

## LIPSIUS' *DE CONSTANTIA*, 17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY STILL LIFE PAINTING AND THE USE OF CONSTANCY TODAY

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**ABSTRACT.** *Lipsius' De constantia, 17<sup>th</sup> Century Still Life Painting and the Use of Constancy Today.* The present article revisits the main ideas from Justus Lipsius' *De constantia* in the light of the present ongoing pandemic. Through his interest for the Stoics, Lipsius was able to contribute to a more general and European interest towards this topic, reviving the Stoic philosophy under the name of Neostoicism. The influence of his ideas can be seen in some art production, especially the one that is connected to the places where Lipsius lived and it is a testimony to their popularity and the various ways of transmitting them. Even if the Stoic ideal remains an ideal, the Neostoicism of Justus Lipsius is meaningful in as much as any philosophy that deals with crises because it can help us view the text from both its relevancy and our recent general experience. The isolation, the anxiety, the uneasiness and fear are emotions that have been more or less present in our lives during this pandemic and they require a solution. Constancy is the solution that Justus Lipsius proposes.

**Keywords:** *Justus Lipsius, Neostoicism, Still Life Painting, Pandemic, Moral Philosophy, Crisis Philosophy.*

### Introducing Humanism and the Rise of Neostoicism in Northern Europe

Contemplating on humanism, Jozef Ijsewijn notes that it was not rapidly accepted in Northern Europe, nor was its spread something that occurred without difficulties. Humanism emerged in Italy in the 14th century and spread throughout Europe up to the 16th century. Humanism was ambivalent, carrying in itself both its past traditions and influences, but also a desire for the new.<sup>1</sup> The humanist curricula included a variety of disciplines and among them only the discipline of

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Mann, "The origins of Humanism" in Jill Kraye (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, Cambridge Companions to Literature, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 1-4.

moral philosophy was present, explaining the humanistic inclination towards moral.<sup>2</sup> This movement had a keen interest in ancient Latin literature and gained several followers in Northern Europe only in the latest phase of its European spread. After the death of Erasmus, it took some 40 years for the humanist movement to gain more followers in the North.<sup>3</sup> Given this situation, it appears quite unexpected that in the period between the death of Erasmus and the generation of 16th-century humanists, the Northern provinces seemed glad to embrace the Neostoicism, through the work of Justus Lipsius. As Neostoicism takes root from the Stoicism and Christianity, having a practical side to it. It appealed to the Low Countries because of their humanist predilection for ancient moral-philosophical texts mixed with their contemporary concerns.<sup>4</sup>

As Jan Papy observes, the late humanism from the Low Countries still has room for further exploration. The political views and the Stoic thought developed survived the modernity and got transmitted into the Baroque thought and still echoed in the Enlightenment. With his Stoic studies, Lipsius played a part in the start of the history of philosophy and the general interest in Stoicism.<sup>5</sup> Because of their popularity, the ideas of Neostoicism are reflected in later writings but also traces of them can be found in art production. It is known, after all, that Rubens was part of Lipsius' circle. However, the Neostoic dispersion of ideas can be suspected in other artists and genres such as still lifes.

By looking at the main ideas of *De constantia* and trying to correlate them with a few examples from the art production of artists that worked in Leiden, the final question is as such: to what end does the constancy from Lipsius' *De constantia* and, ultimately, the Neostoic message reflect some art pieces? To what end is it relevant and worth revisiting? In light of the recent pandemic, constancy may be a possible approach to this situation because both Stoic and Neostoic theories are philosophies designed for times of crisis.

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<sup>2</sup> Jill Kraye, "The Humanist as Moral Philosopher: Marc-Antoine Muret's 1585 Edition of Seneca" in Jill Kraye, Risto Saarinen (eds.), *Moral Philosophy on the Threshold of Modernity*, Springer, Dordrecht, 2005, p. 307.

<sup>3</sup> Jozef Ijsewijn, "The Coming of Humanism to the Low Countries", in Paul Oskar Kristeller, Thomas A. Brady, Heiko Augustinus Oberman (eds.), *The Profile of the Italian Renaissance in the Mirror of Its European Transformations. Itinerarium Italicum. Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought*, Vol. XV, Brill Academic Publishers, Leiden, 1975, pp. 193-198.

<sup>4</sup> Jill Kraye, "The Humanist as Moral Philosopher: Marc-Antoine Muret's 1585 Edition of Seneca" in Jill Kraye, Risto Saarinen (eds.), *Moral Philosophy on the Threshold of Modernity*, pp. 307-308.

<sup>5</sup> Jan Papy, "Justus Lipsius as Historian of Philosophy: The Reception of the *Manuduction as stoicam philosophiam* (1604) in the History of Philosophy", in Anthony Ossa-Richardson, Margaret Meserve (eds.), *Et Amicorum. Essays on Renaissance Humanism and Philosophy in Honour of Jill Kraye*, Brill, Leiden, 2017, pp. 388-389.

