Dead Animals and the Beast-Machine: seventeenth-century Netherlandish paintings of dead animals, as anti-Cartesian statements

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1. Introduction

Still-life painting of dead animals emerged as an iconographical genre in early modern art, mainly in seventeenth-century Netherlandish painting.¹ It was at this time also that the ongoing debate on the status of animals reached one of its most interesting stages, i.e. the dispute regarding the Cartesian theory of the ‘beast-machine’, which viewed animals as mere automata. In recent scholarship the interdisciplinary approach combining art-historical and historical data has become increasingly more popular.² However, as far as I know, such an approach has not been applied to a joint study of these two issues.³ It is the purpose of the present article to offer such a study.

The modern viewer of early modern depictions of dead animals may well feel perplexed. Such paintings often include an ostentatious display of delight in such motifs, which is quite foreign to most modern depictions of this type, for example, Chaïm Soutine’s overtly pessimistic still-life motifs. The modern viewer, especially if he is sensitive to the current debate on animal rights, thus inevitably feels a tension between the inherent beauty of such paintings, and their exemplification of a seeming insensitivity to animal life and suffering. While the present discussion does not necessarily dissipate this tension, it does offer an elucidation and better understanding of it. This understanding stems from the discussion of such paintings as statements of attitudes toward animals, considered within the context of the general development of the early modern attitude toward them. This enables a better understanding of both the development of this attitude toward animals, and the nature of such paintings in themselves. Many observations on these paintings which might normally be considered as ‘subjective’, attain within this context a firmer validity. It will be shown that they exemplify a surprising recognition of the value of animal life, but it will also be demonstrated that this recognition is of a very particular type.

2. Basic early modern attitudes toward animals

Discussions regarding animals, their characteristics, and the possibility of moral duties toward them, have been common since antiquity.⁴ Most views on this
matter, whether pro- or anti-animal, have almost always tended toward anthropocentrism, maintaining a basic human superiority to the animals.\(^5\) This ultimately stemmed from Judeo-Christian cosmology, which viewed the world as composed of God, man, made in God’s image, and nature, which was separated from man and meant for his service. This led to the notion of stewardship, whereby God had given man the stewardship over His estate, earth, and intended it for his use.\(^6\)

This basic anthropocentricity remained a mainstay of most views on animals. An interesting example of this is the recurring admonition to refrain from harming animals, not because this is in itself wrong, but rather because it might lead to the corruption of people committing such acts, and/or to actual cruelty toward human beings. Various versions of this view, which is still popular today, were claimed at various times by such figures as Porphyry (233–304), St Thomas Aquinas (1224/25–74), Maimonides (1135–1204) and Immanuel Kant (1724–1804).\(^7\)

Less overtly anthropocentric views were also common at various times. Such theriophilic (pro-animal) views, regarding animals as sentient beings in their own right, became quite popular in early modern times. The most important and influential of the theriophiles was Michel de Montaigne (1533–92), who was known for his love and praise of animals.\(^8\) Many seventeenth-century theriophiles, such as his disciple Pierre Charron (1541–1603), were influenced by his views.\(^9\) Prominent theriophiles in the Netherlands included the neo-stoic philosopher Justus Lipsius (1547–1606) and the painter and entomologist Johannes Goedaert (1617–68).\(^10\)

The most influential early modern view on animals proved to be the anti-animal Cartesian theory of the ‘beast-machine’, as formulated in the ‘Discourse on Method’ (1637). Published at a time when Descartes was living in Holland, it viewed animals as automata devoid of feeling and soul, as opposed to human beings, who had an immortal soul. Animals were compared to mere clocks, and moral duties toward them were thus considered unnecessary. The more extreme variants of this theory were held by some of Descartes’s followers, while he himself was more hesitant in this respect, and did not categorically deny the possibility that animals might be capable of some kind of feeling. But it was the influence of the beast-machine theory on others rather than his own personal views which became historically important. This theory became the main reference point in discussions on animals for both pro- and anti-animal views. The debate on animals became common all over early modern Europe, including the Netherlands, especially in Holland, where intellectual life was more developed than in the Southern Provinces. The theory of the beast-machine continued to be central to this debate well into the eighteenth century, though by about the middle of that century its importance in this respect had diminished.\(^11\) It should be noted that while this theory was the most influential of the anti-animal theories, it was not the most extreme. Baruch Spinoza (1632–77) belittled the need for consideration toward animals, not because they did not suffer, but despite the fact that they did suffer. His view on animals was to have little historical effect, but it was more radical than the Cartesian view, which implicitly acknowledged that had animal suffering existed, man would have been obliged to give it moral consideration.\(^12\)
The basic anthropocentricity of the Western attitude toward animals is manifested by the philosophical attitudes toward the popular custom of hunting. One of the most interesting phenomena concerned with hunting is the aesthetic appreciation and love of nature felt by many hunters. The seeming paradox between this and the killing of animals is resolved in reality quite casually by hunters, and this is manifested by attitudes toward hunting. Throughout history hunting has been considered by many as an opportunity to come close to nature and the animals, and many hunters feel a close bond and love toward the animals they hunt.\textsuperscript{13} Hunting was also common, of course, in early modern times. People of all social ranks practised various forms of hunting, but the aristocratic types attracted the most theoretical and theatrical attention.\textsuperscript{14} Hunting was also popular in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century, as it was in other countries.\textsuperscript{15}

