

Dutch Golden Age

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The miraculous defeat of the greatest empire in Europe by the small group of United Provinces was complete in the early 17th century. From 1609 Spain was no longer a threat. Dutch military and merchant fleets created the greatest sea power in the world, with trading interests in the East and West Indies, and dominating Europe, with Amsterdam thriving. Apart from her own commerce the Dutch Republic also had by the mid-century the majority of the lucrative carrying trade in the Baltic.

Artists lost the rich patronage of the Roman Catholic church enjoyed by their peers in Italy and the court offered few commissions, but the prosperous middle-class and artisans produced a huge demand. Peter Mundy observed in Amsterdam in 1640,

“All in general are striving to adorn their houses, especially the outer or street room with costly pieces. Butchers and bakers not much inferior in their shops ... and many times blacksmiths, cobblers will have some picture or other by their forge and in their stall. Such is the general notion, inclination and delight these natives have to paintings.”

John Evelyn found farmers speculating in pictures, buying several at a time and selling them at their local *kermis* (fun fair). This unusually vast market was competitive and prices could be low. Around the middle of the century a skilled worker earned around 350 guilders (g) a year and a simple labourer 150g. Eleven works by Pieter de Hooch in 1655 were priced between 6 and 20g; Jan Steen's works were sold for 15g and Vermeer's paintings could be had for 20-30g. One curious aspect of the Dutch Golden Age was the number of leading artists who died in poverty or deep in debt: Frans Hals, Jan Steen, Jan van Goyen, Johannes Vermeer and Rembrandt.

Italian influence

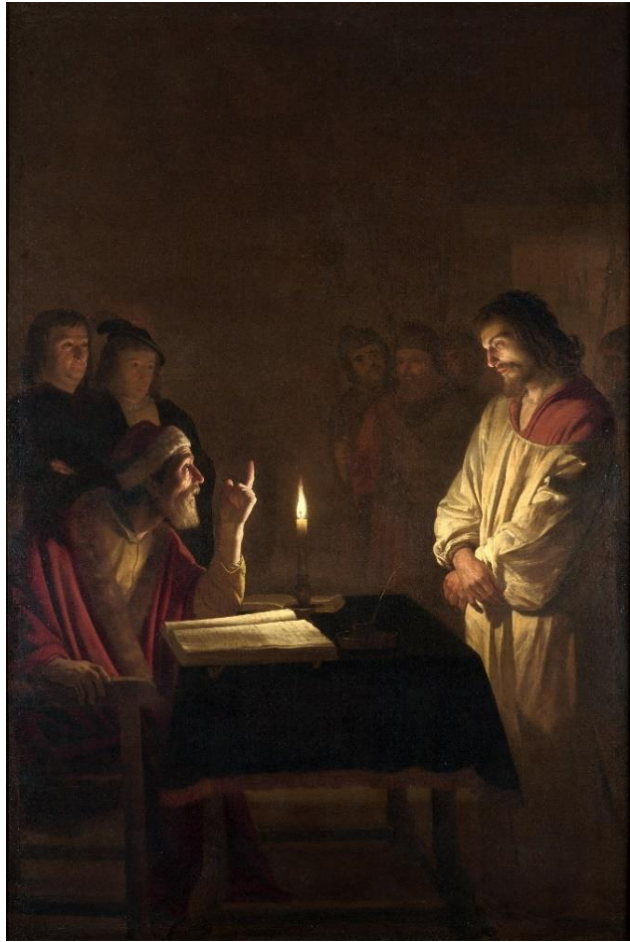
Mannerism from Italy soon died out in the Netherlands, but the influence of Caravaggio was much stronger. **Hendrick ter Brugghen** was in Rome for 10 years before returning to Utrecht in 1614. The *Calling of St Matthew* has Caravaggio's half-length figures grouped around table, realism and varying light. But the soldier in profile was a common motif with Flemish artists and the hands grouped in the centre was an old tradition. Hendrick's light is richer and softer than Caravaggio's.



Hendrick ter Brugghen, *The Calling of Saint Matthew*, 1621

Gerrit von Honthorst had prominent patrons in Italy Scipione Borghese and Giustiniani, for example, whom he shared with Bernini, Poussin and Claude. Gerrit became the best-known Dutch follower of Caravaggio. *Christ before the High Priest* was painted while he was still in Rome. In contrast to Caravaggio, the chiaroscuro is driven by artificial light.

In other works by Gerrit, this light is usually hidden, sparking a trend in Dutch painting, notably by Rembrandt. The *Matchmaker*, painted during his last months in Italy, is the precedent. Gerrit hides the candle behind the foreground figure. The emphasis on reflected rather than direct softens the painting and introduces a more romantic tone. An old woman touting the charms of a whore was a prominent theme in Dutch art.



Gerrit von Honthorst, *Christ before the High Priest*, 1617



Gerrit von Honthorst, *Matchmaker*, 1625

Frans Hals

“*Frans Hals, Rembrandt and Vermeer – the three greatest painters in Dutch Art (Rosenberg)*”. Frans Hals is generally regarded as the founder of the Dutch school of painting. He depicts the confidence and gay optimism of the young Republic relishing its new-found independence. *The Laughing Cavalier* is one of the most familiar characters in Western art.



Frans Hals, *The Laughing Cavalier*, 1624

Using dashing brushwork to show exuberant folk enjoying is Frans' hallmark. He often used the stock characters of Dutch farces: Pekelharing (with a garland of pig's trotters, salted fish, eggs, bean pods, oysters and sausages and holding a fox tail, symbol of the fool) and Hans Wurst (a long sausage dangling from his beret, his grey costume trimmed in red and with huge buttons) flank a woman, almost certainly a boy in drag as theatrical productions were restricted to males. "She" is surrounded by erotic symbols and gestures. The rude gesture made by Hans was over-painted with a walking stick (removed in cleaning in 1951); that made by the man with a spoon in his hat was left untouched.



Frans Hals, *Shrovetide Revellers*, c 1615

Frans Hals' genius for depicting life made him a popular portrait painter. The son of cloth worker born in Antwerp, his parents fled north after the city fell to the Spanish in 1585 and settled in Haarlem. Frans studied under Karel van Mander who advised all young artists to become history painters, but Frans became a portrait specialist; 80% of his existing works are portraits. A popular history of Haarlem written in 1648 said: "*by his extraordinary manner of painting which is uniquely his, he virtually surpasses everyone. His brushes are imbued with such force and vitality that he seems to defy nature herself with his brush. This is seen in all his portraits – they are painted in such a way that they seem to breathe and live.*"

The Dutch were very keen on portraits; burgomasters, ministers, merchants, brewers, scholars flocked to Hals (Descartes too), sometimes for companion pieces of husband and wife. He also received major public commissions for group portraits, the first of which of the St George Militia Company "*announces the great age of Dutch painting like a cannon shot*".



Frans Hals, *Banquet of the Officers of the St George Militia Company*, 1616

Frans was one of the guards in the Company, so he knew the officers - their characters are clear in the painting. Officers were drawn from the ruling class, and originally (15th century) each had to provide his own weapons and armour and pay for a servant to accompany him in the field. There were 11 officers and around 350 guards in each company. In 1558 Haarlem decided to give the officers of each company an annual banquet to celebrate the end of their term of office. Some banquets lasted a week with vast amounts of food and drink consumed at the town's expense. So, in 1609 banquets were held only every 3 years and in 1621 it was ruled they should last at most four days and preferably three. Banquets were often recorded in paintings. Frans de Grebber had done a couple in 1600 and 1610 – crowded mob scenes. Cornelis van Haarlem proved somewhat better with his 1599 work (below), but the officers seem to be from one inbred family, including as Slive notes, “a couple of sets of dull twins.”



It is easy to see why Frans' version caused a sensation in 1616. Aside from the individual portraits, Frans groups his men and uses sweeping diagonals to introduce some animation. By placing the heads on a similar level, the movement doesn't get out of hand. Two of the three ensigns had their hair long, the new fashion in the 1610s, and as junior officers do not sit. The colonel has the place of honour at the top of table. Only he wears a sash of the House of Orange, the others wear Haarlem's colours.

Naturally after this debut, Frans received more commissions from both Haarlem's militia companies. One of St Hadrian is set in vibrant daylight. Once again, a dashing ensign gazes out at us.