## Article Approach

This research interest regarding Justus Lipsius appeared during my art history dissertation that dealt with the 17<sup>th</sup>-century vanitas from the Netherlands. As the dissertation was written from the art history perspective, this prevented the exploration of Neostoicism, Lipsius' works and their possible connection with still life painting produced in that period. This article will use interdisciplinary data from history, art history and philosophy, with an emphasis on the latter. It will begin with a short review of Lipsius' activity and the main ideas of *De constantia*, then will continue with looking at a few examples of still-life pieces that were produced by artists who activated in Leiden (as Leiden was a humanist centre and the home of Neostoicism), ending with a part that aims to forward possible answers to this contemporary pandemic, trying to see how the strategies presented by Lipsius can be relevant. In light of this recent global crisis, it is worth revisiting Neostoicism, its possible reflections in art, and the uses it might pose for our current predicament.

## Justus Lipsius and the Foundation of the Neostoicism

Northern humanism flourished in the University of Leiden as it promoted and had attached to it, some of the most famous humanists that shaped the Dutch culture through their Latin works.<sup>6</sup> At the time of Lipsius' appointment, the Leiden University wished to enrich its humanism and to be better connected to this intellectual movement. To achieve this, it set to hire a number of scholars with good recommendations. One of these scholars was Justus Lipsius that returned to the Low Countries with a letter of recommendation from Marc-Antoine Muret with whom he studied in Rome.<sup>7</sup> In this environment, Lipsius wrote some of his most popular works and it is here where the Neostoic movement took root.

As Dirk Van Miert writes,<sup>8</sup> he was the first *lumen Academiae* in his thirteen years of activity in Leiden. The prestigious position, the high salary and reputation he achieved were impossible to accomplish by Hadrianus Junius, the one to follow

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<sup>6</sup> Dirk Van Miert, "Hadrianus Junius and Northern Dutch Humanism", in Dirk van Miert (ed.), *The Kaleidoscopic Scholarship of Hadrianus Junius (1511-1575). Northern Humanism at the Dawn of the Dutch Golden Age. Brill's Studies in Intellectual History*, Vol. 199, 2011, Brill Academic Publishers, Leiden, pp. 2-5.

<sup>7</sup> Jill Kraye, "The Humanist as Moral Philosopher: Marc-Antoine Muret's 1585 Edition of Seneca" in Jill Kraye, Risto Saarinen (eds.), *Moral Philosophy on the Threshold of Modernity*, p. 313.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 17-19.

into Lipsius' seat after his leave.<sup>9</sup> What Lipsius started at Leiden ended up making the university to be the "largest and most fashionable university in the Northern parts of Europe".<sup>10</sup>

We do know that he was born in Brabant in 1547 and came from the Southern provinces. He acquired a bachelor's degree in Arts and was known as a Latin philologist, publishing four books under the name of *Variae lectione*. It is in 1574 that he publishes his translation of Tacitus, together with commentaries, that his fame grows. Because of this success of his Tacitus translation, he secures a chair in Leiden in 1578, enjoying a good reputation and all the prospects for further works. He argued that the humanist curriculum should look for guidance not only in the writers of the Roman republic but also in the writings of Tacitus and Seneca, despite their sententious style.<sup>11</sup> In 1591 he gives up his Leiden chair, due to a conflict, and leaves the city. The following year he occupies a chair in Louvain where he resumes his activity.<sup>12</sup> It is the span between 1578 and 1591 that we are concerned with, as it is the span in which *De constantia* is produced.

His influence stretched beyond university and that is supported by the contemporary accounts of him having ties with scholars and other groups as well. For example, Michel de Montaigne and other prominent European scholars were readers of Justus Lipsius, with Montaigne having read his *De constantia*.<sup>13</sup> If we look at Peter Paul Rubens' *The Four Philosophers*, also known as *Justus Lipsius and his pupils*, and proceed unto identifying the men, a connection between Lipsius, Rubens, and his brother Philip is revealed. What this piece shows is that Lipsius had a circle of pupils and friends that was not related to university. This is evidence of how intellectual and artistic circles were not isolated, but rather intertwined. In the painting, Rubens presents himself in the posture of a pupil of Lipsius that not only illustrates the respect of the former for the latter but also displays the interest of a well-known artist towards the Neostoicism promoted by the humanist. One can wonder, what was there that interested the 16<sup>th</sup>-century artist regarding the Neostoic view? Lisa Rosenthal offers us a possible answer. It was the idea of self-mastery and

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<sup>9</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>10</sup> Anthony Grafton, "The new science and the traditions of humanism" in Jill Kraye (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, p. 218.

<sup>11</sup> Anthony Grafton, "The new science and traditions of humanism" in Jill Kraye (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, pp. 212-213.

<sup>12</sup> Christopher Brooke, *Philosophic Pride. Stoicism and Political Thought from Lipsius to Rousseau*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2012, pp. 12-13.

<sup>13</sup> Jan Papy, "Justus Lipsius as Historian of Philosophy: The Reception of the *Manuductio ad stoicam philosophiam* (1604) in the History of Philosophy", in Anthony Ossa-Richardson, Margaret Meserve (eds.), *Et Amicorum. Essays on Renaissance Humanism and Philosophy in Honour of Jill Kraye*, p. 390.

development of a pragmatic philosophy that was more than just pure theory, but a way of life that was of interest for an artist. Here lies the success of Lipsius' work and its relevance to Rubens, as it was something the artist could apply himself.<sup>14</sup> To create Neostoicism, Justus did as the scholastics did with Aristotle. Namely, he Christianized the Stoics.<sup>15</sup> Was there a need for the Neostoicism in the Netherlands? The Netherlands had growing tensions with the Habsburgs.