All these philosophical issues notwithstanding, there remains the problem of determining to what extent, if at all, artists were aware of them, and if so, what, if any, influence they may have had on the actual painting of animal motifs. Evidence of artists directly discussing attitudes toward animals is rare. In seventeenth-century Netherlandish treatises on art, even when specific sections are devoted to animal painting, they tend to centre on academic notions, such as principles of animal depiction, or the qualities of animals depicted in art, mainly horses and cattle. This is evident in the chapters on animal depiction in the treatises by Karel van Mander (1548–1606), Chrispijn van de Passe the Younger (c. 1594/95–1670 or after) and Samuel van Hoogstraeten (1627–78).\textsuperscript{16} Art theoreticians seem to have been more interested at the time in the depiction of the physical appearance of animals in a realistic, true-to-life manner, than in the psychological characteristics of animals. This became evident in the interest of painting various subjects, including animals, according to the concept of ‘naer het leven’ (from the life).\textsuperscript{17}

At least two direct views of artists regarding the animal debate do nevertheless exist. One is the theriophilic view of Johannes Goedaert noted above. The other is a Cartesian statement by Samuel van Hoogstraeten, though not from his chapter on animal painting. In discussing the difference between animals and human beings, he repeated the typically Cartesian opinion whereby animals ‘act according to their nature; more or less like a clock, which has no other impulse, than to impart the spring to the clockwork.’\textsuperscript{18}

The scarcity of such statements by painters, whether of anti-, or especially pro-animal sentiments, is surprising at first, particularly considering the fact that pro-animal sentiments seem to have been more the province of poets and the general public, while anti-animal sentiments were more common among scientists and philosophers.\textsuperscript{19} This in itself would have tended to suggest that pro-animal sentiments would be common in artistic circles in general. Indeed, they were to find expression in an important Dutch emblem book from 1694, by Jan Luiken (1649–1712) and his son Kasper Luiken (1672–1708). In an emblem devoted to the butcher’s profession, they expressed an aversion to the killing of animals that was not rare at the time. Above an illustration of a butcher working (plate 24) the motto reads: ‘The butcher./ Thoughtless, pays no attention’; and below the illustration a short poem reads:
The beast treads in his comrades’ blood
And knows not the fear, or to avoid,
As like the thoughtless heart;
All his fellow-creatures die by his side,
And he sees the evil fruit,
Yet does not himself take flight.\(^{20}\)

The scarcity of painters’ expressions regarding the debate on the status of animals is, in fact, only initially surprising. The discussions of animal depiction by van Mander, van de Passe and van Hoogstraeten, and the views of Goedaert, were expressed by painters who were not specialists in animal painting. Indeed, Goedaert’s theriophilic sentiment may in all likelihood have arisen more from his work as an entomologist than as a painter. Nevertheless, considering the wide diffusion of the debate on animals in the seventeenth century on the one hand, and the comparatively high level of education, and even at times erudition, of many contemporary painters, it does not seem far-fetched to claim that many were indeed aware of this debate. One is thus prompted to assume that if they held any views on animals, they expressed them by their art, rather than in verbal terms. Furthermore, accepting the claim that artists in general tended more toward pro-animal sentiments, one would assume that animal painters shared by and large such views, and that their art expressed this. While this would seem \textit{a priori} to be logical, it cannot be proved in any conventional sense, precisely because of the non-verbal nature of painting. Moreover, paintings of animals might be construed to express both pro- and anti-animal views. For example, a painting of an animal in motion might be interpreted as depicting either a Cartesian automaton in movement, or a living, feeling creature.

All this seems to deny any possibility of considering paintings as modes of expressions of attitudes

toward animals. But this holds true only if one considers painting as a cultural medium separate from general cultural trends. This is manifestly not true. It thus becomes not only possible, but even imperative, to consider animal painting as a mode of philosophical consideration of animals, beyond the merely physical aspect.

3. Aspects of Netherlandish paintings of dead animals

The above remarks regarding animal painting are also relevant to still-life paintings of dead animals. Animal and still-life painting were regarded then, as now, as two distinct genres. According to most early modern academic theories, and well into the nineteenth century, still-life painting was regarded as probably the least prestigious of artistic genres, followed by such genres as landscape and animal painting, and then by history painting. But the borders between genres were not always clear. Still-life paintings of dead animals often included figures of live animals as well (plates 25, 26 and 27). But the artistic status of a certain genre does not have to influence its relevance as historical data. And furthermore, it seems self-evident that paintings which centre on the corpses of dead animals, can and should be considered as statements, even if unconscious, of certain modes of attitudes toward animals.

As with other genres of seventeenth-century Netherlandish painting, dead-animal painting is subject to the iconological debate, i.e., the attempt to determine

25  Frans Snyders, Larder with a Servant, c. 1635–40, panel, 138 × 196 cm, Amherst, Mass., Mead Art Museum, Amherst College.
26 Jan Fyt, *Dogs guarding Booty*, 1659, canvas, 120 × 171 cm, Vaduz, Sammlungen des Fürsten von Liechtenstein.

