

# Collecting

**Memento mori | From 16th-century vanitas paintings to morbid YBA conceptualists, we are drawn to reminders of mortality, says Caroline Roux**



Left: 'A Vanitas Still Life' (1629) by Jacob Westerbaen, on show at the Douwes Fine Art booth at Treasure House Fair — Douwes Fine Art, Amsterdam

## Art's greatest subject? Death

time," says David Grob, another dealer who is taking part in the fair, which offers a potpourri of art and objects from the deeply historic to the present day. His works are rather more recent than Downer's. In a callback to his involvement with the Young British Artists of the late 1980s, Grob will show a piece called "Hatchet Job", made by Mat Collishaw in 2005, where an axe is embedded in a plastic medical skull. This piece was made for a charity auction, clearly with a hefty dose of humour, but Collishaw has often dwelt on death in his work, including a photographic record of last meals taken on death row (on view until September 6 at The Sherborne gallery). He has said that this focus on violence and death emphasises the very urgency and desperation

of living, while his compositions — like the death row series — are modern manifestations of vanitas art, the genre developed by northern European painters in the 16th century to remind the living of the inevitability of death. Where the historic versions show worldly objects (globes, books, instruments) alongside symbols of mortality (skulls, hourglasses), in Collishaw's fries and burgers take their place.

Douwes Fine Art from Amsterdam is bringing a fine example of the real thing: a 1629 vanitas by Jacob Westerbaen who was based in Leiden, where the vanitas form first emerged. Douwes is said to



the oldest family-owned art gallery in the world, established in 1770 and now run by the eighth and ninth generation of the family; its business ranges over five centuries but its heart is in the older masters. "This is a very nice, intimate piece," says Evert Douwes (generation eight), "possibly painted for his courtly cousin, Sir Jacob." A skull sits amid volumes with furling pages (to own a library demonstrated wealth as well as intellect) and a lute is to one side. Documents detailing the business of the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie are scattered across the table.

The VOC, or the Dutch East India Company, established in 1602, was the first multinational, prefiguring the modern world of international mega corporations. Perhaps the painting might appeal to a tech bro? "Well, around that time, [the VOC] would have been worth twice what Nvidia's worth now," says Douwes. "But writers and musicians are attracted by these cerebral works. And of course, surgeons. They deal with life and death all the time."

While some collectors are intrigued by the subjects of mourning and death, others are drawn to stories of royalty. Stephen Reynolds, a UK-based jewellery dealer, is showing a gold, enamel, hair and diamond ring commemorating the death of Edward IV ("They dug him up in the 18th century and used his hair")

**Mat Collishaw has said that his focus on violence and death emphasises the very urgency of living**

and a slightly less ghoulish one for William III that he discovered just weeks ago. "It turned up in a provincial auction in Holland, but any museum in the western world would want it," says Reynolds, who is a renowned "divvie" (someone with an almost uncanny ability to spot extraordinary treasures). "There is a brooch in the V&A by the same hand. But this is a ring, with a poem inscribed on top talking up a valet, and covered with a faceted rock crystal, and rings are more sought after than brooches."

There is also a correlation between illustrious figures and quality pieces, royals, aristocrats and the famous often leaving hefty bursaries for pieces to be made after their death. "I'm very familiar with mourning rings for Pitt [the Younger] and Lord Byron," says Downer, who was the jewellery expert at Sotheby's in London for a number of years. "They carry a premium." In the case of the latter, his death — fevered, in Greece and aged 36 — is mythic and any reminder still carries the charge.