As Israel Jonathan shows, the 16<sup>th</sup> century was, in his later half, marked by its revolts and rising tensions. Pointing to the revolts of Holland and Zeeland in 1572, that are considered to be the start of the process of independence, or even to the Union of Utrecht where the provinces sign a treaty in 1579 to help each other in the face of Spain, is enough proof to highlight the distress that the Netherlands faced. It is only in 1609, when a peace treaty with Spain is signed, that the turmoil is starting to weaken and eventually cease, making way for a new state that will be the Dutch Republic.<sup>16</sup> It can be assumed that the forming of Neostoicism aimed at this state of affairs, trying to offer an answer to the current political and social situation, as the *Leviathan* of Hobbes tried. It was an answer through reason that could offer happiness and peace inside's one mind and being.<sup>17</sup> With Lipsius, the appreciation that Muret held for the Silver Age Latin texts became practice. He highly regarded Seneca because he perceived him as the one to offer the most appealing and accessible variant of the Stoic philosophy.<sup>18</sup> In order to prove or disapprove the need of Neostoicism and its applicability, exploring *De constantia's* main points is necessary.

### **Lipsius' *De constantia***

*De constantia libri duo qui alloquium praecipue continent in publicis malis* is comprised of two books and was published in 1584, becoming a well-known work

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<sup>14</sup> Lisa Rosenthal, *Gender, Politics, and Allegory in the Art of Rubens*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, p. 82.

<sup>15</sup> Jan Papy, "Justus Lipsius as Historian of Philosophy: The Reception of the *Manuduction as stoicam philosophiam* (1604) in the History of Philosophy", in Anthony Ossa-Richardson, Margaret Meserve (eds.), *Et Amicorum. Essays on Renaissance Humanism and Philosophy in Honour of Jill Kraye*, p. 403.

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Israel, *The Dutch Republic. Its Rise, Greatness and Fall*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995, p. 179, pp. 313-314.

<sup>17</sup> John Sellars, "The Early Modern Legacy of the Stoics", in N. Powers and J. Klein (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Hellenistic Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, New York, Forthcoming, Preprint via Academia.edu, pp. 2-4, [https://www.academia.edu/37646446/The\\_Early\\_Modern\\_Legacy\\_of\\_the\\_Stoics](https://www.academia.edu/37646446/The_Early_Modern_Legacy_of_the_Stoics) (accessed 15.02.2020).

<sup>18</sup> Jill Kraye, "The Humanist as Moral Philosopher: Marc-Antoine Muret's 1585 Edition of Seneca" in Jill Kraye, Risto Saarinen (eds.), *Moral Philosophy on the Threshold of Modernity*, p. 328.

of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century. The success of the book is supported by its many prints and translations: forty-four times printed in Latin, fifteen times in French, with several other translations such as Dutch, German, English, Spanish, Italian and Polish, getting more than eighty editions in the span between the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>19</sup>

As Gerhard Oestreich outlines<sup>20</sup>, Lipsius' work aims to be a moral philosophy that offers the reader a pattern for one's behavior that is laid on both Stoic and Christian foundations. It seeks to offer solutions to problems regarding the state, society, and politics. The work is shaped as a dialogue between Lipsius himself, that is on his way to Vienna, and Langius the humanist that he visits. The action is set off by the fact that Lipsius has decided to run away from the city of Louvain, due to the ongoing revolts and wars. Langius takes in this scenario the role of the wiser man that scolds Lipsius for his choice.<sup>21</sup> This is the premise that allows the author to discuss at length the main points of Neostoicism.

The first important point, as seen in chapter two,<sup>22</sup> is made when Langius tells Lipsius that travelling to another country while trying to escape war will not solve anything. This implies that what disturbs him is rather internal than external. This idea in *De constantia* is highly reminiscent of the Stoic theory. In *Letters from a Stoic*, Seneca elaborates on self-possession as a solution for a peaceful existence, restraint of one's instincts, and no emotional attachments. Langius sets to argue that Lipsius is not genuinely concerned because of the war and what happens to his countrymen, but because of what could befall him. His sorrow has as root selfishness and fear for oneself, rather than the compassion for his countrymen. Seeking any form of pleasure to alleviate his pains is merely an illusion, for they do not help him recover, but make him suffer some more by reviving his wounds. The only true remedies are wisdom and constancy.<sup>23</sup>

Constancy is discussed and defined, in chapter four, as an invincible strength of the mind that cannot be influenced by anything external. Constancy is connected to the strength that is described as fidelity, faithfulness, that is a product of sound reason. For constancy to retain its constant character it appears that strength ought to be part of it as it provides the fortitude of enduring faithfulness. It is clarified that constancy takes root from patience, described as its mother, while recalling its

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<sup>19</sup> Gerhard Oestreich, *Neostoicism and the Early Modern State*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008, p. 13.

<sup>20</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>21</sup> John Sellars, *Justus Lipsius, On Constancy*, Exeter University Press, 2006, pp. 2-5.

<sup>22</sup> Justus Lipsius, *On Constancy. De constantia Translated by Sir John Stradling (1594)*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2006, The First Book, Chapter 2.