27 Jan Baptist Weenix, *A Dog and a Cat near a Disembowelled Deer*, canvas, 180 × 162 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.
if, and what, symbolic and moralistic messages are conveyed by the painted motifs. And also, as with other genres, there are many cases in which the decision on this point is controversial. As will be seen below, dead-animal paintings with and without symbolic meanings, lead to a large extent to similar conclusions as regards the attitudes toward animals they convey, though they also differ in certain respects of this issue. This dichotomy is perceived in Dutch as well as Flemish dead-animal painting. The art of the seventeenth-century Southern Provinces at its most typical was Catholic-Baroque in style, full of movement and sumptuousness, while at the same time that of Holland was predominantly Protestant, less flamboyant and more intimate. However, it seems that as with other secular motifs, it was Flemish sixteenth-century examples, brought north by refugees from Spanish persecution around 1600, that probably served as catalysts for the development of similar iconographies in Holland. The styles of such paintings in the two countries developed quickly along different lines, though by about the middle of the seventeenth century influences between them became more and more common, as the Golden Age of painting in both of them reached its end.

Seventeenth-century dead-animal painting grew to a large extent from sixteenth-century Flemish kitchen and market scenes, by artists such as Pieter Aertsen (1508/09–75) and Joachim Beuckelaer (c. 1530/35–73/74). Such scenes reflected the thriving of the times. It prompted religious criticism of abundance as 'voluptas carnis' (temptation of the flesh). Such criticism was expressed in depictions of slaughterhouses and butchers' shops. Theologians at the time commonly regarded figures of slaughtered animals as symbols of the deaths of believers. This association between animal corpses and a general concept of human death, was to accompany many examples of seventeenth-century iconography of this type, whether as a primary or secondary motif. Depictions of slaughterhouses and butchers' shops also criticized hedonistic human behaviour, and thus often portrayed butchers as vulgar figures. In these respects such motifs centred more on human death or criticism of human conduct than on animal death and suffering, though the latter meaning may also at times have been implied. In this respect they are reminiscent of the view that harming animals is wrong not in itself, but mainly because it leads to human corruption and suffering.

Perhaps the most famous example of a painting of a butcher's shop was painted by Annibale Carracci (plate 28). It is relatively free of symbolic meanings, although the painter included in such scenes erotic and comic allusions, maybe even to the Commedia dell'Arte. In a painting of a similar scene by Frans Snyders (1579–1657), the most important seventeenth-century Flemish still-life and animal painter, such a comic element seems missing (plate 29). In such scenes he at times represented people eviscerating meat as reminiscent of types of saints' torturers. He may also have portrayed butchers as kinds of anatomists; the Flemish physician and anatomist Andreas Vesalius (1514–64) had indeed recommended anatomists to study butchering techniques. Again, such scenes probably symbolized human issues, though the possibility of conscious statements regarding the animals in themselves cannot be ruled out.

Almost all types of animals, fish and fowl were depicted in seventeenth-century still-life paintings. For example, one of the most popular still-life motifs in

Netherlandish art at the time was the depiction of dead birds. In many paintings figures of dead birds were the main motif, or were juxtaposed with those of other dead animals. Flemish painters preferred painting large stacks of birds and other animal corpses, while Dutch painters preferred compositions on a smaller, more intimate scale. Snyders in many cases inserted elements of action into his still-life paintings, such as a dog or cat sniffing food, people responding to these animals, etc. Such elements were typical of Flemish still lifes, and at times had symbolic meanings, connected to restraint and temptation, civilization and barbarism, etc. (plate 25).31

An interest in the animals for their own sake is difficult to prove. Snyders may have been familiar with the famous Pythagorean vegetarian principle, as described in Ovid’s Metamorphoses, a book well known in early modern Europe, particularly in artistic circles. Karel van Mander had included a section on this book in his treatise on painting, and in it he mentioned Pythagoras’s vegetarianism and theory of metempsychosis.32 In seventeenth-century Holland, Pythagoras’s name became almost a synonym for vegetarianism. This is reflected in the Dutch travel literature of the period, as can be seen in descriptions of various exotic people who adhered to vegetarianism, by Jan Huygen van Linschoten (1562/63–1611), Jan Nieuhoff (1618–72) and Johan (Joaness) de Laet (1582–1649).33 While all this cannot prove conclusively that contemporary painters were aware of such theories, or if so, that these theories influenced their depictions of animals, alive or dead, it does make such suppositions at least likely in certain cases. Many of Snyders’s dead-animal figures, for example, mimic human poses: lying on their backs, with heads inclined sideways or legs crossed, at
times similar to figures of fallen warriors. But again, any allusion to compassion for the animals in themselves is not certain (plates 25, 29, 30 and 33).\textsuperscript{34}

