

# HOMO LUDENS

## Der spielende Mensch

### VI

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Herausgegeben von Günther G. Bauer

Beiträge von:

Heiner Gillmeister

Eric de Vroede

Stefan Größing

Günther G. Bauer

Yoko Mori

Andreas Boestel

Bernhard Wiezorke

Robert Kamper

Thomas Berner

Rainer Buland

Manfred Zollinger

Lord Aberdare

# The Iconography of homo bulla in Northern Art from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Centuries

Yoko Mori

## 1. *Soap Bubbles in the Sixteenth Century Art* *homo bulla in the paintings of "Saint Jerome in his Study"*

Erasmus published his "Adagiorum Collectanea" (1500) in Paris which included an ancient proverb, *homo bulla* ("man is but a bubble") and explained as "*vetus adagium quo vitae humanae fragilita significantur*" (an old proverb in which the fragility of human life is indicated). He quoted it from a treatise, "De Re Rustica" by a Roman author Marcus Terentius Varro<sup>1</sup>. While the latter mentions this proverb, he says that with his age of eighty years, he had to pack up his baggage for the journey from this world. After Varro, another Roman writer, Arbiter Petronius, in his Satyricon, quotes "*nos non pluris sumus quam bullae*" (we are no more than bubbles) in his "Satyricon"<sup>2</sup>, sighing after his visit at the cemetery burial of his deceased friend.

Following the Erasmus' quotation of this Roman proverb, it became popular among the sixteenth century humanists and painters. One of the earliest paintings carrying the inscription "*homo bulla*" is "Saint Jerome in his Study" (fig. 1), a copy after Joos van Cleve, taking over the composition from Quentin Massys (before 1520). However, the latter painting does not carry this Latin proverb. Saint Jerome by Massys is sitting in his study and is meditating on death pointing with his forefinger to a skull on his desk, a symbol of a famous medieval proverb "*memento mori*" (remind the death).



fig. 1 A copy after Joos van Cleve, "Saint Jerome in his Study", early 17th century, oil on panel, private collection.





fig. 2 "Youth", 1500-1510, Chaumont tapestry, Cleveland Museum of Fine Arts.



fig. 3 Maarten van Heemskerck, "Riches bring forth Pride", 1564, engraving. Brussels, Royal Library.



Beside him is an extinguished candle, another attribute of this proverb<sup>3</sup>. Another version of Joos van Cleve (Busch-Reisinger Museum, Harvard College, U.S.) includes a study with a more elaborate room decor plus some disguised symbols (a hanging white towel, a kettle with a waterbasin). An attached piece of paper on the wall inscribed “respice finem” (remember the end) and under it “HOMO BVLLA” is carved on the arched opening of the niche. Therefore, the meditation of *homo bulla* is a new extension in the philosophy of Renaissance humanism from the medieval *memento mori*, which is rather stressed on the mortality of human being.

The subject of Saint Jerome became very popular among the humanists who might have hung such a painting on the wall in their studies. Other Flemish painters of the first half of the sixteenth century, such as Marinus van Reymerswaele and Jan Massys also produced this subject.

By the early sixteenth century, soap production was increasing across Europe, in cities such as Marseilles and Genova. The representation of blowing soap bubbles as a children’s game gradually appeared in the pictorial world. Thus the new iconography of *homo bulla* combined with the association of children’s game. It is also not surprising that a soap bubble became identified with brief childhood. Until the establishment of modern medicine for children, there was an unbelievably huge percentage of children’s death. It was said that one third or one fifth of children died before their first birthday. Hence, a soap bubble with its beautiful lustre mirrors the world, i.e. an interior of the room, window, landscape, sky, and was a really suitable motif for *homo bulla*, especially from the following century.

### *Soap Bubbles as Allegory of homo bulla in Art*

One of the earliest examples is seen in the Chaumont Tapestry of “Youth” (1500-1510, fig. 2). The allegorical figure of Youth sits in the center of a garden of flowers surrounded by dancing and singing couples who are accompanied by a lute playing court lady. The top of the composition carries a poem alluding to the transience of youth (2), and it translates, “*Youth triumphs while its heart is healthy/ And when it seems to hold all in its hand./ But this triumph is without eternity./ Here one sees the example full well: Those who are happy hide earth in their heart./ Let the young heed this warning.*”<sup>4</sup> Its meaning is emphasized by a soap bubble blowing boy in the lower right corner.

In the mid-sixteenth century there are different applications of a soap bubble, a new current children’s game used for morality prints and emblem books. “Riches bring forth Pride”, one of eight plates comprising the Vicissitude of human things, engraved by Cornelis Cort after a drawing by Maarten van Heemskerck (1564, fig. 3). Behind the allegorical chariot of





*Nam quid amabilius? quid Mundo ornatus isto? At non tam citò vana solet subsidere bulla  
Vberius blandis quid rogo delicias? Deliciae mundi quam citò praterirent*

fig. 4 Crispyn de Passe the Elder or his workshop, "The Vanity of the Earthly Delights", 1599, engraving, private collection.

Riches, the personified Pride, Trickery, Plundering, Deception, Usury, Lust and Betrayal accompany Richness, while Vain Fertility and Vain Voluptuousness are symbolized by a young girl blowing soap bubbles. Her action is not extremely prominent, but it is very interesting to note that the painter adds soap bubbles to this scene.

A Dutch print by Crispyn de Passe The Elder or his work-shop, "The Vanity of The Earthly Delights" (fig. 4), one of the Collection of 33 prints, titled "Hortus Voluptatum" (1599), shows almost the same idea as the above mentioned "Riches bring forth Pride." The richly dressed female allegorical figure of Earthly Delights looks at herself in a mirror which she holds with her right hand, and she places a globe with a cross on her knee. As she supports it with flowers in her left hand, she is also indicated as the personification of the World. Beside her, a peacock, the symbolic bird of Vanity, is standing to strength her function. While two children to her right carry fool's caps, the other three are blowing bubbles. The meaning of the soap bubbles in the print is explained in the accompanying Latin inscription as follows: "For what in the world, I ask, is more pleasant, more attractive, what is more fruitful than those charming delights?