<sup>23</sup> *Idem.*

connection to strength. Even though constancy appears as the most important element, it is part of a web or structure that helps to build the invincible character of constancy in the face of adversities.<sup>24</sup> Without strength, constancy would be less constant as it would shatter easily, while without patience, constancy would be hopeless and would look useless to the user. By adding these two other elements and forming this structure where the three are connected, constancy gains the invincibility that allows it to be a faithful remedy.

Another important point can be found in chapters five and six which deal with the differences between reason and opinion. Reason leads to constancy and opinion to inconstancy. Reason has heavenly descent, is the perfection of the soul that has a divine and fire-like nature, while opinion is born out of the body that is defined by the element of earth. Interestingly enough, Langius notes the fact that these two parts, the soul that is fire and the body that is earth, have a point where they mingle and mix, explaining that they cannot live with each other entirely pure, untouched by the other. Thus, the individual has the task of seeking reason in that part of the soul that is pure of body.<sup>25</sup> While Lipsius lived in a century that tried to separate quite clearly between reason and body, it is intriguing to see that he mentions that there is a point where the soul (that is of heavenly descent like reason) mixes with the body. This suggests that as long as two elements are bound to live with each other, they are unable to stay pure of the other. The description present in chapters five and six is highly reminiscent of the cosmology that can be found in the writings of Empedocles and other thinkers that followed the Presocratics. The similarity stands in linking some parts of our being with natural elements such as fire and earth. Empedocles too stated that the world is formed out of things that have their descent in one of the four elements and these elements mix and unite with each other under the guide of Love (in D73, 250-260) that was seen by the thinker as a uniting force.<sup>26</sup> Even the point where Lipsius states how these elements mingle and mix is almost identical with the passages by Empedocles from D53.<sup>27</sup> Of course, the elements differ but the dynamic and logic of things are what really connects Lipsius with the ancient thinkers, hinting at his inspiration.

In the seventh chapter, the things that might disturb our constancy, together with the notions of public and private evils are introduced. These disturbances are

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, Chapter 4.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, Chapter 5-6.

<sup>26</sup> Andre Laks, Glenn W. Most (eds.), *Early Greek Philosophy* Vol V, Harvard University Press, Harvard, 2016, pp. 413-415.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 397.

false goods, identified as riches, honor, authority, health and long life, while the others are false evils, identified as poverty, infamy, lack of promotion, sickness, and death. Both false goods and false evils are being born out of four primal affections felt by the human: desire, joy, fear, and sorrow. It is worth mentioning here that the false goods seem to be the opposites of the false evils, while the four affections can be taken into pairs: desire with joy, corresponding to the false goods and fear with sorrow, corresponding to false evils.<sup>28</sup>

Having established the need for constancy and what may disturb it, Langius moves on to discuss the public and private evils, from chapter eight onwards. The public evils are the evils that befall a group of people, a society, a nation, while the private ones affect individuals or families. The companion argues that the public evils are given to us by God and they are a necessity. These are two of the four arguments he brings, while the third and the fourth are as follows: the public evils are profitable for us and they are not uncommon or sorrowful. As John Sellars writes,<sup>29</sup> Langius mentions four points where the Stoic theory should be revised: the point of God being submitted to fate, the existence of a natural order of causes, the inexistence of contingency, together with the lack of free will. Through these, he differs from the materialist and determinist theories, while also aligning himself to the Christian views.

The second book of *De constantia* continues the talk about the public evils, exploring the last two arguments. Lipsius' friend and host develops the explanation of the public evils as being a part of God's plan, thus they are profitable for us, humans. He identifies a few of the benefits of public evils as such: the acquirement of will, the exercising of will and the evils as punishments for sins. It is further suggested that the events through which the Low Countries went are not something rare or unseen, invoking history to support this claim. He gives various examples of nations and cultures that were subjected to different kinds of trials, as a natural course of history. They were not unlucky or damned, they simply had a period of glory that was followed by one of decay, as everything that is born is destined to eventually die.<sup>30</sup>

John Sellars emphasizes that what Lipsius is conveying is the Stoic conclusion of the fact that we humans cannot avoid suffering. The only solution might be

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<sup>28</sup> Justus Lipsius, *On Constancy. De constantia Translated by Sir John Stradling (1594)*, Chapters 7, and John Sellars, "Justus Lipsius's *De Constantia*: A Stoic Spiritual Exercise", *Poetics Today*, 28:3, 2007, Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics, pp. 339-340.

<sup>29</sup> John Sellars, "Justus Lipsius's *De Constantia*: A Stoic Spiritual Exercise", *Poetics Today*, 28:3, 2007, Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics, pp. 339-343.

