

Gallery 12

Life and Death in the 17th Century

Today most people feel they should enjoy life to the full and would rather not think about death.

In 17th-century Europe the reverse was so.

Life was seen as a brief but painful business, a prelude to everlasting life in heaven, or damnation.

The early part of the century was beset by tragedies. Fires, plagues, wars and religious conflicts were rife and such disasters left people clinging to their beliefs. But from the 1650s there was growing prosperity, bringing increased material comfort and social stability.

This change is reflected in art and in other possessions that also show the influence of travel and trade through novel ideas and exotic materials from overseas. New optical technology led to fresh ways of seeing and scientific progress displaced old superstitions.

The paintings in this display provide an insight into human experience in Europe during the 1600s. They depict contemporary life and cherished objects, and are often saturated with hidden meanings which make them fascinating to explore.