But the empty bubbles do not collapse as quickly as the delights of the world dissapear".<sup>5</sup>



In the emblem book of Hadrian Junius, “Hadriani Iunii Medici Emblemata, ad D. Arnoldum Cobeli” a moral lesson is attached to avaricious desire. As the Latin title translates, “*To embrace everything is to grip nothing*”. The caption below warns against a person who searches for many things and chases after fragile fame. “*He is for me more foolish than the boys.*” The illustration shows several boys trying to catch soap bubbles floating in the air, which are light like a breeze. The engraving of Jerome Wierix (fig. 5), “The Life of Christ” depicts the carpenter’s workshop of Saint Joseph where the Child Jesus and angels play with soap bubbles. The Latin inscription below translates, “*Speak, boy, man is but a bubble, nothing is as light as a bubble, nothing more fragile, / Mother, at birth your son is but the size of your short fore-arm / yet he is the limitless Son of God.*”<sup>6</sup> The comparison of *homo bulla* with the eternal Christ is original in the iconography of a soap bubble, and there is little doubt that the writer of this verse knew Erasmus’ “Adagiorum.”

The painting, “The Wide and Narrow Ways” (c.1580, Rijksmuseum, het Catharijneconvent, Utrecht) was executed against the Catholic authorities by an anonymous protestant Netherlandish artist during the great religious debate. Christ carrying the cross enters through a smaller archway on which personifications of Faith, Hope and Love are perched. Christ walks from the narrow road to the Heaven of Jerusalem. In contrast, the Pope and the Catholic clergy are standing on the wider road and they do not observe the destruction through it. The latter road is symbolized by a soap bubble blowing boy who is standing in front of the large gate, although nobody is aware of him. In this case a soap bubble implies the vain function of the Catholic direction.

Not every illustration of a soap bubble in the sixteenth century implies *homo bulla*. There are several examples of soap bubble blowing boys which seem to have no allusion to the brevity of human life, but they just play at it as a new popular children’s game. They are seen for instance in “The Retable of the Holy Kinship of St Anne” (1500-1510) in the Musées Royaux d’Art et d’Histoire Bruxelles, in the marginal illustration of “April” from the Flemish Book of Hours by the Master of Hortulus Animae (1510-20) in the Staatliche Bibliothek (Cod. lat. 28346), Munich; “Saint Jacob the minor” from the triptych of “The Holy Trinity and the Holy Kinship” (c.1510, fig. 6) by the South Netherlandish painter in the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne; Pieter Bruegel’s “Children’s Games” and others. Bruegel included a boy blowing a bubble in the lower left among 91 different children’s games in his famous painting. Bruegel’s soap bubble seems not to be depicted as an allegorical image as that of Cats to be discussed later, but one of the encyclopedic activities of “Childhood”.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the primary purpose of the poem of a French woodcut of 1580 (fig. 7) depicting a rattle, a windmill of a nut and a hobby-horse does not mention the soap bubble play as transient. It reads, “*Un peu plus grands d’une façon nouvelle, / Ils font tonner*





*Dic, o Puer; Homo Bulla,  
Res tam levis non est vlla,  
Bulla nil fragilius.*

*Mater, Nati pro staturâ,  
Vlna brevis est mensura;  
Est immensus filius.*

*Hieronymus Wierx excudit. Cum Gratia et Priuilegio. Buschore.*

fig. 5 Jan Wierix, "The Life of Christ", engraving, Brussels, Royal Library.





fig. 6 South Netherlandish, "Holy Trinity and the Holy Kinship", ca. 1510, oil on panel, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne.

*la gente Crecerelle,/ Courent disposts, sur vn cheual de bois:/ Puis de savon destremp en eau claire,/ Pendant qu'unt tourne vn moulinet noix,/ Ensemblement vont des bouteilles faire."*

It is interesting to remark that a soap bubble appears in an other context, namely, in association with an ear of corn, a symbol of resurrection from death. In the engraving of "the Allegory of Life and Death" (fig. 8) after a painting attributed to Marten de Vos (1532-1603), a putto with a skull under his arm is lying over a bundle of wheat. Another putto on the right is blowing a soap bubble. Flowers in the vase besides him are apparently a symbol of the transience of life, derived from Isaiah, chapter 40, 6-8 and Psalm, chapter 102,3. The former passage reads, "All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it." The inscription above the engraving of de Vos reads, "Having been born, we die; but death is revived by the pious". Rudolf Wittkower points out that the relationship between a skull and ears of corn can be explained from Saint John's Gospel, chapter 12, 24: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit." Wittkower further quotes the Commentaries to Saint Paul's Epistle and interprets, "The tertium comparationis between man and corn is that both must be buried in the soil to be reborn : resurrection is not possible without preceding death".<sup>8</sup>





Un peu plus grands d'une façon nouvelle,  
Ils font tonner la gente Crecerelle,  
Courant disposés, sur un cheval de bois:

Puis de savon destrempé en eau claire,  
Pendant qu'un tourne un moulinet à noix,  
Ensemblement vont des bouteilles faire.

fig. 7 "Children's Games", 1580, French woodcut.



fig. 8 Maarten de Vos, "Allegory on Life and Death", engraved by Sadeler.



One of the final examples in sixteenth century inscribed with the words *homo bulla* is found in the title page of Jacob Hoefnagel after Joris Hoefnagel, “Archetypa studiaeque patris” (1592). HOMO BVLLA is written separately on two vases with lively flowers. In addition, the monogram of HOMO interlaced with a human skull crowned with laurel leaves is situated in the center of the composition. There is also a quotation from the Psalm 102(103), 15.<sup>9</sup> Several bubbles are resting on a seashell and floating in the air around it. Two years after Hendrik Goltzius’ engraving of 1594, “Quis evadet?” (Who will escape?) is printed and it plays the important role of the iconographical forerunner into the next century; therefore his engraving has been considered as a classic example of a soap bubbles blowing putto. The work has all the traditional attributes of *vanitas*, such as soap bubbles, a human skull, flowers and a smoking urn.

## 2. *A Soap Bubble in Seventeenth-Century Vanitas Painting* *Putto Playing with Soap Bubbles*

Thus a soap bubble in the sixteenth century has often been interpreted as the symbol of the brevity of human life. However, after Goltzius’ “Quis evadet?”, it receives additional symbolical meanings in allegorical engravings, emblem books, still-life paintings and genre painting during the seventeenth century. Another variation of Goltzius’ work engraved after this oil painting, titled also “Quis evadet?” (1603, fig. 9) is worthy of mention, because it was illustrated as a picture within a picture in the engraving (fig. 10) dedicated to the memory of Johannes Theodor de Bry, a leading engraver who died in 1623. The figure of “Leven” (Life), namely, a bubble-blowing putto in a sheet called, “floskaartje” is the adaptation from the above mentioned Goltzius’ “Quis evadet?”, although a human skull is now omitted. The putto is placed second from lower right among 36 images of various social levels from Kaiser, Kaiseress, king, queen, noblemen to servant and maid. Besides this putto as Life, the allegorical figure of “Doot” (Death) follows with a scythe and a hour-glass.