<sup>30</sup> Justus Lipsius, *On Constancy. De constantia Translated by Sir John Stradling (1594)*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2006, The Second Book.



offered by the way we decide to tackle and face suffering. We can choose sorrow, or we can choose constancy that, opposed to sorrow, is a product of reason and is a type of wisdom. For the philosopher, constancy is the only viable option in the face of suffering. Compared to the first book, the second one has the addition of linking directly wisdom, in the form of philosophy, with constancy and stability in one's life. By making this link, Lipsius provides a privileged status to the pupils of philosophy that have the best chances to achieve a life of constancy and stability in a world of tumult and distress. This very linking is important as it hints to the author's belief regarding philosophy, showing that it has a prestigious place among other respectable arts and sciences. *De constantia* shows that he provided philosophy with a special status.<sup>31</sup>

From a retrospective, the dialogue *De constantia* instructs the reader with the basic Stoic teachings, all applied to a specific situation of crisis. It associates the Stoic teaching with the Christian beliefs, criticizing the classical Stoicism where it does not corroborate with the Christian view while making it all very accessible to any reader through the practical way in which it is composed. By giving several applied examples of situations the 16<sup>th</sup>-century reader can relate to, it becomes highly available anyone that is in any way affected by the revolts, the war or the general anxiety that comes with such events.

### The Neostoic Moral Reflected in Still Lives

Stoic philosophy was suited for modern Northern Europe because it was a philosophy fit for a crisis. The Stoic ethics were also appealing because they were not concerned with the *polis*, but with the individual.<sup>32</sup> It was through peace of the individual that Stoic thought aimed to achieve political peace and stability.

In discussing the Neostoicism in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Thijs Weststeijn<sup>33</sup> highlights a few things. The ethics were represented mainly by Neostoicism, that was one of the most influential, authoritative schools, intellectually speaking. The works of Dutch Stoics like Hendrik Laurensz Spiegel, Pieter Cornelisz Hooft or Dirck Volckertsz Coornhert were highly discussed in circles attended by educated citizens, and this ethical view that was marked by the Stoicism had a part in the way in which theories

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<sup>31</sup> *Idem* and John Sellars, "Justus Lipsius's *De Constantia*: A Stoic Spiritual Exercise", *Poetics Today*, 28:3, 2007, Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics, pp. 345-352.

<sup>32</sup> Christoph Strohm, "Ethics in Early Calvinism", in Jill Krayer, Risto Saarinen (eds.), *Moral Philosophy on the Threshold of Modernity*, p. 274.

<sup>33</sup> Thijs Weststeijn, *The Visible World*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2008, pp. 39-40.

of art developed. In commentaries about art and literature, moderation and modesty were often appreciated. This was a mark of the Stoic view and artists were also advised to have an ethical side to their works, preaching about the Stoic morals. As Svetlana Alpers points, the realism of the Dutch paintings, especially those of minor genres, is only apparent. While they cannot be judged generally but only particularly, some paintings are imbued with moral lessons because there is a traceable connection between certain motifs and the printed mottoes and emblem texts that emphasized this moral aspect.<sup>34</sup>

This idea can be connected to the philosophical theory according to which nature contains in itself the rules of commendable human behavior. The natural world and ethics are related, and so is their study. This is the reason why painting had to achieve an ethical aspect as well. Painting had the task of studying nature and by doing so, it entered the study of ethics through their relation.<sup>35</sup> For example, the painting of landscapes, seascapes or still life were genres that were quite popular in the Netherlands. As they studied and depicted the natural world, they were also in close relation to the ethical study and had to include this aspect as well. When analyzing this relation, between philosophy and the artistic production of the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, Thijs Weststeijn<sup>36</sup> shows that it ought to be noted how philosophy had a practical side to it, especially in the early modern period. It was often seen as a set of rules that would enable escaping calamity by providing a solution. If one would argue that Neostoicism did not have a lasting impression on the Netherlands, this can be countered by the fact that the work of Arnold Houbraken, *The Great Theatre of Dutch Painters* (1718-1721) was still influenced by Stoicism, even if it was a century apart from the Stoic peak. In this respect, connecting the Neostoicism with Rubens or a painting genre that was popular in this period does not seem a stretch. After all, Jill Kraye emphasizes how the Northern humanists had a general interest in contemporary art, often commissioning pieces meant to edify certain ideas.<sup>37</sup>

Returning to the city of Leiden and its university, in terms of artistic production, Leiden becomes a centre. As Philip Hooks<sup>38</sup> shows in his analysis regarding the artistic production and market in the Netherlands, there were the cities of Utrecht, Delft and, Amsterdam that developed first in this sense, as the northern provinces

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<sup>34</sup> Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing. Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1983, p. xxiv.

<sup>35</sup> Thijs Weststeijn, *The Visible World*, p. 40.

<sup>36</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>37</sup> Jill Kraye, "Artists and Humanists" in Jill Kraye (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, p. 179.

<sup>38</sup> Philip Hook, *Escrocii galeriilor de artă*, Baroque Books & Arts, București, 2017, pp. 14-16.

had a general quicker growth. Following Jonathan Israel<sup>39</sup>, Leiden, Haarlem, Antwerp and the southern provinces in general developed, artistically speaking, in a second wave, a thing that comes off as a bit surprising, because in Leiden the Neostoicism and the humanism were promoted through the university. If the assumption that the Stoic teachings that were found in this new, adapted and modern form made a lasting impression in the Netherlands, later in the Dutch Republic, is right, then one should be able to test it. It can be done through some selected art pieces from the said timeline that, when analyzed, should be able to show the key ideas from the Neostoic moral philosophy.