Frans Hals, *Banquet of the Officers of the St Hadrian Civic Guard*, 1627

Frans' fresh spontaneity is best seen in *Merry Drinker*, whose medal may mark him as another militia man. While Hals was esteemed in the 17th century, he was not considered a great painter. Only in late 19th century was his style fully appreciated, influencing Whistler, Manet and Singer Sargent. Of course, the Impressionists loved his brushwork.



Frans Hals, *Merry Drinker*, 1628-30

Frans received many commissions to paint companion pictures of husband and wife: at least 30 of these pairs remain. In these works, Hals uses a more finished style. The convention was that light always came from the left, the chap was on the left with his face half in shadow, and the features of the girl were fully lit, because as the Dutch said; "*the sun shines more brightly on women*".

He was the favourite portraitist of the Olycan family, prominent brewers and magistrates whose men served as mayor of Haarlem. He painted nine of them including companion pieces of two generations. These companion pieces were designed to be seen together. In works by Jan Steen, they can be seen in the background on either side of a fireplace, or bracketing a landscape. In the Mauritshuis, Jacob and Aletta Olycan (below) are hung on either side of Vermeer's *View of Delft*, rather casting them into the shade. Unusually, these two pictures are life-size.

Companion pieces, celebrating a marriage, were popular in the Netherlands. Rarely did husband and wife appear in a single picture. That would have been too large for the wall space in Dutch houses. Hals' *The Married Couple* is the only one known, and is set outside to boot. The work is full of obvious mutual affection. The bride is the focus despite being the smaller of the two, light draws attention to her charming expression, framed by the expanse of the mill stone ruff. She drapes her hand over her groom's shoulder – a gesture which somehow conveys their easy friendship as new lovers, as well as showing off the wedding ring, now on index instead of third finger – a new fashion. The lovers are surrounded by symbols; ivy lies on ground at feet of the woman (steadfast love and fidelity), the vine winds up the tree behind the couple (undying marital love, clinging even to a dead tree as "true love continues after death") and thistle (male conjugal fidelity). As we shall see, Dutch art is full of symbols.



Frans Hals, *Jacob Olycan and Aletta Hannemans*, 1625



Frans Hals, *The Married Couple/Marriage Portrait of Isaac Massa and Beatrix van der Laen*, 1622

Over time companion pieces have lost their mates. Some of Hals' portraits which have survived on their own were originally companion pieces. When most married couples break up, one usually fares better than the other, and this is true of paintings too. Stephan Geraedts and Isabella Coymans were separated in 1886 – he is now in Antwerp and she in Paris. No matter the condition of her portrait, nothing can diminish Isabella's stunning allure. Frans captures the gorgeous woman completely. Unusually, gestures link the couple across the frames; Isabella's serving to deepen the enormous jealousy we feel towards Stephan. Like other fashionable women in the middle of the century, Izzy modifies the strict regent costume by wearing an off-the-shoulder low-cut collar (regarded as very racy by older Dutch women), red ribbons in her hair, a huge silver bow and black lace on the white satin panel of her skirt.



Frans Hals, *Stephan Geraedts and Isabella Coymans*, 1650-51

Frans was repeatedly in financial difficulties, even in the 1630s when he had too much work to handle, he was sued by his butcher, baker and shoe maker. Even after a long period as a successful artist, Frans remained in trouble. His meagre possessions were seized by a baker in 1654 for an unpaid debt and during his final years he was destitute. In 1661 the Haarlem Guild of St Luke exempted him from paying dues and in 1662 the burgomasters gave him a gift of 50g and a subsidy of 150g, which was increased the following year to 200g annually. These were not great sums; not much more than a labourer would earn in a year.

In 1663, Frans was given the commissions by the governors of the Old Man's Alms House to paint group portraits of the Regents and Regentesses. The commission allowed Frans to stand security the following year for a debt of 458g which his son-in-law had incurred; Frans received 550g for these two works. *The Regentesses* is the better one. There is no interaction between figures, as there is in the militia groups, and the brushwork is looser, but the characters of the four ladies are captured – the two at the back seem more sympathetic than the foreground pair - but all of them have the sort of authority necessary for dealing with the vagaries of aging chaps.

Frans was over 80 when he painted this, but he had not lost his skill. He died in 1666 and was buried in Grote Kerk in Haarlem, a city he rarely left during his life. His circumstances were so poor that his widow lived out her years in an alms house. His work fetched low prices. In 1675 a pair of his portraits sold for 28g and in 1679 man's portrait for 12g. The demand for Van Dyck's style must have depressed Hals' prices, just as they did for Rembrandt.



Frans Hals, *Regentesses of the Old Men's Alms House*, 1664

Rembrandt (separate file)

Gerrit Dou, an early pupil of Rembrandt, had previously trained as a glass- and copper-engraver, so naturally latched on to Rembrandt's early taste for detail. Gerrit started the Leiden tradition of small minutely finished pictures. They consistently fetched much higher prices than Rembrandt's. Dou was one of the most successful artists in the Netherlands; paid 500g per annum by the Swedish minister in The Hague just for the right of first refusal of the paintings he produced. This is a clear indication of the disadvantage Hals and Rembrandt suffered for their lack of a polished finish. Gerrit was notorious for his diligence. Once praised for the care with which he painted a broom the size of a fingernail, he replied he had still three day's work left on it.

Kitchen scenes were popular with Gerrit. The small (21 x 17 cm) *Girl Chopping Onions* will lead us into moralising genre scenes, which are filled with symbolism and draw heavily on proverbs and sayings. Kitchen scenes often showed housewives or maids with children, the latter being ignorant of the amorous meanings associated with household items or chores.



Gerrit Dou, *Girl Chopping Onions*, 1646

The dead bird symbolises sex, as *vogelen* (to bird) was also a slang term meaning to copulate; an empty bird cage stands for the loss of virtue; a mousetrap an indication of the penalty of lust – the trapped mouse sacrifices freedom for a tasty treat, just as the man will pay for stolen kisses. Carrots and onions in herbal handbooks were considered aphrodisiacs. All this will explain why the seemingly innocuous *Girl Chopping Onions* was made into a print in 18th century France inscribed with the verse: “*I am perfectly willing to believe that you are/knowledgeable in the delectable art of preparing stews/But I feel even more appetite for you/than for the stew that you are preparing.*”

Genre

Genre paintings of the Dutch Golden Age are separated into moralising scenes, woven around Jan Steen, and of quiet domestic interiors, through Johannes Vermeer. Portrayal of peasants continued, either in fairs or in taverns, some decidedly seedy. Adriaen Brouwer replaced the rustic charm of Pieter Bruegel the Elder with honesty and sympathy, for Adriaen shared the pleasures of peasants; eating pancakes, playing cards, brawling. Over the century peasants became better off and Adriaen van Ostade was one artist who showed them in a more refined light, enjoying themselves in more appealing taverns.

After the middle of the century, countryside inns appeared in paintings as charming places for town-folk to visit, and these works were very popular. Some of them works are moral scenes. Jan Steen’s *Peasants before an Inn* highlights a stern-faced critical shrew scowling at the merriment, which is enjoyed not just by rural folk but the middle-class too, marked by their starched collars and ruffs.



Jan Steen, *Peasants before an Inn*, 1653

Jan Steen painted many scenes of village inns and festivals to which town-people had travelled by boat on a canal or river; the *Ship of Saint Rijn Uijt* (St None Left or Cleaned out), which depicts the Dutch proverb, “*Gambling, women and drink make many a man poor.*”

Jan Steen

Prodigal Son/Unequal Lovers. That proverb is behind the various paintings (with a long history) which warn about the frittering away of one's fortune on whores and drink; "*wasting one's substance in riotous living*" as Saint Luke puts it. As in Honthorst's *Matchmaker* (and also in van Baburen's *The Procuress*), usually an old woman touts the attractiveness of a younger girl. Jan Steen included himself in a charming version, with the usual conventions, including the naïve man having his pocket picked. This is quite a small painting (19" x 15") and Jan shows his deft skill in the loose brushwork of white collar and the glistening material of the salmon dress.



Jan Steen, *The Merry Threesome*, 1670-2

Like the *Matchmaker*, the figures are close and the scene is uncluttered, adding to the intimacy of feeling – both in the picture - there seems no escape for old Jan, which seems not to alarm him in the least, clearly besotted with the girl as he plainly is - and the viewer. Sometimes the warning against profligacy in chasing flighty young things comes in seemingly genteel surroundings.