The influence of Goltzius’ putto with a skull and soap bubbles is seen in the engraving, “Juventus Artificiosa” (Skilful Youth) designed by Jan Popels. Here three putti play with soap bubbles in a field. The central one puts his right hand on a skull. The inscription below reads, “As the swollen and ephemeral bubble quickly perishes, so passes the esteemed memory of man”.

## *Soap Bubbles in Still-Life Painting*

Jacques de Gheyn II’s “Vanitas” (1603, Stockholm, National Museum) reaches a new height in the iconography of Flemish and Dutch still life





*Memento brevis haec, certaq; obnoxia morti  
Vita, quasi fumus, bullula, flosq; perit.  
Cur ergo teneris (proh stulti) fidimus auiis?  
Cur non sponte mori discimus ante diem?*

*Excussa blanda carnis, dum vita superstes  
Compede, post mortem liberiere gradu  
Spiritus astra petet, iam sedem vbi fixat  
Cumq; agnoscat caeca turba suam*

fig. 9 Hendrik Goltzius, "Quis evadet", 1603, engraving, Albertina, Wien.



painting, namely “*vanitas* still life”. Under the influence of de Gheyn II a great number of *vanitas* still life paintings with soap bubbles were made without showing a playful putto or a child. The glossy spheres floating in the room sometimes emerge from the open window to the space outside. One finds ostentatious objects overloading a table, namely a crown inlaid with precious jewels as the political might, precious jewels or gold coins as desire for earthly goods, books as pride in knowledge, or musical instruments as physical love evoking sexual stimulation. There is sometimes a sort of scheme to *vanitas*, that is, a globe, a piece of burned out tobacco (a vanishing fire), a pocket watch (fleeting time), an empty glass placed on the table. This recalls the verse inscribed in the painting by Pieter Claesz’ circle: “*The cup is empty. The hour has gone. The candle is burned out and man is in silence*”.<sup>10</sup> This author considers the important influence of Ecclesiastes on the *vanitas* iconography. As Ecclesiastes was supposedly read widely among the humanists and Calvinist writers, one often comes across the phrase “*Vanity of vanities ! All is vanity*” (Chapter 1, 2) (*Vanitas vanitatum, omnia vanitas*) inscribed on the pieces of paper in the paintings or sometimes an open book of “Ecclesiastes” is in view. Jan van der Heyden’s “Still Life” (Budapest, National Museum of Fine Arts) is one of the most appropriate examples. Not only the painting, but also the contemporary musical notes carry the text of *vanitas vanitatum* quotations as seen in the note of Jan Pietersz Sweelinck.<sup>11</sup> The Flemish painter, Pieter Boel’s “Vanitas” before 1668 (figures by Jacob Jordaens, fig. 11) is worth notice. A human skull is placed in the middle of the composition and around it are many attributes of *vanitas* as mentioned before, plus a lantern, an hour-glass, a precious silver plate (desire for wealth), flowers (short lived fragrance), a parrot (having a human voice), fruits (speedy lost of flavor), and a globe (implied as the futility of earthly affairs). A putto blowing a soap bubble is represented, while a new figure, that of Father Time, holds a scythe while trying to blow out the flame of a lantern.<sup>12</sup> This is really one of the most representative Flemish *vanitas* paintings in the seventeenth century.

Jan David, a Jesuit priest, published “Christeliicken Waerseggher” (The Christian Soothsayer), 1602 featuring an illustration captioned MUNDI IACTANTIA, MINVS EST NIHIL (This plentiful world is less than nothing) (fig. 12). In the illustration four children are blowing soap bubbles, an image designed to reinforce the idea of the caption that all is vanity. Below the illustration are three parallel texts in Latin, Dutch and French respectively, that equally convey the message that the world is nothing but *vanitas* and deceit. Within the illustration the Latin word, *nihil* and the Dutch, *niet* are written in big characters. The Dutch text below reads: “*Wat ist van swerelts toch, en wonderbaer bediet ? Al yedelheys bedroch, met eenen grooten Niet.*” (“*Then, what is of this world, an extraordinary meaning ? All (is) vanity’s deceit, and a great naught.*”) It is also important to quote a sermon







by the Dutch Remonstrant preacher Johann Uytenbogaert: *"A man is nothing but a bubble/just like children blow in a shell/which becomes round and shiny./It is a pleasure to see/as if it were an extraordinary thing/ but in less than a moment / it disappears and is gone./Then man sees nothing at all."*<sup>13</sup>

### *Soap Bubbles Illustrated in Morality Books*

Jacob Cats (1577-1660), a Dutch poet included the play of a soap bubble blower among about twenty various children's games in the illustrated title page of his *"Houwelyck," "EX NUGIS kinderspel SERIA"* (Children's Games, Serious matters arise from trifles, the first edition in 1625), by Adriaen Van de Venne (fig.13). Here average Dutch children, not putti as in the allegorical figures, come to the fore front stage. A youth dressed in ordinary clothes with a large hat plays with soap bubbles. Cats warns against meaningless earthly affairs in his poem and it tells about a soap bubble as follows: *"From whence comes all this weight ?/ The world is too light/ The bubble of the child/ is soap, air and wind;/ But this one full of earthly matter/ is vain, evil and empty:/ Even less than nothing/ Yet with an appearance of substance."*<sup>14</sup>