One of the climaxes of seventeenth-century dead-animal painting is found in Rembrandt’s two paintings of *The Slaughtered Ox* (plate 31).\textsuperscript{35} This motif had artistic precedents, the most important of which was probably the painting *Slaughtered Pig* by Joachim Beuckelaer (plate 32), which may have inspired Rembrandt’s painting.\textsuperscript{36} But Rembrandt’s painting is particularly blunt, so much so that the huge piece of meat completely dwarfs the figure of the maid close by. The motif of a flayed meat carcass may have been a symbol of prudence, or

connected to themes of death and vanitas. The slaughtered calf was considered a symbol of the death of Christ. Rembrandt’s treatment of the motif may also have been connected with the theme of the return of the prodigal son, in which the father suggests slaughtering a calf in honour of his son’s return (St Luke 15: 11-32). Thus these paintings can be interpreted as having a double entendre, as reminders of death on the one hand, and the need for faith and amending of ways on the other.37 On the other hand, they may have represented the month of November, the traditional month of animal slaughter, and the festival connected with it; or may even have been a type of genre scene connected with this theme.38 One cannot dismiss either the possibility that Rembrandt’s chief interest in this motif was in the visual challenge of depicting the strong colours and dramatic composition. This dramatic quality is what gives these paintings added meaning, whatever interpretation one may wish to convey to them, including the possibility of sorrow at the death of the animals in itself.

Probably the most popular of seventeenth-century dead-animal genres was the gamepiece. The popularity of this genre, as of all dead-animal painting, may possibly be partially explained by the simple fact that it was easier to paint dead animals than live ones.39 The Flemish style of such paintings was more sumptuous than the Dutch, and reminiscent of Mannerist kitchen and market scenes. The inclusion of live animal motifs heightened this effect. While a painter such as Snyders at times painted more intimate compositions, they were still predominantly Flemish in style (plate 33). His pupil Jan Fyt (1611–61) embellished the Flemish style of gamepiece with another Flemish element, the depiction of such motifs outdoors. However, his appreciation for careful finishing of details also exemplified the gradual Dutch influence on younger Flemish artists, less dependent on Rubens (plate 26). In any event, this Flemish style, even more than the Dutch style, was to be a major influence on the painting of similar subjects in the eighteenth century.40

The Dutch style, at least in the first half of the century, was usually more intimate, and characterized by a closer and more direct observation of a smaller number of objects, on many occasions in a monochrome technique, and prompted by an interest in trompe l’oeil. The illusionistic effect was heightened by omitting background scenes. The objects were no longer tilted in the direction of the spectator, as in Mannerist kitchen and market scenes, and the sense of intimacy was thus heightened. Painters at times combined various objects, such as larger numbers of dead animals, vegetables etc. (plate 34). But there were also attempts at depicting single objects, such as one bird (plate 35).41

A different, more colourful and complex style of Dutch gamepiece also developed under Italian, and mainly Flemish influence. This Flemish influence on the Dutch was stronger than the vice versa one. This style was exemplified in at least some of the gamepieces by Dutch painters such as Jan Baptist Weenix (1621–before Nov. 1663) and his son Jan Weenix (c. 1642–1719) (plates 27 and 36).42

The stylistic differences between the typical Dutch and Flemish styles of still life were possibly also the outcome, at least to a certain extent, of the differences in the social and cultural climates in both countries. The Dutch preference for realism was probably connected with the advanced scientific development in
Holland at the time. Depictions of dead animals may thus have been influenced by studies in anatomy, the development of anatomical theatres and the import of zoological artefacts from the Dutch overseas empire. The Southern Provinces were much less advanced scientifically, and this may explain the limited influence there of the Dutch realistic style of painting. The popularity of gamepieces in seventeenth-century Holland may also be partly explained by socio-economic
reality. Rich burglers were prevented from participating in the more prestigious forms of aristocratic hunting. They thus may have viewed gamepiece paintings as status symbols representing the noble social status to which they aspired. This in turn may have been one of the reasons for the success of Flemish-style gamepieces in Holland, as intimate paintings would have been much less effective in this ostentatious role.

In paintings in the typical intimate Dutch style, the painter could act as a sculptor and stand close, at a distance of about a metre, from the painted object, without being confronted with the major technical problem of perspective. The still-life painter could thus decrease the spatial depth of the painting, bring the background closer to the objects in the foreground, and present it as an object in itself, disregarding perspective. The viewer thus felt closer to the painted objects, as if they were within touching distance, and the naturalistic allusion common in trompe-l'oeil depictions was taken one step further. This was bound to have a psychological effect on the viewer, whatever the intended message of the paintings. Assuming for a moment that a conscious allusion, on the parts of both artists and viewers, was made to the suffering and death of the animals themselves, this Dutch form of still-life representation would have tended to emphasize the more individual and ‘poetic’ aspects of the subject. On the other hand, the more flamboyant style typical mainly of the Flemish still lifes would have tended to emphasize the more dramatic aspects in such paintings. They thus complemented each other in representing different aspects of the animal tragedy.

4. Symbolic or decorative values, and the Cartesian beast-machine

The iconological problem highlights the fact that in certain Flemish, and mainly Dutch, seventeenth-century paintings, symbolic messages are clearly discerned, while in others they seem to be missing, perfunctory, or at least secondary in importance. Paintings belonging to the second type may be termed, at least in certain cases, as ‘decorative’; i.e., they may be treated as artistic depictions which were produced and viewed mainly for their aesthetic value, with little or no deference to allegorical messages, moralistic or otherwise. Of course the aesthetic value of paintings was also important in cases where they included symbolic messages, or when they played the role of status symbols. But in cases where this was not so, this mere decorative value was even more underlined. The term ‘decorative’ is particularly pertinent to the genre of dead-animal painting. While the decorative quality of beautiful things, such as rare flowers, nautilus cups etc., is basically taken for granted, this is not the case regarding objects such as animal corpses. In this respect early modern art differs from modern art. Modern dead-animal paintings, such as those by Soutine, also, of course, have an aesthetic value. But this is not a pleasing, ‘decorative’ value. They are shocking, disturbing, while those of the early modern era were meant, especially when they lacked symbolic messages, to please the eye, i.e., to serve, literally, as decorations.