Gerard ter Borch, *The Parental Admonition*, c 1654

Goethe saw this painting and remarked how the father quietly and moderately admonishes his daughter. Goethe thought the other woman was the girl's mother, taking a sip of wine and being quiet while father speaks. But the scene is set in a brothel and the old woman is the procuress. The man is holding a coin, which was erased by a former owner who was embarrassed at the allusion, who then gave the work its present title.

Often, as in Jan Steen's work, the theme is the lust of aging men. Gerard's painting *The Gallant Officer* (1662/3) is another example, showing a rotund, greasy soldier offering money to a charming young lady.

Judith Leyster painted Unequal Lovers the other way round in *Temptation/Unequal Love* (*National Gallery Rome*). A young man playing the lute studiously ignores the money and treasures offered by an old crone.

She also showed (right) a young girl studiously continuing her needlework, ignoring a man's offer of coins. Gerard's girls in the *Parental Admonition* and *The Gallant Officer* look as though they are going to accept the deal, examples of another prominent saying; "*money bends love to its will.*" This was written by Otto van Veen in his popular emblem book on love which included quotations from lyricists, philosophers, and ancient writers.

Emblem books, developed in Renaissance Italy, became very influential in the Netherlands. Each page had a motto and an illustration linked by a poem explaining the relevance to a virtuous life. Domestic conduct books had simpler verses; Jacob Cats published a series prescribing the proper ways of Christian courtship, marriage, child-rearing and household management.

These books were a source of symbols for Dutch genre scenes (like those in *Girl Chopping Onions*). Veiled meanings were prized - Christ had spoken in parables and so too Erasmus in his *Adages*. "*There is nothing empty or meaningless in things,*" wrote Roemer Visscher one of most widely read Dutch authors of emblem books.



Judith Leyster, *The Proposition*, 1631

Jan Steen is the great humourist of Dutch art, but his comical inventions were recognised by the famous French art critic Thore-Burger as “*satire with a moral ... far from being a glorification of misconduct they always have at base a moral significance; the punishment of intemperance, debauchery, idleness and disorder*”. Emblem books were a rich source for his paintings, in which he often included inscriptions of proverbs.

Disorderly Household. Jan painted many examples of the dangers of poor household management. Many of his exuberant pictures of families around a festive table are designed to illustrate well-known proverbs. The old woman holds the song sheet of “*the young ones chirrup as the old ones sing*” – a warning of the consequences of parents setting an example of bad behaviour. The father (Steen) allows his child to smoke his pipe, the mother drinks and bares her cleavage.



Jan Steen, *As the Old Sing, So Pipe the Young*, 1668-1670

One of Jan's best work in this vein is *Beware of Luxury*, jam-packed with proverbs and symbols. The mistress of house is sleeping allowing the others to run riot. The amorous couple drink, a dog is wolfing a meat pie, a child tries a pipe, the baby breaks a bowl and plays with valuables (ripping an important document with seals and throwing to the floor where it will soon be drenched), a servant steals from wall safe and an unattended roast falls into fire.

“*Proverbs cast as images*” is how Eddy de Jongh (in Chapman et al) describes Jan's art. Here, the pig (“don't spread roses before pigs” or as the English have it, “don't cast pearls before swine”); the monkey, symbol of animal passion and instinct, has stopped the clock (“in foolishness time is forgotten”). Possibly, the older black-dressed couple are Quakers (symbolised by the duck). The woman's admonishment of the young man is emphasised by her pointing at a basket holding crutches, switches (used to punish petty criminals) and the leper's rattle – the threat of poverty and disease hang over the intemperate household.



Jan Steen, *Beware of Luxury*, 1663

Jan Steen was born in Leiden in 1626 to one of the city's older upper middle-class families. Despite a long history (back to the 15th century) of serving in public institutions and the civic guard, the family's adherence to Roman Catholicism barred them from these posts. Jan married Margriet, daughter of the famous landscape painter Jan van Goyen. They lived first in Delft and then in Haarlem, and had six children. Margriet died in 1669 and Jan moved back to Leiden to a house inherited from his parents. There he met contrasting fortunes. The art market collapsed in 1672 when the French invaded, but he found love in the shape of Maria van Egmond. Like other members of Jan's family, she found her way into his paintings. And she was none too happy about it. One of Gerrit Dou's pupils;

"once came upon Maria, Jan's second wife, in a despondent mood, complaining ... that Jan depicted her sometimes as an indecent object, sometimes as a horny tart, or sometimes as a match-maker or drunken whore which annoyed her. She added that she wished to be portrayed as a proper woman."

She is the main figure in *Merry Company on a Terrace*. Her bodice undone with two pink roses at her breast (symbols of Venus, the goddess of love), wearing bright red shoes (symbols of sexuality), with one arm resting on thigh of musician and the other extending a glass for more wine.



Jan Steen, *Merry Company on a Terrace*, 1673-5

"The Dutch are rightly proud of Steen and love his kind of humour" (Rosenburg) and to this day in the Netherlands a "Jan Steen household" is an epithet for a lively and untidy home. It would be a mistake to type-cast Jan as a painter entirely of jolly moralising scenes. More than 60 religious paintings are attributed to him. Admittedly this is small percentage from his 800 authentic works and often Jan chose his biblical subjects to suit his style and taste. Scenes from the Passion did not attract him. His favourite religious subjects, like the *Wedding of Tobias and Sarah* or the *Marriage at Cana* (which he painted at least six times) could be treated as genre, complete with the inclusion of Jan. However, no-one can dispute the genuine piety of *Prayer Before the Meal* (sold in 2012 for £5.6M).



Jan Steen, *The Prayer Before the Meal*, 1660

The little chandelier (*belkroon*) is inscribed with "Thy will be done" and Proverbs (30: 7-9) appears on the placard nailed to the back wall: "Three things I desire only and no more/above all to love God the Father/Not to covet an abundance of riches/but to desire what the wisest prayed for/an honest life in this vale/on these three all is based." The small shelf has candle, taper, books, skull and a sheet of paper inscribed "Think on death". A wreath of wheat crowns the skull – wheat, which must first die and be buried in the earth before growing into a new plant, is a symbol of hope – like grain, man must die and be buried to attain eternal life.

Jan originally designed the painting as a Catholic work: a large crucifix is visible on the wall through the overlaying paint, with Christ's body clear above the shelf. Without this, the picture of domestic piety was very popular, as the home and family were the sacred core of Dutch society. Jan shows his skill in still life, especially with the ham and heavy burlap cloth on the barrel.

Love and Couples This skill recurs in the small painting *Girl with Oysters*, who seems to offer more than food.



Jan Steen, *Girl with Oysters*, 1658-60

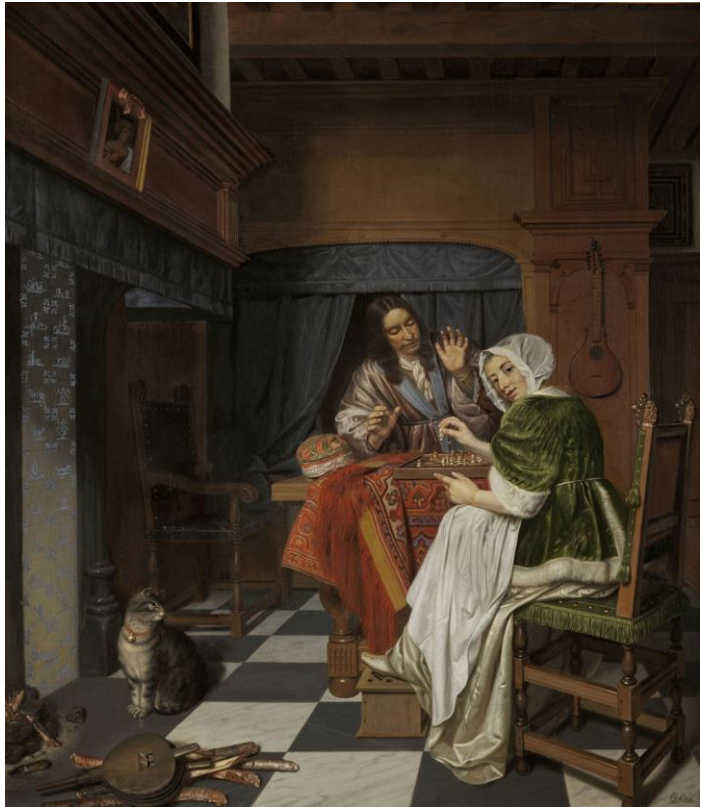


Frans van Meiris the Elder, *The Oyster Meal*, 1661

The seafood was regarded as an aphrodisiac in 17th century Netherlands: the leading medical authority of his day, Johan van Beverwijck wrote oysters; “*arouse appetites and the desire to eat and to make love which pleases both lusty and delicate bodies.*”

Frans van Meiris' flushed girl, showing her bosom, seems quite ready for the bed behind her. Oysters appear in many Steen paintings, symbolising love (or lust), and often being shucked by an old woman as procuress with “*pointed nose and pointed chin, the devil dwells within.*”

Chess was sometimes shown as game of love, often with the woman pointing to her queen: the man might win at this game (and others) but victory is trivial compared to the queen's power in love. **Cornelis de Man** shows a curtained bed behind the well-to-do chap. The Protestant Dutch also drew a parallel between chess and man – during the game there are differences in rank, and some are more powerful than others, but at the end of the game – death – all are put away in the same box, equal in God's eyes.



