

*Vanitas*, by Pieter Claesz (c. 1597–1660)

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This artwork appears in the [July 20, 2016](#) issue.



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The vanitas tradition in 17th-century Dutch still-life painting draws inspiration from the Vulgate version of Ecclesiastes 1:2: “*Vanitas vanitatum omnia vanitas*” [“Vanity of vanities, all is vanity”]. The Latin *vanitas* means “emptiness” or “futility” and was used to render the Hebrew term *hebel*, which primarily means “vapor” and refers to that which is fleeting and perishable (Ps. 62:9, 144:4). In this painting, Pieter Claesz, a German-born painter based in Haarlem, depicts human mortality with a skull and bone. The table is cluttered with other items suggesting transience and the futility of human pursuits. Along with an overturned chalice, there is a timepiece, a writer’s quill, and a music manuscript. The smoke is an especially poignant symbol of ephemerality. The impermanence of human existence underscores human dependence on a sovereign and eternal God.