Adriaen Poirters (1605-1674) includes in his masterpiece, *"Het masker vande wereldt afgetrocken"* of 1646 (The World unmasked) a long Dutch poem, *"De Schoonheydt is verganckelijck"* (Beauty is Transient) accompanying a motto, *"Het verdwijnt, Soo 't schijnt"* (*"As it appears, it disappears"*).<sup>15</sup> In the center of the illustration, engraved by Frederik Bouttats (fig.14), one sees a boy blowing soap bubbles. The following are excerpts from his poem: *"The lustre of a soap bubble shines forth hither and thither,/ as if it were a miniature heaven./ It is the fairest, that is clear: /but you know that this too fades right away, /and that beauty does not remain./ Alas, what is my fame based upon ?/ What is it also but a blossom ? /And to what purpose so high a pride/ as if it were an everlasting good ? /And to what await all this jumble ? /See how the world goes. /And to what purpose all this poppycock ?/For the frame that is soon to rot ?/ I see how fleeting time/slowly eats away at the years;/The sweetest voice, the fairest hair,/already feel the (tooth of) time. / I swear to you, you should be more steadfast,/and not lean upon your beauty,/ for it is more fragile than a reed."*

An illustration engraved by the French Claudine Bouzounet Stella (fig.15) for the text, *"Les Bouteilles de Savon"* in *"Les Jeux et Plaisirs [sic] et l'Enfance"* by Jacques Stella (1657), does not demonstrate the strong moral lesson about the vain value of earthly matter like Cats, but points out that adults sometimes will fight for frivolous things as children do for soap bubbles. Therefore the meaning of soap bubbles is different than in Dutch traditional iconography. The French text reads, *"Ceux cy se gourment tout de bon/pour ces Bouteilles de Savon/ Comme si c'estoit des Pistoles; /Mais*





fig. 11 Jacob Jordaens, "Vanitas", ca. 1660, oil on canvas, Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels.



fig. 12 "Mundi Lactantia, Minus est Nihil", engraving, from Jan David's, Christeliicken Waersegger, 1602, Royal Library, Brussels.



*souvent parmi les grans on voit naistre des differens pour milles choses plus frivoles.*"<sup>16</sup>

### *An Ordinary Child Playing with Soap Bubbles*

"Toilet of a Lady" by Jan Miens Molenaer (1633) gives the character of genre painting with a young lady at a mirror. In the 1940es the painting was titled "Preparation for the Wedding" because the skull under the foot of the lady was overpainted with a footstool.<sup>17</sup> After cleaning, it became clear that this is an allegorical painting of *vanitas*, with a skull, musical instruments, world map, and costly jewels. However, except for the skull it gives us an impression of a charming genre painting, so that soap bubbles were transformed in the scene of daily life. Cornelis de Vos eliminates the skull from his painting "Allegory of Vanity" (Braunschweig, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum). Here one finds a great deal of ostentatious furniture, imported porcelain from China, a crown inlaid with precious jewels, a scepter and gold and silver coins under the foot of a boy blowing a bubble. Human greed for the treasures, political might and riches in this room recalls the lines in Ecclesiastes 2, 8-12. *"I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces; And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. ... behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun."* Finally in the paintings of Caspar Netscher, Essaïas Boursse and Frans van Mieris, one finds all the allegorical attributes of *vanitas*. As they appear to represent nothing but ordinary genre scenes, they easily misled the 19th century French art critic Eugène Fromentin, who commented on them as *"the total absence of what we call today a subject."* However the essential meaning of *homo bulla* did not completely disappear from the above mentioned genre paintings. The engraving after the painting dated in 1663 by Frans van Mieris (fig.16) represents a boy blowing soap bubbles from an opened window. A young woman with her tempting glance stands behind him. It is interesting to mention the function of sunflowers here. According to "Amorum Emblematum" (1608) by Otto van Veen, sunflowers are a symbol of a lover's heart enthusiastically turned toward his/her lover, like a sunflower toward the sun.<sup>18</sup> Thus soap bubbles imply here the heart of a changeable lover.

The action of blowing soap bubbles from the window is a popular subject in the seventeenth century, as seen in paintings of the same artist in Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum and of Caspar Netscher in 1670, National Gallery, London, and others. These inspire Chardin's composition (fig. 17) of the eighteenth century (New York, Washington, Los Angeles). Chardin dedicates himself to representing the lustrous and rainbow-like surface of a bubble as





fig. 13 Adriaen Van de Venne, "EX NUGIS, Kinderspel, SERIA", engraving, from Jacob Cats' Houwelyck, 1628, Institut für Spielforschung Salzburg.



fig. 14 "A Boy Blowing Soap Bubbles", engraved by Frederik Bouttats, from Adriaen Poirters' Het masker vande wereltd afgetrocken, 1646, Sammlung Gerold P. Hein.



if the human being together with a bubble were the important objects of a still life. Thus one could hardly refer to the seventeenth-century *vanitas* iconography in it anymore, as Philip Conisbee suggests that Chardin's "Soap Bubble" is "*an admonitory image, for the youth is wasting his time, and a vanity, reminding us of the transience of human life and endeavor.*" The artist's interest is focused on the largest expanded bubble, which could burst at any moment. A small boy beside him looking anxiously at a bubble would be a good witness, how an elder child blows a bubble to the largest possible size. Chardin established thus a new stage of the soap bubble, namely, "Ding an sich", which evokes the viewer's contemplation. Whereas a bubble-blowing boy in the attic in Jan Steen's "The Life of Man" (Mauritshuis, 's-Gravenhage) is often mentioned, his "Garden Party" (formerly the Collection of French and Company, New York) is less discussed. Although the merrymaking composition by Jan Steen, an early stage of fete galante is rather rare, the action two boys blowing soap bubbles on the stop stair at the left gives a key for interpreting the meaning of this painting, namely, the fragility of human love, as in the painting of van Mieris above. Several couples including unequal lovers (an old man and a young girl) are enjoying playing instruments, drinking wine, conversation, etc., in a palace garden with a stone fence, on which some statues of cupids are seen. Behind the fence a few sunflowers are blooming.

Soap bubbles associated with portraits also make a pictorial statement. The baby holding the soap bubble in Jan Mijtens' "Govert van Slingelandt and his Family" (1657, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum Museum) indicates, as recorded in vital documents, the unfortunate death of a young mother and infant during childbirth.<sup>19</sup> Thus the soap bubble symbolizes the shortness of life. "Self-Portrait" (fig.18), by Clara Peeters gives the onlooker a clear admonition that female beauty does not last for long, like the flowers on the vase beside her. The artist herself holds a soap bubble in the gilded container, while another one is floating in the same room.<sup>20</sup> It is very interesting to observe that the artist does not idealize herself, but depicts her strong character and the roughened skin of her working hands. Several typical attributes of *vanitas* still life painting are also present. Also this painting is reminiscent of the above quoted poem of Adriaen Poirters, "The Beauty is Transient".