Cornelis de Man, *The Chess Players*, c1670



Jan Steen, *Celebrating the Birth*, 1664

Mischief in love was enjoyed too. Steen's *Celebrating the Birth* shows the aging father tentatively holding the new-born while acceding to requests for more money for expenses. A younger man mocks him with two fingers, marking him a cuckold who may not know the child is not his. The lovely girl in the foreground reminds us of Bruegel and Raphael's water-carrier. Midwives and nurses were sources of bawdy chatter as they saw lots of different households. The painting at one time had the alternative title, *The Gossiping*.

The effects of love were depicted in countless paintings of Doctor's Visits – Jan Steen produced many. Each one could be read as a gentle reminder of lovesickness which medicine can never cure – with a painting of a love scene and a sculpture of cupid included. Jan has an Italian classical scene of Venus and Adonis for the former and a small boy for the latter. These scenes often show a maid holding a beaker of the girl's urine, commonly considered useful for indications of pregnancy and a reminder of the consequence of a night of illicit love.



Jan Steen, *The Doctor's Visit*, 1660 (Apsley House)



Jan Steen, *A Woman at Her Toilet*, 1663

Doctor's Visits had all manner of phallic symbols and indications of unchastity. The herring from Shrovetide revels served as a symbol of folly and licentiousness, as well as alluding to telling the girl the unsalted truth. Jan includes on the right wall, Frans Hals painting, *Pekelharing* (Steen was a keen collector of Hals' works).

Jan sounds another warning against the transitory pleasure of sex by using an archway decorated with sunflowers (constancy), grapevines (domestic virtue) and a weeping cherub (he has been punished for profane love).

Beyond this threshold, which no moral person should cross, lie vanitas symbols of the transient effects of pleasure (lute with broken string, skull, extinguished candle and open jewellery box). Putting on a stocking appeared in emblem books as a caution against impetuous behaviour – pulling one on too quickly would risk a tear (giving into sensuality would lead to ruin).

Children Jan Steen enjoyed painting children, either in the classroom or celebrating religious festivals. Jan shows his skill in composing large groups in *The Unruly School* – Arthur Wheelock suggests Jan used Raphael's *School of Athens* as a model: the boy in middle foreground is in similar pose but reversed as Michelangelo. There are distinct groups too (the three children examining animal and bird prints, the boys writing). In the background a single boy serves as Raphael's Plato and Aristotle.



Jan Steen, *A School for Boys and Girls/The Unruly School*, c1670 (Edinburgh)

To the left of the lovely figure of the girl with a blue shawl (the white highlights arch beautifully up from the prints, through her apron, the woman's headdress and on to the poster on the wall), a kneeling boy picks up a portrait print of Prince William III (the man who saved Europe from French domination). More tellingly, discarded and seemingly forgotten on the floor in the right foreground is a print of Erasmus – educator *par excellence*. While literacy was high in the Netherlands by the pitiful standards of the day, the quality of education varied greatly. Dirck Valcooch, who wrote the first Dutch handbook for village schoolmasters in 1591, complained bitterly about low wages and dreadful teachers – some were appointed simply because they were unable to do other work. In 1620 one community complained of a teacher who had been in post for 10 years but was virtually illiterate, knew nothing about maths and wasn't keen on teaching. Jan Steen captures these shortcomings in his portrayal of the adults notionally in charge of the *Unruly School*.

An edict of 1655 required all teaching candidates to be able to read, write, perform four basic calculations and to know the tunes of hymns. The Reformed Church didn't help a great deal, however, when it decreed that a schoolmaster's duty was religious not scholastic. Unusually, corporal punishment was not excessive - a visiting Frenchman who taught in Leiden thought Dutch children were undisciplined and needed to be beaten more often. Even so, in Dordrecht laws were introduced to protect schoolmasters from being dismissed by enraged parents whose children they had walloped. Eventually, a regulation of 1682 instructed teachers to use gentle methods (detention or shaming in front of peers) instead of the rod and the ferule. The latter is shown in Jan's *The Strict Schoolmaster*. Even in this painting, leniency towards children is suggested by the shears on the wall, a symbol excusing Dutch parents from disciplining their children, lest they "cut off the nose and spoil the face."



Jan Steen, *The Strict Schoolmaster*, 1668

Children had more fun on Twelfth Night. Relatives and friends gathered to make merry. Traditionally, a "king" was chosen either by finding a bean in a cake or by lottery. The child elected as king had onerous duties, including trying alcohol. "The King Drinks!" was shouted when the 'king' took his swig – cue for the gathering to follow suit rather more zealously. Three candles were symbols of the Magi.

In the early 17th century Dutch clergymen complained of excessive drinking and lustful behaviour on Twelfth Night and celebrations were limited. By mid-century, the general climate of toleration saw them proliferate, which may account for Steen painting several pictures of them in 1660s, sometimes with the title *The Bean Feast*. Jan includes himself in the version in Kassel (dated 1668) with his first wife Margriet van Goyen sitting next to him with her hands crossed. The one below is the rowdiest of them all, and explains why the clergy objected.



Jan Steen, *Twelfth Night*, 1666-7 (formerly Los Angeles)

One of Jan's most popular paintings is *The Feast of Saint Nicholas*, coming in at least six versions. On the eve of the 5th of December, children place their shoes around the hearth and sing around the chimney down which St Nick (whose day is on the 6th) will slide. He leaves appropriate gifts; the good children get cakes, sweets and toys; the naughty ones get a birch switch with which they will be punished. Naturally, all children get nice presents, but one is teased. This is depicted in the Rijksmuseum painting, the best of the lot. Diagonals form a flat X, from the man pointed to the chimney on the right down to the basket of pastries, and from the carved table covered with sweets through the child pointing at the shoe which holds the distressing birch switch to the crying, teased boy. The family is held together by gestures and expressions. It is easy to overlook Steen's skill in composition, distracted as we are by the fun of the content.

The small girl, laden with presents, holds a doll representing John the Baptist (his halo neatly done, lit with golden highlights) and the baby held by the man next to the chimney clutches a gingerbread Saint Nicholas, suggesting the painting was for a Catholic patron. Both are omitted in the version in Rotterdam; the little girl, again the focus with a bucket of goodies, holds a simple gingerbread round. Perhaps the Rotterdam work was for a Protestant, but not for a Calvinist for whom St Nick's feast was absolutely taboo.



Jan Steen, *The Feast of Saint Nicolas*, c 1667 (Rijksmuseum)

Among Jan Steen's patrons were his fellow brewers but his works made their way into the collections of the elite in Leiden and in important collections in Amsterdam, even though Jan had never lived there. He painted few portraits, however. *The Poultry Yard* (1660) of the child Jacoba Maria van Wassenaer offering milk to a lamb, surrounded by an array of birds is one, but the best known is commonly called *The Burgher of Delft and his Daughter*. It is not one of Jan's better paintings; the daughter looks like a late addition, with her head far too small.

Adolph Croeser, a rich grain merchant, sits on the stoop of his house on the Oude Delft canal in Delft. In front of him is his thirteen-year-old daughter Catharina. He is being petitioned for a contribution by an old woman with a child. Delft, like other Dutch towns, distinguished between poor people of the town and beggars from outside. The municipal poor were registered and given a licence which allowed them to beg for alms. This is probably what Adolph holds. Towns were hard on the poor and unemployed from outside. Some folk, considered to have lost their jobs through no fault of their own and with useful experience, were given a permit to stay for few days to see if they could find work. If they couldn't they were expected to leave and municipal officers would set dogs on them if necessary. The Catholic church used to be in charge of charity in the Netherlands, but councils took over these duties, not without much squabbling over the scale of largesse – the Protestant work ethic perhaps trumping compassion.