The Dutch painter and theoretician Gerard de Lairesse (1641–1711), while stressing the importance of variety in painting, nevertheless opposed what he
considered the abuse of painting by the depiction of unseemly objects, and favoured what he considered noble and edifying ones. In the realm of still life he claimed that one should avoid depicting simple things such as cabbages and herrings, and choose only such things as rare and beautiful flowers and fruits. However, one should remember that de Lairesse’s views exemplified an academic French influence on Dutch art in the late seventeenth century, at a time when the Golden Age of Dutch painting was in decline. Indeed, the freedom to depict almost all motifs, beautiful or otherwise, in a ‘decorative’, aesthetical manner, seems to have been one of the mainstays of early modern art, particularly Dutch painting. Any preference for depiction of beautiful objects was thus a conscious one in the seventeenth century. The point thus becomes one of determining what indeed is considered beautiful, and in this respect the singularity of early modern dead-animal painting is highlighted. Contemporaries seem to have found depictions of dead animals aesthetically pleasing, in almost the same way that they regarded breakfast or flower pieces. It is precisely in this context that they can be referred to as ‘decorative’. From the point of view of the development of the attitude toward animals, this is particularly important.

Prima facie, this would imply that dead-animal painting conveys an inherently anti-animal viewpoint. But the situation is not so simple, and paradoxical as this may seem, such paintings may include a pro-animal sentiment, at least in a certain sense. In fact, in many cases such paintings may be regarded as anti-Cartesian statements, i.e., as opposed to the viewpoint of the Cartesian theory of the beast-machine. In the case of decorative dead-animal paintings without overt symbolic messages, this stems from the very idea of presenting the corpse of a dead animal as a beautiful object. Of course, people who enjoyed hunting, and this included most of the early modern élite, would not have been offended by this very idea. But the fact is, that in many of these paintings there is an obvious attempt to conceal or beautify the violent aspect connected with the killing of animals. This constitutes a confession by way of elimination, of a recognition, even if unconscious, that the lives of animals have some value. Otherwise, there would not have existed a reason to conceal any violent aspects of their death, as the death of a mere machine would not have shocked a believer in the beast-machine theory. One may, of course, claim that there was no necessary connection between the way in which animal corpses were depicted and philosophical attitudes toward animals; one could regard animals as machines, and still derive enjoyment from their depiction in painting, whether alive or dead. According to such a view, any beautifying of such motifs would have originated simply to avoid bad taste. But while this may have been the case in certain instances, it seems improbable to have been the general rule. Moreover, even in paintings which did not seem to conceal the violent aspects of the animals’ death, one may perceive an anti-Cartesian element. This, owing to the fact that such depictions may be claimed to have drawn their expressional and dramatic power from the very fact that they exemplified a pre-recognition of the suffering of animals.

Dead-animal paintings which do contain symbolic meanings can also be considered as anti-Cartesian statements, albeit in a different way. Many of these paintings alluded to ideas of human death, vanitas etc. At times such ideas were
even conveyed by explicit symbolism. One may therefore assume that the death of animals in such instances served only as a symbol, a means to an end, without having any value in itself. However, it seems more probable that such depictions implied at least some meaning beyond the merely symbolic, at least some reference to the animals in themselves. Even if their death served only as a symbol, its function in this respect would have been ineffective, should some inherent importance of their life and death not have been assumed. Otherwise, without some level of conceptual similarity between the symbol and what was being symbolized, this symbolism would not have been cogent. This, because the life and death of an animal would have been meaningless as symbols of human life and death, for anyone who regarded them as mere Cartesian automata, devoid of feeling and soul, and thus categorically different from human beings.

Dead-animal painting exhibited in yet another way a recognition of the value of animal life, albeit in an almost haphazard manner. This is evident in those compositions, mainly of Flemish origin, where live animals are represented near dead ones. Such compositions in fact emphasize even more any reference to the value of animal life, whether symbolic or decorative. This, simply because of the contrast between the two states of animal existence, alive and dead; i.e., when one sees a living animal near a dead one, one is reminded of the fact that the latter was also alive only a short time ago, and was not originally a still object.

Nevertheless, the value accorded to the lives of animals in dead-animal paintings is in most cases small, and goes nowhere near equation with the value of human life. In cases of decorative depictions, the paintings constitute a confession of the fact that the death of an animal is not something so terrible after all, because it is capable of becoming a decorative, pleasure-giving subject, if only represented in the right manner. And when allegorical depictions are concerned, the very fact that the death of an animal symbolizes human death, and not vice versa, demonstrates that the life and death of animals are minor in importance compared to those of human beings.

