is relevant to memento mori because of their short life span and fading beauty, especially of the butterfly. Butterflies metamorphose from a larval stage into a radiant work of natural beauty. This beauty, however, is fleeting. The [Morpho butterfly](#), the collection in the cabinet, has a lifespan of about a hundred days, the length of a season. With winter the season of the butterfly, just like the season of growth in the spring, summer, and fall.

The quintessential memento mori are skulls. There are both an alligator skull, property of the Gettysburg College Biology Department. On the touchable table, there is a replica of a human skull.



Memento mori skull, Photo credit: Dr. Felicia Else



American Alligator skull, Research credit: PETER ZHANG

### Can artwork show these themes without memento mori symbols?

Although there are no memento mori in the two Hoguet paintings, they refer to the fragility of life in different ways. The landscape, *Landscape with a Wagon and Windmill*, is set at dusk near the beginning of fall.



Landschaft Mit Einem Fuhwerk und Windmuhle (Landscape with a Wagon and Windmill), Louis Hoguet, detail, Photo Credit: Kathleen Paul

This is evident because of the side cast, soft lighting, and the slightly orange leaves in the trees. These are clues to hint fall is coming, and with fall comes the end of the harvest and the dead season, winter.

The seascape is more obviously connected to the notion of memento mori because the sublime landscape is meant to draw out fear of nature and death. The Romantic Era is about intensity of emotion, and one such emotion it revolves around is fear, including fear of death.



Felsige Kustenpartie mit Staffag (Beach Landscape with Fisherman), Louis Hoguet, Photo Credit: Kathleen Paul