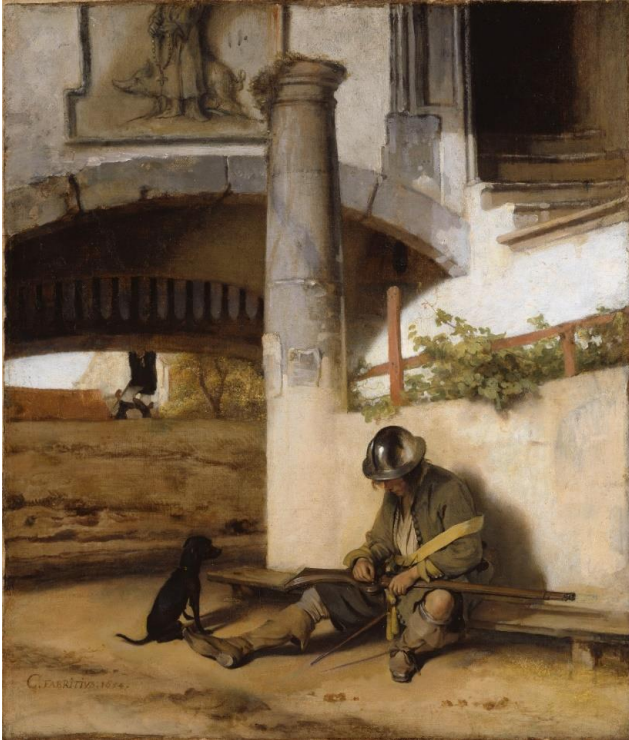


Jan Steen, *Adolph and Catharina Croeser/The Burgher of Delft and his Daughter*, 1655

The scene was to have a personal relevance to Jan. The Anglo-Dutch Naval War from 1652-4 crippled trade and demand for non-essentials fell. Jan was unable to support his family through his painting and from 1654 to 1657, Jan's father leased a brewery in Delft for his son. Jan was unable to make a success of the business, and was forced in 1657 to ask Adolph Croeser (*The Burgher of Delft*) to stand surety for a loan as he was seriously in debt. Jan's fortunes with the tavern he opened in 1672 were no better. On his death in 1679, the place was heavily saddled with mortgages. He was buried in the family grave in Saint Peter's in Leiden but (in an echo of Rembrandt's situation over Saskia's grave), poverty forced Maria to sell the plot in 1686.

School of Delft

Carel Fabritius was one of Rembrandt's best pupils. Born in 1622 in a small town 20 miles north of Amsterdam and a carpenter in his youth (hence his name), he was with Rembrandt in the 1640s. His works are significant in developing the Delft School and the art of Vermeer and de Hooch. Unfortunately, Carel was not able to paint many pictures: four years after he moved to Delft, he perished in the disastrous explosion of a gunpowder magazine in 1654. His years with Rembrandt can be seen in his handling of paint; he was not a polished, high-finish painter like Dou. Carel liked natural daylight (rather than his master's deep chiaroscuro) which can be seen in *The Sentry*. Warm sunlight has lulled the soldier to sleep. The alert dog and, above the arch, St Anthony Abbott with the pig (symbol of the sensuality and gluttony which the saint overcame) are counterpoints to the slumbering figure.



Carel Fabritius, *The Sentry*, 1654

Carel favoured silvery cool tones rather than the warm browns of Rembrandt, and preferred a dark figure against a light background (as opposed to vice versa). These are captured in *The Goldfinch*. These two works, Rosenberg reckons, “are a premonition of Vermeer’s best qualities.”



Carel Fabritius, *The Goldfinch*, 1654

Johannes Vermeer

Johannes Vermeer painted little, his way of working was slow and deliberate; only 35 paintings are now attributed to him. He stands out mainly because of his sensitivity to light and predominantly blue and yellow colour schemes. Frans Hals' expressed the gay optimism of the young Netherlands. As the nation matured and wealth increased, the Dutch calmed down and relaxed. Life became distinguished by a quiet, peaceful and domestic atmosphere, “which Vermeer better than anyone else, depicted in his beautiful interiors (*Slive*)” and so he is representative of the Dutch national character much more than the individualist Rembrandt.

Vermeer was born in Delft in 1632, but little is known about his life, as he left no letters or drawings. Only two of his paintings are dated, which has resulted in a great deal of sport among art historians attempting to plot the development of his career. Initially, though, it seems Johannes began as a history painter; *Diana and her Companions* (*Mauritshuis*) and *Christ at the House of Mary and Martha* are the only extant biblical and mythological scenes. The latter is Vermeer's largest painting (160 cm x 142 cm); the figures larger than life-size. Unlike his later works, it is broadly painted but aspects of Vermeer's later art appear: the patterned covering, the highlights on the edge of the bench and on Christ's chair-arm and, most notably, the silhouetting of Mary's profile against Martha's white dress.



Johannes Vermeer, *Christ at the House of Mary and Martha*, c 1655 (National Gallery, Edinburgh)

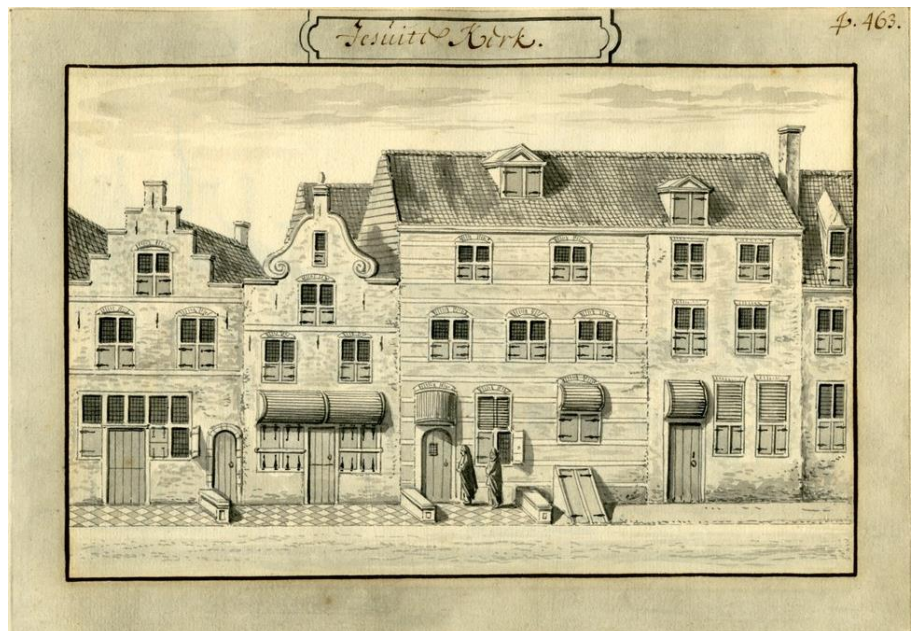
Vermeer's father, Reynier, was an innkeeper and art dealer. In the 1630s he rented an inn which he called "The Flying Fox" (presumably for his name) but moved to a better place in April 1641 when he bought for 2700g (with a sizeable mortgage) a large inn called Mechelen on the Market Square. With the New Church to the left and the Baroque Town Hall to the right, this superior position meant Reynier's customers were now middle-class and he was able to display for sale works from the leading painters in Delft with whom he was friends. When Reynier died in October 1652, Johannes took over the business. Indeed, the bulk of his income came from it, not from his paintings.

It is not clear with whom Johannes served his apprenticeship, but he was registered as a master painter in the Guild of St Luke on the 29th December 1653. The *Girl Asleep at a Table* is the first stab Vermeer made at a single quiet figure in an interior. It's not a complete success. The table covering is strange and the space unconvincing. In her satin dress and pearl ear-rings, she is clearly not a maid, as some have thought. Slive believed she was drunk, pointing to the upset wine-glass (which has suffered from abrading) and the indecent open collar. Others, spotting the mask and the foot of a cupid in the painting on the rear wall, suggest she is not asleep but suffering from the melancholy of love. A radiograph reveals that originally man in hat stood in back room with a dog looking at him from doorway, which would support the love theme.



Johannes Vermeer, *Girl Asleep at a Table*, c 1657

Between taking over his father's business and registering as a master painter, Vermeer married Catherina Bolnes from a leading Catholic family in Gouda. Since the Reformation the family had been banned from lucrative posts but kept their land, so Catherina's mother, Maria Thins, was very wealthy. Maria was separated from her wastrel husband and lived in a large house on the southern side of the Market Square in Delft, a few steps away from the New Church and very close to the Roman Catholic church, the Mission of the Cross, run by Jesuits. The faith was tolerated in Delft because many important manufacturers of Delftware were Roman Catholics. Since the late 16th century very large quantities were exported, forming Delft's principal business.