### 3. The Evaluation of Soap Bubbles in the Eighteenth Century

Images of a soap bubble continue in use to the eighteenth century. There is a newly discovered ceiling fresco in Regensburg which has been restored during 1967-68 for the Hofbibliothek at the Castle of Princes Thurn and Taxis (fig. 19).<sup>21</sup> Cosmas Damian Asam painted it in 1737, but in 1812 it was overpainted according to a change in contemporary taste. The original



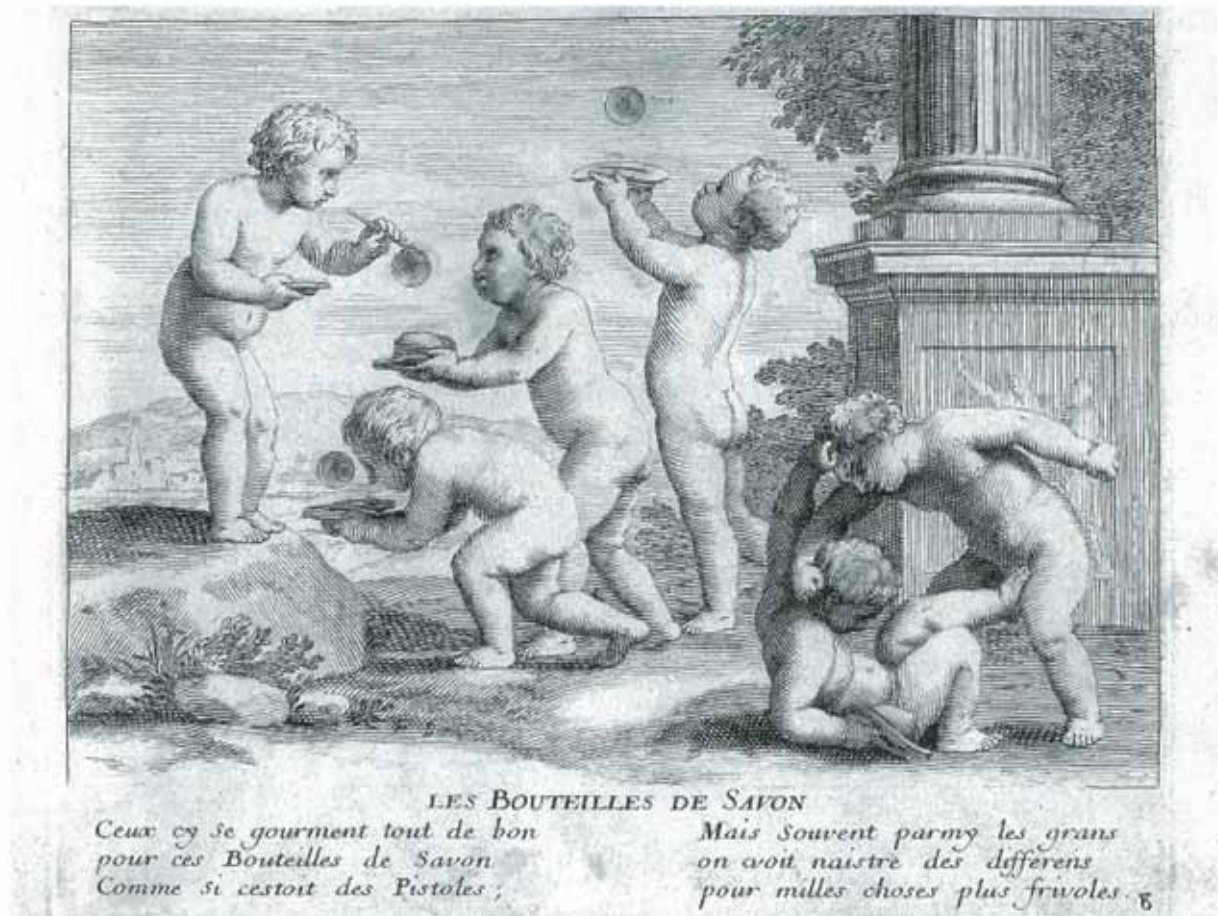


fig. 15 Claudine Bouzounet Stella, "Les Bouteilles de Savon", engraving, from Jacques Stella's *Les Jeux et Plaisiers et l'Enfance*, 1657, Institut für Spielforschung Salzburg.

central theme is to praise heavenly wisdom. King Salomon holding a scepter is looking at heaven. He is sitting on the throne surrounded by lions, books, terrestrial and celestial globes which are attributes of human wisdom. Under him a putto is blowing a soap bubble and besides him an inscribed banderole indicating the passage from "ECCLESIASTE(S)", I.V(erse).17, namely, "And I applied my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind." At the other corner a second putto is blowing a soap bubble indicating that the arts are also *vanitas* depicted at the other three corners near the cornice. Thus, soap bubbles here are not implied as *homo bulla*, but as vain human knowledge in comparison to heavenly wisdom.

Another interpretation of a soap bubble was made by the contemporary French Rococo painter, François Boucher. The engraving after a lost painting by Boucher, "A soap bubble playing couple" shows a charming lady joking with bubbles as a young man tries to catch them with his hat (fig. 20). The inscription under it reads. "Amusons-nous. Sur la terre et sur l'onde./ Malheureux, qui se fait un nom ! Honneurs, faux éclat de ce monde. Tout n'est que boules de savon". The first line seems to be the typical Rococo concept of letting them be amused anywhere, although the second and third





fig. 16 Frans van Mieris, "A Boy Blowing Soap Bubbles", 1663, engraved after the painting, Institut für Spielforschung Salzburg.

verses follow the traditional interpretation. However, there is no deductive allusion in this image with any attributes of *vanitas*. As the engraving became popular, it was copied by an English designer for a porcelain plate made in Staffordshire.