Norbert Elias claimed that the medieval habit of slicing meat at the table, and serving birds without at times plucking their feathers, was gradually relinquished in the seventeenth century, as people began to feel less at ease with the more uncomfortable aspects connected with the production of meat. He claimed that during the ‘civilizing process’, people attempted to crush any ‘animal’ characteristics connected with themselves, including those linked with their food. Such a process emphasizes even more the small value related to the lives of animals, when the violent aspects of their death are neutralized and beautified in dead-animal painting. This violence is considered in such cases as a negative thing, not so much because of its impact on the animals, as for the ‘shock’ and discomfiture it might cause in people. In this respect the appreciation of such paintings is similar to the philosophical claim that harming animals is not a negative thing in itself, but rather because it might lead to the corruption and harming of people. Thus, while seventeenth-century Netherlandish dead-animal painting cannot be considered as a purely anti-animal phenomenon, it is also not a purely pro-animal one. Rather, it probably conveys the popular attitude toward animals at the time, an attitude which perceived a certain limited degree of feeling in animals, but less than in human beings. In this respect it was an anthropocentric cultural
phenomenon firmly in the mainstream of the history of the Western attitude toward animals.

However, one may also claim that at least in certain cases, such paintings exhibit an even lower regard for animal suffering than the Cartesian attitude. Indeed, even when there seems to be a recognition of animal suffering, this does not necessarily imply remorse for that suffering on the part of the artists or their audience. On the contrary, assuming that such recognition existed, then the very popularity of the paintings emphasized the low regard for that suffering. Thus, such paintings are even more insensitive than the Cartesian view, which at least tried to explain away the suffering of animals, and thus implied that had it existed, it would have entailed moral consideration. In this respect dead-animal paintings are in many cases more similar to Spinoza's attitude toward animals than to that of Descartes. The indifference toward animals in such paintings is thus dialectically emphasized. In this respect they are in concordance with the common philosophical view which sees in nature on the one hand something wonderful, which should be approached as much as possible, and on the other hand something inferior to man and meant for his use.

5. Conclusion

While one cannot disregard the artistic value of dead-animal painting beyond the interests of the present discussion, it seems that these interests are essential for a true understanding of such art. This discussion began from the assumption that artistic representations of dead animals exemplified an a priori insensitivity toward animals. This assumption was at first refuted. But interestingly enough, this did not result in an interpretation of such paintings as distinctive pro-animal statements, even though, in certain cases, such pro-animal messages may have been intended. In general, such paintings, especially in the context in which they were created and perceived, seem rather to have dialectically emphasized to an even greater degree, a basic anthropocentric viewpoint.

This dialectical process calls to mind the views of John Berger. He regards many forms of post-industrial animal imagery as reflecting not a feeling of closeness to animals, but rather the opposite, a reaction to the growing distancing of modern man from them.\(^5\) An extrapolation of this view suggests that in many other cases, proliferation of claims of sympathy with animals, philosophical or artistic, is not necessarily reflective of an improvement in the actual treatment of animals, and at times may even indicate the opposite. In other words, the more the abuse and depreciation of nature and the animals increases, whether in theoretical forums or the 'real world', the more one is likely to encounter evidence of sensitivity toward them. Of course one should be wary, as there exist many examples of both, on the one hand, seeming sympathy toward animals which is in fact anthropocentric (e.g. see hunters), and on the other hand sincere pro-animal sentiments. Indeed, there are also many cases of actual improvement in the treatment of animals. But this does seem to imply that even many pro-animal sentiments still share a predominantly anthropocentric viewpoint. It thus seems, paradoxically, that modern man loves animals, but does not respect them.
Therefore, rather than speak of improvement or deterioration in the development of the attitude toward animals, it seems better, in this respect, simply to speak of an historical process of change.

These observations are also applicable to early modern art in general, and to seventeenth-century Netherlandish paintings of dead animals in particular. These can be considered as exemplifying man's ability both to appreciate and exploit nature at the same time. But these paintings seem to be less 'sophisticated' than modern animal imagery in concealing the exploitative end of this dichotomy. This helps to explain the uneasiness which modern viewers, especially those which are both art connoisseurs and animal lovers, may feel when confronted with such paintings. This uneasiness may be expressed by the discernment of a strange 'lively' quality which pervades many of these paintings, especially the more sumptuous among them. These paintings are also impossible to ignore, whether in sumptuous or intimate compositions, as in many cases they have a compellingly high artistic value. Indeed, many of them are masterpieces, and furthermore, they were produced in large quantities. They reflect the basic dialectical tension in modern man's attitude toward nature and the animals. This makes them essential to the understanding of the history of the attitude toward animals on the one hand, and on the other hand makes their consideration within this context equally essential. It is only within this context that many of the verbal, 'subjective' categories applied to these paintings receive confirmation, and a true understanding of their nature and importance becomes possible.