Concerning the works of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century artists, the genre of Still Life will be of interest, because the painting of Rubens of *The Four Philosophers* has already been discussed in several studies.<sup>40</sup> As the said genre was widely spread, with an



**Fig. 1.** David Bailly, *Vanitas with the Bust of Seneca*, first half of the 17th-century, via Studfile.net.

estimation of two million and a half of paintings, around the year 1650<sup>41</sup> and was a popular genre in Leiden, it may shed light on how the Stoic moral was regarded by a wider public. Such a great number of paintings is supported by the fact that their price range was accessible to the average man, thing that partially explains their success on the market.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Jonathan Israel, *The Dutch Republic. Its Rise, Greatness and Fall*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995, pp. 548-551.

<sup>40</sup> Such as Lisa Rosenthal, *Gender, Politics, and Allegory in the Art of Rubens*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005 and Christopher Brooke, *Philosophic Pride. Stoicism and Political Thought from Lipsius to Rousseau*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2012.

<sup>41</sup> Philip Hook, *Escrociile galeriilor de artă*, Baroque Books & Arts, București, 2017, pp. 28-30.

<sup>42</sup> Jonathan Israel, *The Dutch Republic. Its Rise, Greatness and Fall*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995, p. 559.

If we are to look upon Leiden, the works of the painter David Bailly, that was born and worked here,<sup>43</sup> might be able to convey a few aspects of the theory that Lipsius developed during his time at the Leiden University. In this respect, of great interest is the work with the title *A Vanitas Still Life with the Bust of Seneca*. Three types of objects can be found in it: creations that emulate the human body, organic matters, and books as an object of knowledge and study. The central piece is the bust of Seneca, followed by another classical bust and a smaller statue. The positioning of a skull between them is noteworthy, as it gives the work its *vanitas* character. Going back to the observation made by Thijs Weststeijn,<sup>44</sup> that the study of nature and ethics were closely related, as philosophy had a practical side to it in the early modern times, the opened books, containing the sketches that are a study of nature become connected to philosophy.

A painter was no stranger to philosophy, as he dealt with the study of nature and this study was connected with philosophy. It should be kept in mind that the natural sciences were very prolific in modern times and even philosophy was thought to be one of them.<sup>45</sup> It ought not to be debated whether or not the skull has the meaning of *memento mori*, as Svetlana Alpers and other art historians proved.<sup>46</sup> It is this association of *memento mori*, which was a popular medieval theme long before the Vanitas occurred, with the bust of Seneca that marks a change in which this cautionary message is being read. Because of the Neostoicism of Justus Lipsius and the rediscovery of classical Stoicism in a humanistic context, such a painting gains philosophical meaning, becoming a testimony to the increased popularity of both the stoics and authors like Lipsius. Having a look at Seneca's philosophy, the Roman philosopher dealt at length with the topic of death and how to conquer its fear.

One of the solutions he offered was the premeditation of death during one's life, to prepare for it. Learning how to die became the core of learning how to live and a key feature of his philosophy.<sup>47</sup> Concerning this, a painting can fulfil this very role of premeditation as it urges the viewer to think about this message of *memento mori*, while also remembering the recipes provided by both Stoics and Neostoics for overcoming the fear of death.

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<sup>43</sup> As seen on *David Bailly*, RKD, Neederlands Instituut voor Kunstgeschiedenis <https://rkd.nl/nl/explore/artists/record?query=david+bailly&start=0> (accessed 10.02.2020).

<sup>44</sup> Thijs Weststeijn, *The Visible World*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2008, pp. 39-40.

<sup>45</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>46</sup> See Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1984 and Ingvar Bergström, *Dutch Still-Life Painting in the Seventeenth Century*, Hacker Art Books, 1983.

<sup>47</sup> Noyes Russell, "Seneca on Death", *Journal of Religion and Health*, Vol. 12, no. 3, 1973, Springer, pp. 223-240.

Another example shall be able to prove the point. Jan Davidszoon de Heem had a Leiden period as well, studying under David Bailly.<sup>48</sup> He is considered to be one of the most acclaimed still life painters. While in Leiden, de Heem had a change in his painting subject: from flowers and food to books with the theme of *vanitas*.



Fig. 2. Jan Davidszoon de Heem, *Still Life of Books*, first half of the 17th-century, via Wikimedia

As far as the Baroque painting is concerned, details were an important part of it and de Heem made no exception. In his Book Still Life period, he often painted open books, just like in this work called *Still Life of Books*, detailing them so that the viewer could read what was on the pages. The pages usually contained passages about the futility of life, its meaningless character, and brevity.<sup>49</sup> What can be easily deduced from here is the fact that this painting conveys the same Stoic message,

through *memento mori*. While in the given example there is no skull, the message is the same through the readable passages that make this still life a more subtle *vanitas*.

Even though the examples bear striking similarities with the classical Stoic theory, it is advisable to not claim them as such. Recalling the success and fame of both Justus Lipsius and his works, together with the fact that the early modern times were still a religious period, the paintings ought to be viewed in the light of Neostoicism. While they do not stray far from the traditional Stoicism, they do differ when it comes to general beliefs. The modern world is a world that believes in life after death, a belief that alters the Stoic perspective through hope.