A round painting by a German painter, Hendrick Wilhelm Schweickhard (Museum Ridder Smidt van Gelder, Antwerp), probably hung over a doorway shows winged putti blowing soap bubbles, trying to catch them with a hat or just admiring them. It is difficult to interpret now, whether such an eighteenth century decorative painting still keeps a strong *homo bulla*



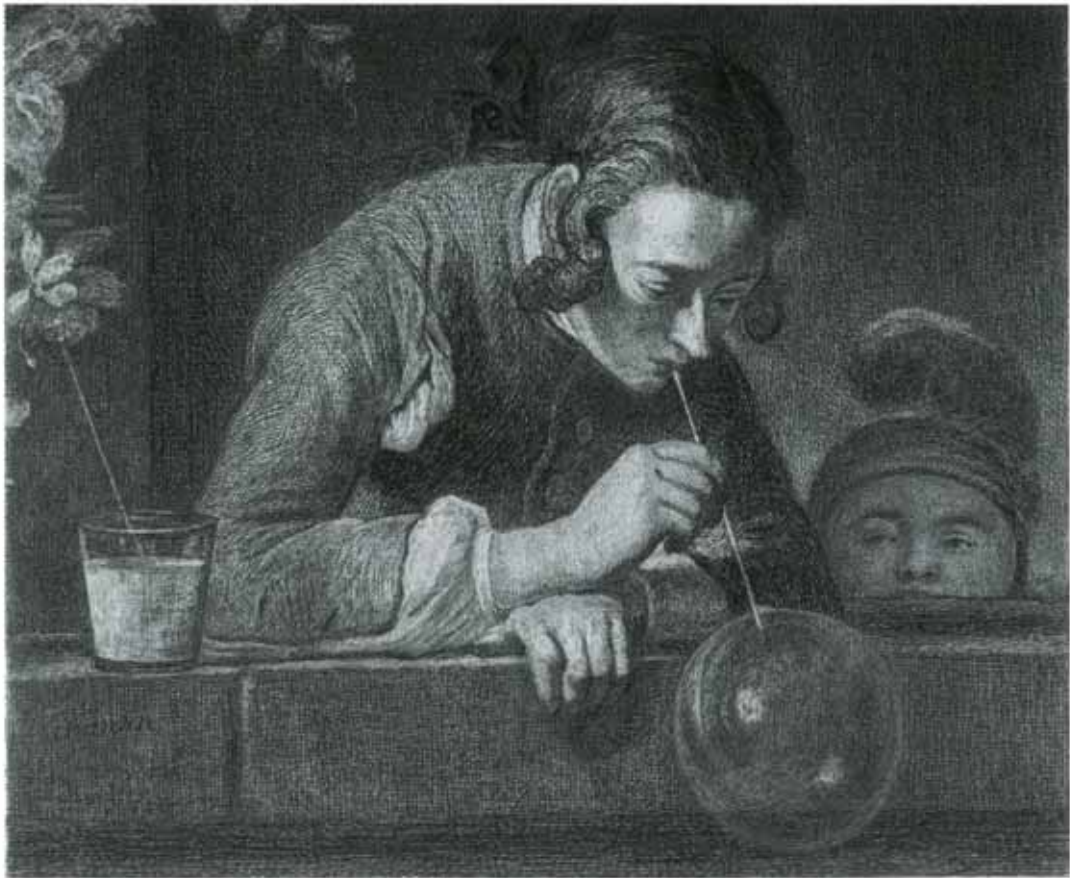


fig. 17 H. Leford "Les bouteilles de Savon", 1899, etching after Chardin.



fig. 18 Clara Peeters, "Self-Portrait", oil on panel, Collection of P. de Boer, Amsterdam.



implication. With a similar meaning the portrait of a painters' children, such as "Portrait of Three Children" by Ph. A. Ch. van Loo (1764, Schloß Charlottenburg, Berlin) seems not to indicate any symbolical connotation. R. Johnson's, "The Shop or Sentimental Preceptor" (London, ca. 1787) educates school children using a soap bubble to illustrate that all life (not only the human being) is a mere soap bubble, according to the traditional concept of the seventeenth century. It is to be pointed out that the moral lessons employing a soap bubble are not addressed here to the adult as in the seventeenth century. The illustration shows a boy on the right making liquid soap in a big washbasin and another boy is involved in blowing bubbles with a cheap earthenware pipe. The text reads in part. "*How soon doth nature disclose the human genius! the boy no sooner learns to paddle alone, than he takes up, in play, what exemplifies the whole course of his future life. Life's bubble. Toil and pleasure continually fill every stage of it. And they that are filled with the greatest expectations of riches and honour, of gaiety and pleasures, have frequently great reason to confess, that life is a mere bubble.*"<sup>22</sup>

#### 4. Two Contrasting Meanings of Soap Bubbles in the Nineteenth century

It is interesting to read how the German writer still applies the motif of soap bubbles in the instruction of children.

A tale of soap bubbles in Münchner Bilderbogen illustrated and written by Lothar Meggendorfer is one of the loveliest examples ever made. The protagonist, a little Fritz tries to make different soap bubbles, that is, a bag-like bubble, tiny bubbles, a twin bubble. He also tries to catches them with a pipe, a vase, his arm, leg and back. Suddenly a soap bubble bursts and spurts into his eyes. It hurt his eyes so that he cannot see anymore. He spills the soap liquid over the ground, accidentally hitting a chair, and a vase is broken. Then his mother arrives and slaps him on the face. His father comes too and beats his son. Fritz cries and the story ends with the admonition, "*Every pleasure is transient like soap bubbles, Remember it!*"<sup>23</sup>

When the famous English soap company Liver Brothers commissioned Sir J. E. Millais, a work for advertising "Pears" (1877), a charming boy with a soap bubble in the picture was born. He becomes now an eternal and popular image of youthful purity and is no more the allegory of a short-lived and fragile child. This is the imaginary world of Peter Pan.<sup>24</sup> The soap bubble here does not burst, and it serves as an emblem of the on-going successful company. Thus the iconography of *homo bulla* employing an image of soap bubbles has evolved into different phases, extensions, interpretation, and comprehension in the history of art.





fig. 19 Cosmas Damian Asam, "Salomon on the throne", 1737, fresco, Hofbibliothek of Princes Thurn and Taxis, Regensburg.