Places of worship were restricted in external appearance to be similar to Dutch houses. A drawing by Abraham Rademacher of 1730 shows the Jesuit Church in Delft. For two of these "hidden churches" in Delft, Roman Catholics were obliged to pay 2000g per year, as well as paying smaller fees for their festivals. Maria was very devout and refused to allow Vermeer to marry Catherina until he converted to Catholicism.

Maria Thins had a collection of paintings, among them *The Procuress* by Dirck van Baburen. This was clearly an important family heirloom, as Vermeer included it in the background of two of his paintings. Vermeer's first dated work (1656) is of the same subject, but is an immature effort which little suggests his mature pictures. However, *Officer and Laughing Girl* painted roughly a year later, some of his signatures become evident; lion-head chair finials, ornate windowpanes to left with reflected and refracted light, figures silhouetted and a carefully placed map on the wall.



Johannes Vermeer, *Officer and Laughing Girl*, c 1657 (Frick Collection)

The girl has a lovely expression, which is unusual for Vermeer as there's not much animation in his art. The structure is convincing, despite the over-large figure of the officer. The bottom of the map forms a tangent with girl's head, and the black rod links her to the man, the V-shapes of girl's and man's right arms create link too. *Christ at the House of Mary and Martha* has the three primary colours predominant and here Vermeer has painted the larger area of the landmass on the map in blue, perhaps to balance the yellow of the girl's bodice and the pattern on the chair and the large area of red. The map will appear again, and it was conventional that West should appear at the top.

The small dabs of yellow on the chair help to define structure (in the diamonds especially) as well as showing reflected light. This *pointille* technique of Vermeer's is used extensively in *The Milkmaid* to produce texture on the bread rolls, loaf and the two baskets, as well as highlights all over the place (dark jug, sleeve, top of skirt, opening of blouse, headpiece and lantern)



Johannes Vermeer, *The Milkmaid*, c 1660 (Rijksmuseum)

Johannes uses the primary colours again, arranged in a mirror – the red of the jug and bowl bracketed by blue of the tankard and over-skirt with yellow of the blouse and the bread farther out. An important feature of the composition is the use of light-dark contrasts to accentuate the figure. To the left, where the maid's sleeve and head-dress catches the light and is bright, the wall is dark. On the right, where the silhouette is naturally in shadow, the wall is much lighter. Vermeer further emphasises this profile by a thin white contour line running down her entire side. These light-dark contrasts will appear again and again.

The composition is balanced but unsymmetrical. The bright large expanse of wall is important to that, as well as to the silhouette. Minutely observed imperfections in the plaster break the tedium of this large area and the footwarmer is an important space-filler. Originally, Vermeer painted a large basket of clothes here; the remains of the handle can be seen on the wall above the tiles (which are strangely ornate for a kitchen).

The Milkmaid is the first of Vermeer's mature single figures. She is larger than the others, perhaps intentionally so to give the impression of reliability. A note of artificiality is introduced by the table. Compositionally, the diagonal leads us to the girl and adds depth, but realistically the table would be placed against the wall. The scene is of quiet competence and is, therefore, reassuring – order and peace exist and the maid does not convey an emotion. The next three single figures of the early- to mid-1660s are quite different in that regard.

These three figures, representing Vermeer's mature style, are more refined and perfectly balanced, "so thoroughly composed that the addition or removal of a single object, the adjustment of a chair or map to right or left, would disrupt the equilibrium. (Sutton)." Each of the women is caught in a moment of stillness, but the paintings are given life particularly by their hands and by the profiles accentuated against the background, just as in *The Milkmaid*. *Woman with a Pearl Necklace* conveys a happy feeling, helped by the warm yellow (the curtain a crucial second mirror of the girl's dress) and the lovely red ribbon. The girl, delighted with how she appears wearing the necklace, is confident she will stun admirers at the important social event for which she is preparing.



Johannes Vermeer, *Woman with a Pearl Necklace*, 1662-64 (Berlin)

Vermeer shows his genius by including items of interest to fill the composition but which serve mainly to emphasise the girl. They also add to the sense of dreaminess - the sharp outlines of the table, chair and large vase and their highlights contrast with the soft handling of paint in the figure. Even more cunning, and in contrast to all his other works, the wall is left empty of detail, so emphasising the girl's gaze which travels in an unbroken line to the mirror, "activating the entire painting." Degas would use the same device between ballet-instructor and dancer. Truth and purity, the wonder of female beauty; Thore-Burger described the painting as "delicious".

More unsettling is *Woman Reading a Letter*. The overall cool tone of blue, the tension in the hands (here the fingers and thumb press together, whereas in *Necklace* their light touch and open relaxation add to the sense of happiness), her expression on the face and the shadowed head, suggest the arrival of bad news.



Johannes Vermeer, *Woman Reading a Letter*, c 1663 (Rijksmuseum)

The woman is placed in the centre of the composition, unlike the others, and the blue jacket, puffed out at the back (different to the back-hugging yellow coat of *Necklace*) creates a symmetrical bulk, adding to her monumentality: if it is bad news, she will surely weather it. The design is terrific; round and rectangular forms, diagonals and verticals, curves (map, figure, chair seat, table cloth), but again with no obsession over still life which would distract from the figure.

The hands and letter are emphasised by the rod and the vertical margin of the map, the pure white of the letter against the ochre of the map's margin. Again, Vermeer uses a white contour line on the right side. Cleverly, he places the dark crest of the map so as to silhouette the light profile of the forehead, and uses a region of meagre cartographical material as a light background against shadowed hair. Vermeer adds a dark blue bow on the front of jacket underneath the letter to contrast against the similarly-coloured wall, and uses that as an excuse to edge the remainder of the coat with a thin darker blue line. Many of Vermeer's works have maps of the Netherlands – here *Holland and West Friesland*, designed by Balthasar van Berckenrode in 1620. Vermeer paints the map larger than in reality (his rendering is the perfect size – any smaller and the composition would fail). Those maps were large, examples of broadsheet printing using many plates. Broadsheet engravings of science experiments and scientific illustrations were popular. A wonderful example is Willem van Swanenburg's *Sailing Cars* (1603), a 2' by 4' engraving on three plates, commissioned by the Prince of Orange to commemorate a two-hour ride along the coast in his wind-powered contraption invented by court engineer Simon Stevin. The poem round the margins records the marvel of the sailing car and sings the praises of the Dutch countryside – readable in the high-definition version available online from the Rijksmuseum.

Johannes third single figure has sparked much speculation about meaning of the scales. Another superb composition once again emphasising the hand - the perspective lines of the mirror top and bottom converge to this point. This focus of the painting here is well-ordered, with the extended little finger, the bottom edge of the painting on the back wall against the crossbar of the scales and the open box against the pans being the horizontals. The left edge of the painting, the margin line running to the hand and the vertical support of the scales (slightly offset) being the orthogonals. The subdued light and expression of the woman convey a contemplative peace which is helped by the delicate way in which she holds the balance. Johannes' *pointille* technique alleviates the sombre setting with sparkling pearls.



Johannes Vermeer, *Woman Holding a Balance*, c 1664 (Washington DC)

The scales are empty. The painting on the rear wall is of the Last Judgement which recalls the advice of Saint Ignatius in his *Spiritual Exercises*, urging the meditator to examine his conscience and weigh his sins as though he were at Judgement Day. The mirror in front of her underpins this idea of self-knowledge. The work speaks of the responsibility of maintaining an equilibrium in a life of temperance and balanced judgement. Evidently, this is just what the woman has done, her peacefulness exhibiting no fear of her eternal fate.

This view of the painting is heavily favoured over the minority view expressed by Salomon (1983) that the woman is pregnant and the scales are empty because the fate of the unborn child – a pure and unblemished soul – is not known. This would chime with the controversy over predestination and free will raging between Protestant sects in the Netherlands. But the theory fails, as the fashion of the time was for thickly padded skirts, so the woman is not pregnant.