### Constancy, to What End?

One may justly wonder to what end may the values of Neostoicism and this entire discussion be any useful, outside the field of abstractions? Stoicism, in

<sup>48</sup> As seen on *Jan Davidsz. De Heem*, RKD, Nederlands Instituut voor Kunstgeschiedenis <https://rkd.nl/nl/explore/artists/36842> (accessed 12.02.2020).

<sup>49</sup> Ingvar Bergström, "De Heem's Painting of His First Dutch Period", *Oud Holland*, Vol. 71, No. 4, 1956, Brill, pp. 173-183.

general, is often critiqued to be idealistic, unable to be put in practice. The image painted in the article so far seems idealistic, putting the mentioned thinkers in a good light. This may change through what Wiep van Bunge points. A reading of Tacitus or Cassius Dio will paint a different picture of Seneca who is said to have earned quite the fortune while educating Nero.<sup>50</sup> The same can be said about Justus Lipsius that is said to have stolen part of Muret's writings and presented them as his own or who often plagiarized.<sup>51</sup> To what good shall we inquire further into Neostoicism and Stoicism as they turn out to be impossible and a bit rotten?

I did not have an answer to this when I first wrote this article, all because the pandemic did not happen back then. Revisiting my draft and ideas the realization of the actuality of Justus' *De Constantia* came to me. It is now, precisely, that Neostoicism may be more accessible, more relevant and closer to where we stand as a society. Why the Neostoicism, instead of Stoicism in its classical form? I will list a few of the reasons for this choice. Historically speaking, in the broadest sense, we are closer to modern times than we are to the Antiquity, sharing more cultural similarities. Moreover, we find ourselves in a type of crisis that is similar to what Justus Lipsius has lived: we are, at least metaphorically, in an ongoing war. To argue for this rather bold affirmation, let me support it with some instances. As Nigel Warburton pointed out in his "(Hospital) trolley problems. Some philosophical responses to coronavirus", the ongoing pandemic has been described as a metaphoric war by various leaders around the globe. The current situation with the coronavirus is described as an invisible war, in an attempt of making us stay alert and united against this common *enemy*.<sup>52</sup> As the author emphasizes, it's interesting to think about the fact that we chose to depict an almost-invisible virus as an enemy, humanizing it in a sense, putting it in a war narrative. When viewing the situation from the lenses of the mentioned metaphors, the current situation sounds more similar to the actual war that Lipsius witnessed during his times.

Because of some similarities in our circumstances, Lipsius' work may sit closer to us than before, allowing us to put his writings in the perspective of this generalized epidemic. It suddenly becomes more relevant than before as we can find a real and practical mean for his advices, all in order to keep our constancy that may have been threatened by the recent lockdown, government measures and,

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<sup>50</sup> Wiep van Bunge, "How Not to Cope with Crises" in *Erasmus School of Philosophy*, <https://www.eur.nl/en/esphil/how-not-cope-crises>, (accessed 2.10.2020).

<sup>51</sup> Jill Kraye, "The Humanist as Moral Philosopher: Marc-Antoine Muret's 1585 Edition of Seneca" in Jill Kraye, Risto Saarinen (eds.), *Moral Philosophy on the Threshold of Modernity*, p. 313.

<sup>52</sup> Nigel Warburton, "(Hospital) trolley problems. Some philosophical responses to coronavirus", in *The TLS* <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/philosophical-responses-coronavirus-nigel-warburton/>, (accessed 2.10.2020).

most important, deaths. It gives us an occasion to reflect, as individuals, on the various ways presented to guard our mind against the chaos of the world. Had we not lived through this pandemic so far, it would have been difficult to imagine the world entering a rather chaotic state where fear is more present than it used to be. It would have been difficult, probably, as it has been for me, to imagine the actual use and purpose of this writing.

Because fear plays an important role in such a distressful situation, being a main destabilizing factor, Hobbes comes to mind. To be more precise, a few recent readings of him in the light of the actual situation might prove quite insightful. Daniel Mc Carthy suggests that a broader reading of Hobbes' works highlights the role that fear played in his views on history and society. Fear is seen by the philosopher as the main catalyst of any war. The prosperity of one state brings about the fear of the other and so on and forth in a never-ending cycle. He brings up the position of Hobbes on the topic of continual warfare that is rather not an eternal war, but rather the fear of one breaking out. Following the philosopher, McCarthy notes how a sovereign or a government that cannot protect the subject throws it back in a natural state.<sup>53</sup> While this might appear as not directly connected to the current discussion, it is so. After all, Hobbes too lived the Thirty Years War. Why is fear worth mentioning? It is so because, from a Hobbesian view, it is the main factor that is able to commence the series of events that would eventually lead to chaos if the proper measures are not enacted. By mentioning this catalyst that fear is, constancy becomes a possible option for countering this. What does constancy mean? It is the aptitude of keeping oneself in the same state of mind and heart during a period of time, it is *the quality of staying the same and not changing*<sup>54</sup>. Of course, what Lipsius asks of the reader is a tremendous, if not impossible task.