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Notes

1 The terms 'Netherlands' and 'Netherlandish' in the present article refer to both the Southern and the Northern Provinces (Holland). References to either one in particular will make use of terms such as 'Flemish' or 'Dutch', etc.
2 A thorough overview of such interdisciplinary research is beyond the scope of this article. The insurmountable difficulty with all such research is that art is a non-verbal phenomenon, which can only be discussed historically using verbal categories. This probably explains the fact that no clear methodology exists for such research. The present article thus offers only one approach to this problem. Many of the difficulties involved in such research are discussed in Michael Baxandall, Patterns of Intention, On the Historical Explanation of Pictures, New Haven and London, 1985. Of related interest is also Francis Haskell, History and its Images, Art and the Interpretation of the Past, New Haven and London, 1993.

4 For a discussion of the history of such issues from antiquity till the beginning of the early modern era, see Klingender, 1971!, op. cit. (note 3).

5 The terms ‘pro’- and ‘anti-animal’ are used throughout this article to denote the two basic philosophical ‘camps’, of those who claimed that animals did have at least a modicum of feeling, and deserved at least some moral consideration, and those who opposed such claims. While such dichotomic terminology might seem too generalizing, and there are indeed many variations in both ‘camps’, it is historically basically valid, at least as regards purely philosophical discussions of animals, and is also technically convenient.


9 For Charron’s views on animals see ibid., p. 60; and Pierre Charron, Of Wisdom, trans. Anon., London, before 1612, reprint Amsterdam, 1771, pp. 101–12.


11 For the most famous exposition of the beast-machine theory, see Rene Descartes, ‘Discourse on Method’, ‘Discourse 5’, in Discourse on Method and the Meditations, trans. F.E. Sutcliffe, Harmondsworth, 1968, pp. 73–6. On Descartes’s own views of animals as less extreme than those of some of his followers see John
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13 For a general introduction to hunting in Europe, relevant not only for medieval hunting customs, see John Cummins, The Hound and the Hawk. The Art of Medieval Hunting, London, 1988. The love of hunters toward their victims may seem strange and even offending, but it is a very ostentatious phenomenon. Hunters rarely distinguish a conflict between love of nature and its violent exploitation. Quotations from two famous avid hunters can help elucidate this. Ivan Turgenev wrote: ‘To hunt with gun and dog is a proper thing in itself . . . But let us assume you were not born a sportsman: nevertheless, you love nature; therefore, you cannot but envy hunters like us . . . ’ and Ernest Hemingway wrote: ‘I did not mind killing anything, any animal, if I killed it cleanly, they all had to die and my interference with the nightly and the seasonal killing that went on all the time was very minute and I had no guilty feeling at all.’ These statements, though modern in origin and style, can certainly be extrapolated to attitudes toward hunting in earlier times. See Ivan Turgenev, ‘Memoirs of a Sportsman’, in Memoirs of a Sportsman and A Nobleman’s Nest, trans. Anon., Boston and New York, 1903, pp. 336–7; and Ernest Hemingway, Green Hills of Africa, New York, 1954, p. 183.

14 In England, for example, James I was accustomed to cutting deer’s throats personally and wiping their blood on the faces of his courtiers, who were forbidden to wash it off. English ladies bathed their hands in deer’s blood, while these were cut open after the hunt, in the assumption that it would make them white. See Thomas, 1984, op. cit. (note 3), p. 29.


17 On this concept see Claudia Swan, ‘Ad Vivum, Naer het Leven, From the Life: Defining a Mode of Representation’, in Word & Image, vol. 11, no. 4, October–December 1995, pp. 353–72. For example, in a book on the lives of various artists, the Fleming Cornelis de Bie (1627–c. 1718), while praising the art of the Flemish animal and still-life painter Frans Snyders, wrote: ‘See Snyders in the hunt [hunting scenes], how pleasantly from the life/ Shows he how to give this sweet art a great fame’ (‘Siet SYNyers inde Jacht, hoe aerich naer het leven/ Wist by des’ soete Const een groote faem te gheven’); see Cornelis de Bie, Het Gulden Cabinet van de Edel Vrye Schilderconst, Antwerpen, 1662, reprint Soest, 1971, p. 60. Van Mander’s emphasis on copying after life, and his influence in this respect on the development of seventeenth-century art, were probably less important than may seem at first sight. See Hessel Miedema, ‘Karel van Mander’s Grondt der Edel Vrye Schilder-Const (“Foundations of the Noble and Free Art of Painting”), Journal of the History of Ideas, vol. 34, no. 4, October–December 1973, pp. 653–68.


18 ‘. . . zi volgen haer natuur; min noch meer als een uurwerk, dat geen andere driift heeft, dan die de veeder aen ‘t raederwerk meedeedeet.’ See van Hoogstraeten, 1969, op. cit. (note 16), p. 86.

19 On this point see Hastings, 1936, op. cit. (note 3), passim. While she refers mainly to the eighteenth century, this claim seems valid also regarding the preceding century.
20 The motto is: 'De vleeshouwer./ Onbedacht, Slaat geen acht.' The poem reads: Het Beest treed in zijn mackers bloed/En weet van schricken noch van myde./Gelyk het onbedacht gemoed./Al Sterft zijn maait aan zijn zyde,/En dat hy siedt een quaade vrucht./Noch geeft hy sich niet op de vlucht. See Johannes [Jan] Luiken and Caspaer [Kasper] Luiken, Het Menselyk Bedryf, Amsterdam, 1694, p. 43.

