

Nature morte – tableau vivant

On the still lifes of things

“I often realize that, in order for a person to deal with the things around him in a more conscious manner, he needs a serious amount of rest and time. In order to recognize the various functions and aspects of things, he needs to dwell on them.”
(From Erik De Kuypere, *Dag stoel naast de tafel. Kroniek van het dagelijkse*, p.37)¹

Writing about a still life is like turning a kaleidoscope: many differing perspectives, visions, and aspects are possible. Writing about the still lifes created by jewelry designer Gésine Hackenberg is truly a kaleidoscopic experience. With every quarter turn of the head, her designs reveal a new perspective; suddenly every piece of the puzzle fits, forming a recognizable whole. Both colored and white parts of drinking glasses and kitchen jars flow together to form both optically and perspectively a sober and subtle still life. Each new glance brings forth new associations and connections. Contrary to what the term 'still life' suggests, it is 'live experience' that permeates the objects portrayed in these 'still lifes'. They tell a number of (art)historical and personal stories. By doing so, these wearable compositions become part of the recurring trademark/signature of Gésine Hackenberg's oeuvre, in which things and their emotional value play a highly important role.

Pictures of 17th and 18th century still lifes, as well as the development of the genre from colorful '*ontbijtjes*' (breakfast pieces) to monochromatic '*banquetjes*' (banquet pieces) en sumptuous '*pronkstillevens*', served as the main sources of inspiration for Hackenberg's newest series, entitled *Still Lifes*. The connection between the historical still lifes and her work is reflected on several different levels. Just as a still life painter, she exhibits a great sense of concentration and detail. She too regards objects of daily life in a slow and thoughtful manner, granting them an emotional reevaluation in her work. As an artist of the present, she presents still lifes as a genre in a fascinating and contemporary fashion.

Directly inspired by the study '*Still Life and Trade in the Dutch Golden Age*' (2007²) by art historian Julie Berger Hochstrasser, the *Still Lifes* series in a way refers to the economic bloom of Amsterdam during the Golden Age, visualized in the traditionally portrayed commodities in historical still lifes. References to commodities like bread, butter, cheese, and wine, are implicitly brought together in Hackenberg's designs, such as a green, transparent glass brooch matched with two drinking glasses to create an odd perspective. Its parts were minutely sliced from a thin Finnish drinking glass and brought together in a new composition, a still life. What immediately comes to mind is the image of rich wine glasses from 17th century '*pronkstillevens*', such as the so-called '*roemers*' (rummers), like a round or oval glass for white wine. Hochstrasser emphasizes the economic pride that such '*roemers*' with wine provoked in a 17th century audience. She additionally states that a still life served as the ultimate ode to the economic bloom of the times. With this claim, she adds a new, positive dimension to the *vanitas* or symbolism of transience that was conventionally ascribed to such paintings. The jewelry still lifes of Gésine Hackenberg contribute a third significance to the work: not only are

¹ DE KUYPER, E., *Dag stoel naast de tafel. Kroniek van het dagelijkse*, Nijmegen, Sun, 1991, p. 37.

² HOCHSTRASSER, J.B., *Still Life and Trade in the Dutch Golden Age*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2007.

This study offers an innovative art historical outlook on still lifes from the 17th century, from an economic perspective.

the implicit reference to the valuable commodities and the symbolical connotations present, but the realness and 'thing-ness' of the objects with their emotional value are traceable, as well.

The still lifes composed of bottles, pots and bowls, which can be worn as a brooch, have a formal austerity and subtle shades of color reminiscent of Chardin's 18th century still lifes. His portrayals of the prosaic, such as the kitchen still lifes, reveal the hidden poetry and beauty of the objects. Gésine Hackenberg indeed feels like a kindred spirit of Chardin. They share a sensibility to and love for the beauty of the prosaic life. Morandi as well is admired by Hackenberg. A master of enigmatic still lifes with abstract compositions, he builds miniature worlds from bottles and pots. The same simplicity of colors and composition can be found in the brooches of Gésine Hackenberg.

As soon as they are worn on the body, an interesting mixture of the terms *nature morte* and *tableau vivant* arises: the human body serves as a canvas and simultaneously becomes a *tableau vivant*³, a 'living painting'. The objects and their souls then literally merge with the direct human environment; they are appropriated by the holder and become a part of our living world.

While traditional still lifes are a perfect *imitatio* or flat imitation of three-dimensional compositions, the brooches and necklaces of Gésine Hackenberg belong to an alienating stage, in between 3D and 2D. By slicing existing pots, bowls and glasses, three-dimensional compositions are created which, on first sight, appear to be two-dimensional. It is exactly this optical game that results in a fascinating and alienating effect. Each piece consequently questions the nature of still lifes and the traditional renaissance perspective. One almost immediately visualizes the references to Picasso's and Braque's cubic still lifes, in which different perspectives are portrayed. In the analysis and fragmentation of objects and in the reconstruction of parts on a canvas, one instantly recognizes the similarity to the still lifes of Hackenberg. Even the remarkable stage between 3D and 2D can be linked to the cubic experiments. Take the work of Braque and Juan Gris in which the object itself – in its real form – becomes a part of the cubic collage in the shape of newspaper clippings, wood, wallpaper fragments... which in turn accentuates the three-dimensional aspect of the canvas. These works engendered a comparable alienating effect between 2D and 3D. A similar form of alienation is evoked by the stone brooches, cut in perspective, also resulting in a blurring of the boundaries between two and three-dimensionality in these designs.

The goblet necklaces accentuate another aspect: movement. The liquid movement when pouring out a glass is displayed by the fragmentation of the glass goblet. Just as in the well-known 'Nu descendant un escalier No 2' (1912) by Marcel Duchamp, the chain of successive phases of movement causes a sense of dynamic. As a result, the still life of the objects evolves into subtle movement and stirrings. These objects may be lifeless, but they are permeated by 'live experience' and stories.

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³ A *tableau vivant* is a form of theater, prevalent during the 18th and 19th centuries, consisting of settings with stationary people in costume.