It appears clearer now why the Stoicism was critiqued as too ideal, impossible to practice. In uncertain circumstances as the ones that we face now, some more than the others, it is difficult to keep our constancy, not let the fear and uncertainty creep in, and act in accordance with some ideals. While Stoicism made quite the comeback in recent, more pleasant, times through a number of books that were addressed to the general reader and made Stoicism become a popular thing outside academia, it might have achieved this because we enjoyed peaceful times. While this point cannot be thoroughly proven, nor can we know what the fate of those books would have been, had they been published in 2020, we have to

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<sup>53</sup> Daniel McCarthy, "A Philosophy of Fear--and Society of Scolds: What Thomas Hobbes Tells Us about the Response to the Coronavirus--and Why the Unafraid Cannot Be Tolerated by Right-thinking Liberals" *Modern Age* (Chicago) 62, no. 2, 2020, p. 7.

<sup>54</sup> According to Oxford Learners Dictionary, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/constancy>, (accessed 5.10.2020).

agree on at least one point. That is the recent experiences which made us rethink the writings that advised on life and attitudes during a crisis, and this includes Neostoicism.

Going to what Eileen Hunt Botting is pointing in “A novel (coronavirus) reading of Hobbes’s *Leviathan*” we find an interesting observation. When Hobbes wrote about how people, when they are isolated from society, lose the account of time, but also the meaning and purpose of industry and other activities, he must have indicated living in a form of quarantine,<sup>55</sup> in the sense of isolation. Undoubtedly, the isolation from the time of Hobbes is different from our current isolation during the pandemic, and yet they seem to both somehow be able to suspend to a degree our lives. Just as David Runciman argues, Hobbes indicates how this suspension, in this case of politics, is a mean to highlight and uncover the “nature of power”.<sup>56</sup> It’s almost as if this isolation and this loss of normality make us aware of things we did not realize up until now.

How can constancy serve us and what has art to do with this? There are several points in which *De constantia* may be applied to our predicament and I will highlight those. First of all, as the beginning of the First Book states, trying to run from the problem will not solve our discomfort towards it. The present virus spread virtually everywhere and even if you do run to a remote island that has no cases, you will still live with the fear that this might change in the future. Lipsius advises conquering fear through compassion for those around us and through constancy as constancy leads to stability which, in turn, to less discomfort. From his point of view, constancy is connected to strength, fidelity and faithfulness and it is a product of reason. Due to its descent, it has the ability to counter fear that is irrational. By sticking to these traits, one can remain steadfast in constancy.

Stability requires strength, fidelity requires virtue and faithfulness requires trust. By enacting these towards our companions we make sure that we do not stray from the rational way. Another important thing would be how opinions, that are opposed to rational thinking, lead to inconstancy and I think the current general situation and our personal experiences can support the danger of irrational opinions when it comes to a crisis of any sort. The last point worth mentioning here is that of the public and private evils that are characteristic of a generally difficult situation. We all face private evils and public evils, probably more often now than before and even to this stressful situation the constancy may help or at least inspire

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<sup>55</sup> Eileen Hunt Botting, “A novel (coronavirus) reading of Hobbes’s *Leviathan*”, in *History of European Ideas*, DOI: 10.1080/01916599.2020.1792059, 2020, p. 3.

<sup>56</sup> David Runciman, “Coronavirus Has Not Suspended Politics It Has Revealed the Nature of Power”, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/27/coronavirus-politics-lockdown-hobbes>, (accessed 5.10.2020).



to remain steadfast in their face for as long as possible. After all, as Lipsius notes, the current crisis is nothing special. The human history is filled with death, war and disease. While we should not despair, we should at least reconsider our hardship in comparison to past hardship and find a way to derive hope from the past.

The given examples of paintings that are enriched with Neostoic meaning may play the role of a reminder because they are accessible to us from the comfort of our home and are already part of our shared material culture. Moreover, they can perform a double-movement effect. The first would be that of being affected by the ideas of Neostoicism when they were created, and the second would be how they can affect us in contemporary times. While it was indicated how the Stoic ideal is rather ideal and, consequently, impossible to achieve, sometimes the mere power to affect and produce an effect is to be regarded. This is an ability that is specific to art. By viewing these still lifes we may be able to find inspiration, hope, and strength and by letting us be affected we may have the power to remain in constancy.

## Conclusion

The philosophy of Justus Lipsius and his dialogue *De constantia* are worth revisiting in the light of the recent events. Through his interest for the Stoics, Lipsius was able to contribute to a more general and European interest towards this topic. He had the merits of comprising his edition of Seneca that was essential to humanistic scholarship and to reconstruct the Stoic moral and natural philosophy. Some Stoic ideas survived this interest peak of the late 16<sup>th</sup> century and 17<sup>th</sup> century and were adopted by philosophers such as Descartes and Spinoza. The latter adopted and emphasized the idea of the irrelevancy of the external world for the internal one and argued for the primacy of the intellect over emotions.<sup>57</sup> This influence of his ideas can be seen in some art production, especially the one that is connected to the places where Lipsius lived and it is a testimony to their popularity and the various ways of transmitting them. Even if the Stoic ideal remains an ideal, the Neostoicism of Justus Lipsius is meaningful in as much as any philosophy that deals with crises because it can help us view the text from both its relevancy and our recent general experience. The isolation, the anxiety, the uneasiness and fear are emotions that have been more or less present in our lives during this pandemic and they require a solution. For some, constancy may prove useful.

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<sup>57</sup> Jill Kraye, "Philologists and Philosophers" in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, p. 152.

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