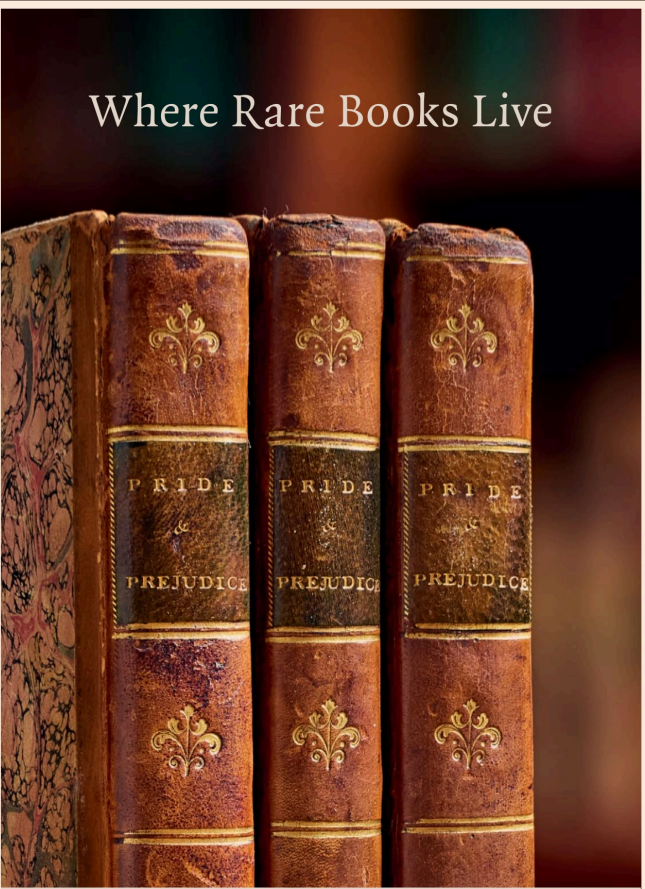
"I've been around a lot of lovely objects," continues Downer, "but it's their biography that appeals to me." And he goes on to describe a painting which shows Sir Thomas Aston wearing the very jewel we are looking at in the bowls of the Silver Vaults. A huge work (6ft by 5ft) and a highlight of the collection at Manchester Art Gallery, to whom it was gifted around 100 years ago, it is known as "Sir Thomas Aston at the Deathbed of his Wife" (1635) and shows its protagonist solemn in grief beside his dead wife Magdalene, dressed in angelic white clothes. Beside her is the draped black cot of a stillborn child. "It's so staged, it's like a performance," says Downer of the work by John Souch, a provincial, 17th-century artist, but one who could get there in time to record the event.

In the painting, the memento mori is pinned to Aston's silken sash. Here in the real world, that same object seems to transcend its own materiality. In its tiny form, and its delicacy, the jewel emblazoned with a skull is still about the aching death of a child. And its place is next to his father's heart.



'Sir Thomas Aston at the Deathbed of his Wife' (1635) by John Souch: he is wearing the Aston Jewel on his sash — Bridgeman Images

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## How Freud transformed modern art

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weak or strong?" What surprises are in store at the fair remain under wraps at the time of writing.

In Mayfair, Alison Jacques is showing paintings by the Argentine-British artist Eileen Agar, one of the few women included in the 1936 show. She described the feminine imagination as "womb magic", which she believed would counteract the "rampant hysterical militarism" of the late 1930s. "I have spent my life in revolt against convention," she said, "trying to bring colour and light and a sense of the mysterious to everyday existence."

On view at the Freud Museum, London, is a small, fascinating exhibition: Leonora Carrington: *The Symptomatic Surreal* (until August 10). It includes letters, publications and drawings made by Carrington — an upper-class, British surrealist and writer — at the outbreak of the second world war. The display also includes a small selection

of Freud's Egyptian antiquities, objects which would have fascinated Carrington, who had a life-long interest in myth and archetypes.

When the war broke out, Carrington was living with the surrealist Max Ernst in the south of France. Ernst was interned and Carrington fled to Spain, where her rich father sent the artist's nanny in a gunboat to bring her back to England. She refused, had a nervous breakdown and was committed to an asylum in Santander. (It's apt that the exhibition is touring to a new museum, Faro Santander, on September 8.) Even-

tually, Carrington managed to get to New York; from there, she moved to Mexico, where she lived for the rest of her long life. The sketches include images of a real horse, a galleon, a girl dissolving in light; a tiny figure in a cage dangling from a monster. A painting of fantastical human/animal hybrids is also on view. Made by Carrington during her stay in the asylum, it's the first time it's been exhibited in the UK.

Quite apart from their shared interest in the unconscious, both Freud and Carrington's lives were shaped by displacement and exile. Freud Museum curator Vanessa Boni tells me. She also observes that Freud, like an artist, used objects as "material tools" to help think through the structure of the unconscious. Interestingly, though, while Carrington was in analysis for much of her life, her work was less inspired by Freud than his arch rival. When Boni visited her house in Mexico City she noted a shelf of books by her bed: all were by Carl Jung.



'Annunciation' by Paul Delvaux — DMS