The timelessness and tranquillity of *Woman Holding a Balance* marks *The Little Street*, which catches the beauty and permanence of ordinary Dutch houses, which may be old but remain in good condition. Just as with his human figures, Vermeer strengthened the weight of the building by painting a white contour line on the gables. The work is almost an exercise in rectangles and lines (mullions, bricks, cobbles, planks in shutters), but the mortar, beautifully done and convincingly uneven, and the rough lines of the cobbles heighten the realism of the scene over its abstract qualities. The location is Vlamingstraat 40–42 in Delft. Vermeer's aunt Ariaentgen Claes lived in the house at the right, with her children, from around 1645 until her death in 1670.



Johannes Vermeer, *View of Houses in Delft (The Little Street)*, c 1658 (Rijksmuseum)

The white-washed walls emphasised by impasto, help attract attention to the figures, who go about the homely chores of Dutch life, contained and protected by their buildings. A woman doing handiwork was removed from the entrance of the alley, perhaps because she diluted the effect of the blue skirt of the maid behind. The foliage on the left now does that, as the yellow pigment has faded, leaving the original green, blue.

Impasto produces marvellous effects in the masterpiece *View of Delft*, “one of most colourful and original landscapes in the history of European painting (Slive).” The texture of the red roofs is created by an underlayer of sand mixed with large lumps of white lead, over-painted with a thin reddish-brown layer, and on top of that numerous small dabs of red, brown and blue paint. Impasto more impressive on sunlit bits of tower of the New Church, which seems; “almost to have been sculpted with a heavy application of lumpy lead-tin yellow”.



Johannes Vermeer, *View of Delft*, c 1660-61

The city's uneven skyline is evened out by Vermeer. The Rotterdam Gate, on the right with twin towers, is turned parallel to the picture plane. The central tower of the Schiedam Gate is made larger to match that of the New Church and higher than the tower of the Old Church and those of the Rotterdam Gate (which are made to match). The changes add stability. The exaggerated reflection of the two gates creates depth, extended by the sun hitting only the rear buildings (those in the centre seem far away) and the light foreground shore (broken brilliantly by the two women.) The pattern of verticals and horizontals, with no conspicuous diagonals, produce the peace and calm of the early morning; another timeless scene, what harm can possibly come to Delft?

That must have been in the mind of William the Silent when he chose Delft as his residence during the Dutch revolt against Spain: the fortifications give a fine view of the surrounding roads and river. His imposing tomb in the choir of the New Church (as we shall see) is the most magnificent in the Dutch Republic. The link with William the Silent sparked the interest of King William I in the 1820s. *View of Delft* was lost for over a century, but a copy was exhibited in 1814 in Amsterdam, when it was in possession of Kops family in Haarlem. The director of the Mauritshuis, Steengracht van Oostkapelle was lukewarm thinking it merely "unusual". However, the first Director of the Rijksmuseum, Cornelis Apostool, was enthusiastic and orchestrated the purchase, with a contribution from King William. Apostool's endeavour was unrewarded; the king kept the painting in His Majesty's Cabinet at the Mauritshuis (a constant reminder to Steengracht of his deficiency in taste).

During Vermeer's mature period come the series of heads (or *tronies*) in close-up with a dark-light contrast. The *Lacemaker* shows a girl deep in concentration and with exaggerated curls in her hair – a French fashion and an indication of the aspirations of Dutch Society from around 1660 to mirror courtly culture (ironic given the invasion to come in 1672).



Johannes Vermeer, *The Lacemaker*, 1665-8

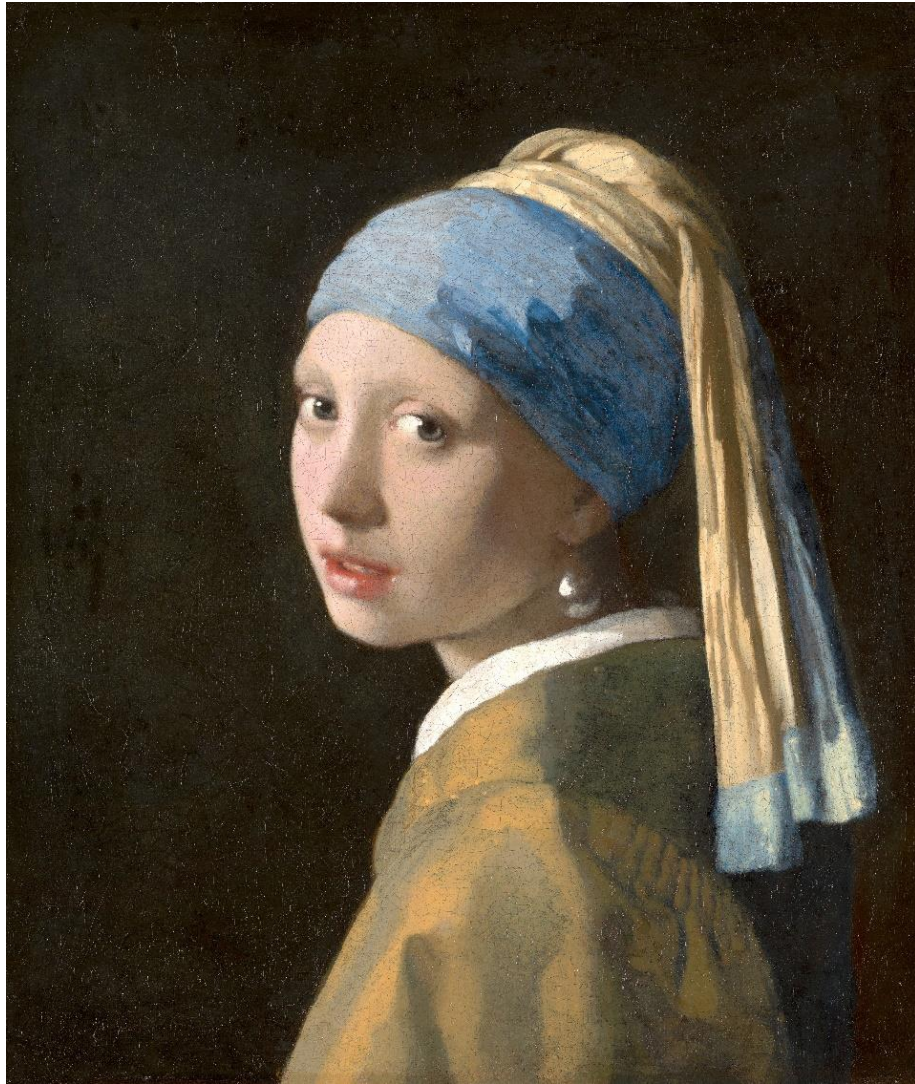
Spinning, sewing and lace-making were advocated as domestic skills for housewife and maiden and also as a means to supplement income. Occasionally women formed their own guilds of textile workers.



Caspar Netscher, *The Lace Maker*, 1662 (Wallace)

Caspar Netscher's version has a Vermeer-like silhouette which enhances the girl's beautiful profile and her beautifully embroidered cap. The clasped hands below a bird in its pattern suggest she is married or thinking of marriage; the same symbol appears on Jacob Cats' Marriage book. There is symbolism (absent from Vermeer): the broom is a reminder of household duties and the mussel shells on floor refer to the contemporary comparison between dutiful women and mussels – each always in their home.

In his most famous head, Johannes shuns the detail of *The Lacemaker* for soft, unblemished skin and liquid eyes. The work was described by A B de Vries, Director of Mauritshuis for 25 years, as, "perhaps the most sublime representation of a young girl to be found in the whole artistic production of the Netherlands."



Johannes Vermeer, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, c 1665 (Mauritshuis)



Johannes Vermeer, *Girl with Red Hat*, 1665/6



Michiel Sweerts, *Boy with a Hat*, 1655

Despite the title, the eyes are the real focus of the painting. The lips are slightly parted with pink dots as highlights. Vermeer used this again in *Girl with Red Hat*; unusually painted on panel and with a figure set against a completely ornate background. The white cravat (heavy impasto scraped off) is crucial in outlining the girl's face. The soft skin and eyes appear also in *Michiel Sweerts' tronie*. There seems little reason to believe Vermeer saw this, as Sweerts painted it either in his last year in Rome or in Brussels, but the similarity of feel is striking.

