



Vanitas Still Life, Edwaert Collier, 1662. [PD] via Wikimedia Commons

The Editor's Desk

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Two years ago, the *Oxford English Dictionary* designated “post-truth” the word of the year, and its relevance continues to loom large. Truth, about almost any subject, seems harder to find, and it’s not a new phenomenon. As authors in this issue of *Oklahoma Humanities* tell us, American history is filled with people and industries that have “massaged” the truth to advantage.

Newspaper moguls Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst perfected sensationalism to grab and hold audiences. Technology progressed and so did the term; today we call it click bait. Political figures (from Richard Nixon to Donald Trump, as contemporary examples) have fired back, accusing journalists of peddling fake news and alternate facts. Where once a free press had ready access to newsmakers and a commitment to objectivity, cable television stepped in with a new philosophy, filling the airwaves with “analysis” and “commentary,” niche content crafted for small, like-minded audiences. Now, viewers can connect with viewpoints that confirm what they already believe, with diverse perspectives conveniently filtered out.

A spirit of populism emerged with the 2016 presidential campaign and suddenly any authority—political or scholarly—was called into question. *Truth is relative. Who are you (the press,*

Congress, the Supreme Court, scientists, scholars) to tell me what is or isn't the truth or what I should believe about it?

But when expertise is shunned, when facts are manipulated, when a free press is denied access to leaders and information, how does it affect democracy? To what sources can we turn if we want to be informed citizens? When we present ourselves as polished avatars rather than real people, does it warp our regard for truth? Are there fictional worlds where we can find the truth of human experience? This magazine issue explores these questions and more.

Which brings us to an accidental brush with art history. To illustrate this wide-ranging, nebulous topic of “truth,” a keyword search of international art museums repeatedly returned results using the term *vanitas*, associated with sumptuous still life paintings of similar subject matter: books, globes, musical instruments, jewels, human skulls, and, strangely, bubbles. Click bait, humanities style.

The *vanitas* genre gained popularity among artists in the Netherlands in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and was named for its allusion to scripture (Latin: *Vanitas vanitatum; et omnia vanitas*. Vanity of vanities; all is vanity.—Eccles. 1:2 KJV). It was an art form with an admonition: to live a modest, circumspect life. These works pointed to the “futility” or “worthlessness” (*vanitas*) of striving for worldly goods, a reminder of the transience of life and certainty of death. At their moralistic extreme, *vanitas* pieces were a condemnation of earthly vice. Books, music, wine, and wealth were expressions of pleasures to be shunned in favor of attending to higher, spiritual matters.

Common symbols communicated these ideas: skulls (the certainty of death); rotten fruit (decay); flowers (which wither and die); smoke (the transience of life); a pocket watch or hourglass (time on earth is finite); and those puzzling little bubbles (life can vanish in a snap).

Jan van Kessel (1626-1679), the artist featured on our arresting magazine cover, used bright colors and intricate detail that was prized by collectors. Catalogue entries from the Getty Museum note that “van Kessel worked from nature and used illustrated scientific texts” to give objects authenticity.

Edwaert Collier (ca. 1640-after 1707), the artist represented on this page, layered his *vanitas* works with abundance: draped tables, swags of silk, musical instruments, pearls, watches, snuffed candles, hourglasses, and overturned wine goblets all speak to a life of excess. In the far right of this rendition, Collier tucks a curling scrap of paper bearing the reminder: *Vanitas Vanitatum Et Omnia Vanitas*.

Ironically, *vanitas* paintings were valued by how they attracted viewers; the more dazzlingly executed, the higher the price to own such a work. Only the wealthiest patrons could afford them. Some artists poked fun at the double standard, as did Collier who often included, among the symbols of death and doom, an artfully penned aphorism: *Vita brevis, ars longa*. (Life is short, art long.)

The rise of the genre coincided with urbanization and the growing importance of commerce, trade, and skilled learning. As objects in *vanitas* artworks, books carried a double meaning: while a life devoted to study (depicted by worn tomes and tattered pages) was to be commended, richly bound books collected as possessions were just another expression of vain consumerism. Art historian Walter Liedtke observed that *vanitas* objects “refer to wealth and individual accomplishment, with . . . the vanity of learning given particular emphasis.”

It becomes clear: Disillusionment with highly educated so-called experts, and trying to decipher what is true and abiding, has preoccupied us for centuries. The trick is to chase the bubbles that burst with new perspectives, outrun those that break against hardened cynicism. Gather ye bubbles of truth while ye may.