21 The intention here is not to give a full description of the development of this iconography, which lies outside the scope of this article, but only to consider those aspects relevant to the argument here developed. For more general discussions of this issue, see the relevant sources in note 3 above.


25 While the iconological debate is more pertinent as regards Dutch than Flemish painting of the period, in certain cases, including dead-animal painting, it is also highly relevant to the latter.


29 Barry Wind, 'Annibale Carracci's "Scherzo": The Christ Church 'Butcher Shop", in Art Bulletin, vol. 58, no. 1, March 1976, pp. 93–6. Another painting of a similar subject by Annibale is in the Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas, for Carracci, and early modern Italian dead animal painting in general, see Silvano Lodi, Natura Morta Italiana, Italian Still Life Painting from Four Centuries, The Silvano Lodi Collection, exhib. cat., Jerusalem, 1994, pp. 7, 26–7, 36–7, 78–81. Annibale was probably influenced by the paintings of butchers' shops by Bartolommeo Passarotti (1529–92), which were, however, more sombre in style than his own. See S.J. Freedberg, Painting in Italy 1500–1600, New Haven and London, 1993, pp. 572–4.


31 Figures of dogs sniffing food might be connected to themes of restraint in temptation, or the conflict between carnal temptation and spiritual aspiration. Snyders also invented scenes in which animals behaved riotously in the absence of human scrutiny, which might have confronted the ideas of civilized and barbaric behaviour.
Such paintings became in effect animal genre paintings. Scenes of this type with dogs could symbolize various political meanings, opportunism, the consequences of neglect of duty, rebellion etc. See ibid., pp. 108–109, 269, 271, 273–7, 280. The preponderance of bird figures in Dutch still lifes was probably explained by the large number of migrating birds passing through the country, and the frequency with which they were hunted. See Sullivan, 1984, op. cit. (note 3), pp. 33–8, 87; and Zumbeth, 1962, op. cit. (note 15), p. 162.


35 Rembrandt painted two versions of this painting: one today in Glasgow and the other in the Louvre. For the purposes of the present discussion there are no significant differences between them, and therefore only the latter is reproduced.


38 For November in this context, see Zumbeth, 1962, op. cit. (note 15), pp. 181–2. For similar figures of slaughtered animals, see also plates 24, 28 and 29.


41 On these various points see Bergström, 1983, op. cit. (note 3), pp. 247–8; and Sullivan, 1984, op. cit. (note 3), pp. 12, 53. One of the most important precedents for trompe-l’œil depictions of dead birds was the painting of a dead bird hanging on a wall (1504, now in Munich) by Jacopo de’ Barbari (c. 1450–1515/16), an Italian painter who also worked in the Netherlands. See Bergström, 1983, op. cit. (note 3), pp. 26–30; Jackson, 1993, op. cit. (note 39), pp. 20–1; and Schneider, 1990, op. cit. (note 3), pp. 11–12.


44 For this theory see Sullivan, 1984, op. cit. (note 3), pp. 38–41.

45 See the remarks in Maurice Grosser, The Painter’s Eye, New York, 1956, pp. 16–18.

46 The use of the term ‘decorative’ may seem superficial or inadequate to some. But for the present discussion it seems to me to be not only convenient, but in fact quite accurate. The dichotomy symbolic–decorative should not, however, be taken to mean that these are opposites, as in many paintings elements of both may be discerned, and this becomes a question of degree. Furthermore, by the term ‘decorative’ I do not mean to imply an interpretation such as Svetlana Alpers’s anti-iconological approach, although something of her emphasis on visuality may be relevant to such non-symbolic images.


48 On the attempt in Flemish painting to minimize the violent aspects of the animals’ death, and to give the paintings a sense of delicate elegance, see Schneider, 1990, op. cit. (note 3), pp. 52–4. A similar claim can be made regarding many Dutch paintings.

49 The swan, for example, was considered a prize catch, as well as a symbol of fearlessness, and thus the depiction of the corpse of a swan was similar to exclaiming ‘how the mighty have fallen.’ See ibid., p. 52, and Scott A. Sullivan, ‘Jan Baptist Weenix: “Still Life with a Dead Swan”’, in Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts, vol. 57, no. 2, 1979, pp. 64–71, p. 67. The duck, especially when depicted dead, became a vanitas symbol. This stemmed from a double entendre play of words, as the Dutch word for duck is ‘eend’, which is similar to the words ‘end’ or ‘eind’, meaning the English ‘end’, at times in the sense of ‘death’. See Sullivan, 1984, op. cit. (note 3), p. 22.


51 He claims that public zoos, realistic animal toys and widespread commercial diffusion of animal imagery began generally to prosper when animals began to be withdrawn from everyday life. He regards such developments as a marginalization of the animals in the modern world. It seems that one can extrapolate his view, at least to a certain extent, to earlier times, and claim that the rise in popularity of animal iconography, in all its forms in early modern times, presaged the process he describes. See John Berger, ‘Why Look at Animals?’, in About Looking, New York, 1980, pp. 1–26.

52 Even assuming that paintings of dead animals formed a small percentage of the overall number of paintings produced in the seventeenth century, this overall number was so large, that the number of dead animal paintings must have been large in itself. On the overall number of paintings produced at the time see Miedema, 1993, op. cit. (note 17), p. 131.