### 5. Soap Bubbles in Japanese Culture and Art<sup>25</sup>

Soap bubble fun was introduced to Japan from Europe, with the import of soap via the Portuguese ships towards the end of the sixteenth century. Soap bubbles became popular around 1677, because peddlers were selling soap liquid on the street to children. Kitagawa Morisada described this in his "Morisada Manko" (1852): In Edo, Kyoto and Osaka one sells soap bubbles in summer time. In Osaka one comes especially to sell for the feast of the Earth God. They are mere children's games. When one dissolves soap powder in water and then blows through it with a thin bamboo pipe, it creates bubbles. In Osaka and Kyoto peddlers sing, "*fukidama, sabondama, when you blow, you get five colored bubbles*". In Edo one sings "*Tamaya, tamaya.*" The peddlers in Edo hold an umbrella with a round treasure container ornament and carry a box of liquid soap from the neck, while in Kyoto and Osaka they wear a head scarf and carry a box by hand. Apparently soaps were very expensive, so that peddlers invented soap-like liquid from Japanese materials or partially using European soap or without. They used the boiled fruit skin of the mukuroji-tree or mixed powder of the white azuki bean with water. There were many documents about soap bubble sellers preserved in illustrated articles. There is an exceptional Haiku poem from



the second half of the seventeenth century associated with homo bulla. *"Deru iki wa/iru iki matanu/yo narikeri. Shabon no awa yo, ningen no yume"* Breathing out does not wait for breathing in. This is the way of life. A soap bubble, that is like a human dream. The concept is derived from the Buddhist Inga Kyo (435-443) to teach the brevity of human life.

Soap bubbles were objects of comic poems and became new popular motifs in Senryu (Comic poetry), because people enjoyed the items of the soap bubble seller: in fact they sell nothing but bubbles!

*"The legs of a ghost are as light as the moment when a soap bubble leaps from a reed".*

*"'You ought to blow soap bubbles outside', so I am driven away from my house."*

*"When one cannot sell soap bubbles, the day flies away like a bubble."*

*"The profit of a soap bubble seller depends upon the wind."*

A woodcut for "October" from a series of the "Twelve Months" by Ishikawa Toyomasa (ca. 1760), illustrates seven children playing with soap bubbles and behind them, a young merchant is praying for good business in front of the altar of the Eibisu, God of Merchants. He offers a lot of delicious foods on the altar during the feast day of this god, October 20th. According to the European relative concept, soap bubbles would be a symbol of vanity of riches. However, this Japanese woodcut has no such implication, because each sheet has children's games depicting the monthly activities. Kitao Masami designed in the first page of Santo Kyoden's "Singaku Hayazomeguka" (1790) God blowing soap bubbles in order to insert good and evil souls into the heart of a man. Kyoden designs the fabric pattern of men's Kimonos using soap bubble motifs just for fun. Therefore there are distorted and complete forms of soap bubbles. The woodcut as a New Year's gift for clients published by Masabei's book store in Ueno, illustrates a collection of tama (ball-like round objects). Tama is a pun for the Otoshidama, a New Year gift. Besides a ball, a round taro potato, silk cocoon and others, a woman blowing soap bubbles is depicted as the largest figure. As a soap bubble bears a beautiful reflection on its surface, it was considered the most suitable tama-item for the Happy New Year. There is also an Utamaro's Ukiyoe calendar with twelve soap bubbles of two different sizes representing a longer month and a shorter month blown by a man. Thus, concepts of soap bubbles in Japanese culture and art are completely different from those in the Europe. While a soap bubble is more often a symbol of vanitas in Europe, Japanese people in the Edo period (1600-1867) were more interested in the current simple work of peddlers selling bubbles and making poems about it using satire, jokes or laughter. Furthermore, Japanese sometimes appreciated the beauty of the soap bubble or applied its spherical form for aesthetic reasons.





fig. 20 François Boucher, "A Couple Playing with Soap Bubbles", 1734, engraving after the painting.



## Notes:

- 1 See the English translation of Varro's work, Lloyd Storr-Best, "Varro on Farming", London, 1912. This proverb in the text of Varro was first pointed out by Wolfgang Stechow, *The Art Bulletin*, XX, 1938, p.227.
- 2 *Arbiter Petronius*, "Petronius Satyrice," Konrad Müller und Wilhelm Ehlers, München, 1965, p. 76.
- 3 I received a kind suggestion about the possible relationship between Erasmus and "Saint Jerome in his Study" of Quentin Massys from Mr. Alexandre Vanautgaerden, Director of Maison d'Erasmus. Massys may have painted it after Erasmus published his new translation of the New Bible from the original Greek text and edited the nine volumes of the works of Saint Jerome in 1516. Erasmus came to Antwerp in 1517 and ordered Massys to portray him and his friend Pieter Gilles for a gift to their friend, Thomas More. From his impression of Erasmus Massys might have painted "Saint Jerome in his Study" intending to portray this humanist in his study. Massys may have also inspired Dürer's "Saint Jerome in his Study" in 1521.
- 4 The quoted English translation of the poem is from : "Three Tapestries from Chaumont", *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art*, Sept. 1962, vol. 48, p.161.
- 5 Daniel Franken, *L'oeuvre gravé des Van de Passe*, Amsterdam, Paris, 1881, No. 1337. F.W.H. Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etching, Engravings and Woodcuts*, Bd. XV, Amsterdam 1949, pp. 285-286. The Latin inscription is, "*Nam quid amabilius quid Mundo ornatus istor, Uberius blandis quid rogo deliciis? At non tam cito vana solet subsidere bulla, Deliciae mundi quam cito praetereunt.*"
- 6 The Latin inscription is, ["Dic, o Puer; Homo Bulla,/ Res tam levis non est ulla/ Bulla nil fragilius/ Mater, Nati pro statura/ Ulna brevis est mensura/ Est immensus Filius."]
- 7 For the soap bubble in Bruegel's "Children's Games" see, Yoko Mori, *The Iconography of Bruegel's "Children's Games"* (in Japanese), Tokyo 1989, pp.91-102.
- 8 Rudolf Wittkower, "Death and Resurrection in a Picture", *Allegory and the Migration of Symbols*, London 1977, p. 162.
- 9 *Archetypa Studiaque Patris Georgii Hoefnagel II*, ed. Thea Vignau-Wilberg, pp.76-77.
- 10 Ingvar Bergström, "Notes on the Boundaries of Vanitas Significance", *Ijdelheid der Ijdelheden*, Leiden 1970.
- 11 P. Fischer, *Music in Painting of the Low Countries in the 16th and 17th Centuries*, Amsterdam 1975, pp.51-52.
- 12 M. Rooses, *Jordaens leven en werken*, Antwerpen 1906, pp.242-243.
- 13 A quotation from Uytenbogaert's work, in Johanna W. P. Drost, *Het Nederlandsch Kinderspel voor de Zeventiende Eeuw*, Gravenhage 1914, p. 145.
- 14 The quoted English translation is from: Mary Frances Durantini, *The Child in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting*, Michigan, 1983, 195.
- 15 Adriaen Poirters, *Het masken vande wereldt afgetrocken*, 1646, in *Nederlandse Emblemata*, ed. P. J. Meertens, Leiden 1983, pp.139-141. I received the kind contribution of Prof. Willy Vande Walle to the translation of this poem.
- 16 Jacques Stella, *Les Jeux et Plaisirs et l'Enfance*, in *Games and Pastimes of Childhood*, ed. Stanley Appelbaum, New York 1969, No.8.11. Zacharias Heyns, in *Nederlandse Emblemata*, op. cit., pp. 84-85.
- 17 *Masters of Seventeenth Century Dutch Genre Painting* (Exhibition catalogue), Philadelphia Museum of Art 1984, pp. 262-263.
- 18 Otto van Veen, *Amorum Emblemata*, Antwerpen 1608, rept. Stephen Orgel, New York, London 1979, p. 112.
- 19 E. de Jongh, *Portretten van echt en trouw*, Amsterdam 1986, p. 241.
- 20 Pamela Hibbs Decoteau, Clara Peeters, K In 1992, p. 51.
- 21 *Die neu entdeckten Fresken von Cosmas Damian Asam in der Hofbibliothek des Fürsten Thurn und Taxis*, München 1968.
- 22 R. Johnson, *The Toy-Shop ; or, Sentimental Preceptor*, London ca.1787, pl. IV.
- 23 I am grateful to Dr. Brigitte Walbe, Foto Marburg, for her kind assistance in reading the text.
- 24 Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches*, New York 1987, p. 515
- 25 For the iconography of the Japanese soap bubble, see Yoko Mori, "The Allegory of Japanese Soap Bubble and its Iconography" (Japanese), *Mirai*, 1995, pp. 2-15.



*ZUSAMMENFASSUNG: Zur Ikonographie Des homo bulla In Der Nordeuropäischen Kunst Vom 16.–19. Jahrhundert*

Erasmus publizierte 1500 in Paris seine „Adagiorum Collectanea“, die ein altes Sprichwort, *homo bulla* („der Mensch ist nur eine Seifenblase“) enthielt. Dieses Sprichwort geht auf „De Re Rustica“ des römischen Schriftstellers Marcus Terentius Varro zurück. Der *homo bulla* wurde während des 16. Jahrhunderts berühmt und nach der Einführung der Seife als Allgemeinut in Europa ab dem Beginn des 16. Jahrhunderts in den bildenden Künsten oft mit einer Seifenblase dargestellt. Eines der frühesten Beispiele zeigt der Gobelin von Chaumont, welcher die Jugend symbolisiert. Der Moraliitäten-druck von Maarten van Heemskercks „Reichtümer gebären den Stolz“ warnt im Hinblick auf Vergänglichkeit mit einer Seifenblasen erzeugenden weiblichen Figur vor menschlicher Gier. Das Emblembuch von Hadrian Junius erzählt davon, daß „alles zu fassen heißt, nichts zu bekommen“ und zeigt das Bild von Knaben im Wald, die versuchen, Seifenblasen zu fangen. Es muß allerdings festgehalten werden, daß es auch einige Seifenblasen-Darstellungen ohne *homo bulla*-Botschaft gibt. Ein französischer Holzschnitt von 1580 bringt ein Gedicht, in welchem einige Kinderspiele aufgezählt werden, u.a. auch eines mit Seifenblasen, jedoch ohne das *homo bulla*-Konzept. Im 17. Jahrhundert wurde die Ikonographie der Seifenblase im Stilleben sowie in Genrebildern immer beliebter. Hendrik Golzius' „Quis evadet“ von 1594 spielt die wichtige Vorreiterrolle für das bildliche Arrangement. Ein auf einem menschlichen Totenschädel sitzender Putto mit Seifenblasen, Blumen und eine rauchende Urne wurden die Grundelemente der Vanitas-Darstellungen. Eine Variation dieses Drucks fand als Bild im Bild im Gedenk-Stich von Johannes Theodor de Bry Verwendung.

Zur selben Zeit benutzte man in Emblembüchern Seifenblasen, um die Vergänglichkeit weltlicher Angelegenheiten wie Reichtum, Ruhm, hoher Sozialstatus, Schönheit, Ehrgeiz, Wissen etc. zu demonstrieren. Jan Davids „Christeliicken Waerseggher“, ein weniger bekanntes illustriertes Buch, lehrt: „Diese überreiche Welt ist weniger als nichts.“ In Adriaen Poirters „Het masker vande wereldt afgetrocken“ von 1646 findet sich ein langes Gedicht, das besonders die Vergänglichkeit menschlicher Schönheit betont und einen Seifenblasen machenden Knaben in einer Stadt zeigt. Die schöne junge Frau in „Allegory of vanitas“ von Cornelius de Vos trägt wertvolle Juwelen, und ihr Zimmer ist mit kostbarem Geschirr und luxuriösen Möbeln angefüllt. Die menschliche Gier nach Reichtum und Schätzen wird mit einem kleinen Seifenblasen pustenden Knaben an ihrer Seite symbolisiert. In der zweiten Hälfte des 17. Jahrhunderts verschwinden allmählich die Attribute der Vanitas-Malerei, und man sieht nur Seifenblasen formende Knaben im Fenster, wie z. B. in Caspar Netschers Arbeiten. Nun fügt



manchmal ein Motiv (beispielsweise in den Werken von Frans van Mieris) wie eine Sonnenblume als Symbol von Energie dem flüchtigen Charakter menschlicher Natur und dem Christentum neue Bedeutung bei.

Nach dem 18. Jahrhundert folgt die Seifenblase manchmal der traditionellen Ikonographie, z. B. im Text eines englischen Schulbuches oder in der Deckenmalerei von Cosmas Damian Asam in Regensburg. Nun legt ein Rokokomaler wie Boucher den Akzent mehr auf das Liebesspiel zwischen einer jungen Dame und ihrem jungen Liebhaber. Wenn im 19. Jahrhundert die Seifenblase in der Werbung einer englischen Seifenfirma eingesetzt wird, wandelte sie sich von der traditionellen Ikonographie der Vanitas zum Symbol der Ewigkeit.