Vermeer painted several scenes of a woman either reading a letter or writing one - very popular in the Netherlands and sometimes with a painting on the background wall to indicate the nature of the letter. Dirck Hals depicted both in similar compositions: *Seated Woman with Letter* (1633) has a complacent woman who has just read a letter, behind her on the wall is a calm seascape; as if the title wasn't a sufficient clue *Woman Tearing up a Letter* (1631) has a seascape of ships being buffeted by stormy weather and high seas. A verse by Jan Krul in 1640 is relevant:

*"Love may rightly be compared to the sea
from the viewpoint of her changes,
which one hour cause hope
the next fear: so too goes it with a lover
who like a skipper
who journeys to sea
one day encounters good weather
the next storms and roaring wind."*

The works of **Gabriel Metsu** cover a wide range, but his masterpieces are the pair *Man Writing a Letter* and *Woman Reading a Letter*. The latter (below left) has a painting of a rough sea scene, but the meaning is ambiguous. The maid could be revealing the storm breaking as her lady reads. She might be drawing the curtain closed, taking a last peek at the storm, suggesting the chap's letter was conciliatory. This would fit with the companion piece *Man Writing a Letter* which has an Italian pastoral landscape on the wall. Not all letter scenes had explanatory paintings. **Gerard ter Borch** (and many other Dutch artists) captured the trend towards French court fashions in the later decades of the century. Here, his three women each have elaborate hair and are surrounded by elegant furnishings. Evidently, spaniels were popular too.



Gabriel Metsu, *Woman Reading a Letter*, 1665



Gerard ter Borch, *Curiosity*, c 1660



Johannes Vermeer, *A Lady Writing*, c 1665 (Washington DC)

Love letters were taken seriously in the Netherlands, as they were admissible evidence in breach of promise suits brought before church councils. Men and women could buy albums of exemplary love letters from which they could choose apposite phrases. Some letters were signed in blood. Vermeer's *A Lady Writing* has a fashionable hairstyle (braided chignon decorated with bows like stars), but she is content and tranquil, and not alarmed by our attention. Perhaps the still-life on the rear wall suggests this is a portrait? Everything again is beautifully proportioned. The girl wears the same jacket that adorns the *Woman with a Pearl Necklace*, but that may not necessarily mean it belonged to the family. After all, Vermeer had many children, none of whom appear in his paintings (perhaps a significant omission; through his art Vermeer obtained some peace and quiet).

Vermeer painted a few scenes of music-making of two or three figures. His masterpiece with more than one figure is undoubtedly *Allegory of the Art of Painting*, "an outright triumph of pure painting. Vermeer's near-miraculous technique included in one picture everything he learned (Wright)." The painting represents all the skills of an artist. The composition is organised by the Golden Ratio. Within it are examples of brushwork; the painterly rendering of the curtain; the elaborate realism of the map (and the profiles of towns in the margin) and its creases; the impasto highlights and *pointille* of the chandelier; a variety of textures and surfaces.



Johannes Vermeer, *Allegory of the Art of Painting*, 1666-68

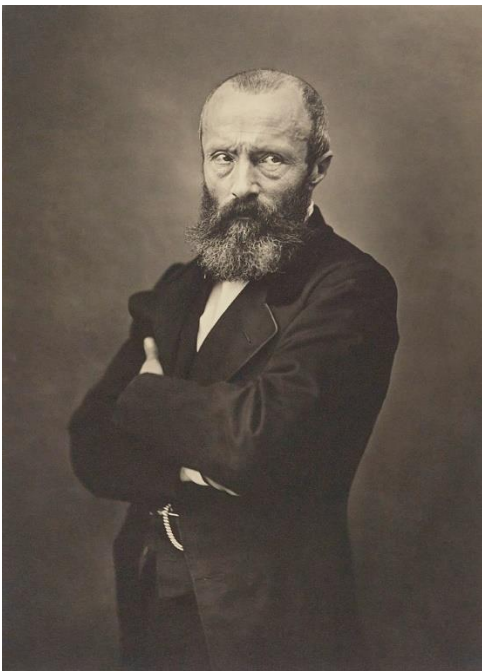
Vermeer emphasises the pre-eminence of history painting. Clio, the muse of history, is beautifully modelled and smoothly painted (again with little pink dots as highlights on her lips), and she bears those attributes stipulated by Ripa that are associated with painting; the book of history, the wreath signifying the honour that history painting brings and the trumpet heralding fame. The mask which Ripa used to symbolise the art of imitation lies on the table. The map shows the 17 provinces before the Dutch revolt (rather than a map of the present) further highlighting the importance of history. In summary, the artist is inspired by the muse of history to paint, and this endeavour is underlined by the slit doublet which was worn only for special occasions in the 17th century; artist as member of the liberal arts, not merely a craftsman.

The French invasion of 1672 resulted in the collapse of the Dutch economy; sluices were opened to flood the land surrounding Amsterdam to prevent French troops from reaching the city. That hit agriculture and cattle breeding hard and recovery took several years. For Vermeer personally, the invasion effectively ended his art dealership – he was unable to sell any paintings afterwards - and for many years his mother-in-law's tenants were unable to pay rent. He had to take out another loan (of 1000g with his mother-in-law's property as surety) in 1675. In December of that year, after a short illness Vermeer died – his widow reckoned money problems brought on his death.

He left the family in dire financial straits; the situation is indicated by his debt of 726g to his baker; the family had not paid for bread since 1672. Catherina was obliged in 1676 to hand over two of the four Vermeer paintings which remained with the family - *Lady with Maidservant holding a Letter* (c 1666-8, Frick) and *The Guitar Player* (c 1670-2, Kenwood) - as security for the which she agreed to pay off at 50g per year. Vermeer's inventory (valued at 500g) of 26 paintings from his art dealership were handed over in 1676 for another debt.

Vermeer was largely forgotten in the 18th century, as French Academy and court tastes dominated art in Europe. But the 19th century saw his reputation rise decisively. First, from around 1825 the daily activities of 'ordinary' people and of landscape in its 'natural' condition were accepted as suitable subjects for paintings; sparked by the rise of the liberal bourgeoisie and reflected in the works of Corot, Millet and Courbet. Second, the more scientific approach to history was applied to art, and it is here that Theophile Thore-Burger restored Vermeer's high standing (and did the same for Frans Hals).

Thore-Burger fell in love with *View of Delft* when he saw it in the Mauritshuis in 1842, and spent the following years tracking down other works by Vermeer. Thore-Burger was



a radical Democrat who thought, "all history is a perpetual insurrection against the powers that rule the world." In his life he saw three forms of slavery; Catholicism, Monarchism and Capitalism and three forms of liberty, Republicanism, Democracy and Socialism. He strongly maintained that art should present a true image of the daily life of the common people. Thore-Burger's admiration of 17th century Dutch art stemmed from it being the art of an emancipated society - only civic and domestic painting existed.

Elected to the legislative assembly after the Revolution of 1848, he became involved in a coup launched in the name of the proletariat of Paris and was forced to flee France; for many years shuttling between England, Holland, Belgium and Switzerland. He refused to deliver a lecture in Brussels in 1864 because of a lack of political liberty: "*it seems impossible to me to speak for instance on Rembrandt without cursing hypocrisy and despotism and without glorifying the light of liberty and all those human qualities that have to do with Revolution and with progress and civilisation.*" He was forced to adopt an alias during a stay in Belgium where the secret police of Napoleon III operated. Under the name William Burger (the German for citizen) he published the first major study of Vermeer in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* in 1866, bringing Vermeer wide international repute for the first time. Vermeer's vivid colours and the effect of sunlight were admired by the Impressionists.

Pieter de Hooch

Pieter de Hooch, a contemporary of Vermeer, was the son of master bricklayer and a midwife, baptized in Rotterdam on 20 December 1629. He trained there and with Nicolaes Berchem in Haarlem. By 1652 Pieter had moved to Delft, at first living in the household of a linen merchant, Justus de la Grange. In 1653, Pieter is mentioned as a servant of de la Grange, but this probably meant that Pieter paid for his board and lodging in paintings. Eleven of Pieter's paintings are listed in the inventory of the merchant's possessions in 1655. By that time Pieter had joined the guild of St Luke in Delft. His best works come from 1655 to 1662.

He swapped Berchem's landscapes for elaborate interiors showing well-to-do burghers and their servants in bright and colourful manner, usually with an open doorway revealing a deeper room or courtyard, often with a more distant view beyond that. Pieter retained Berchem's love of light. One of his favourite schemes was light streaming towards the viewer straight from the background (rather than falling from the left as in Vermeer). Forms are silhouetted and haloes appear on the contours, as in *The Card Players*. He liked warm colours; deep reds contrasting with blacks and greys. He shared Vermeer's love of windows, devoting great care in rendering mullions and patterns, even the odd crack or two in *Boy Bringing Bread*.



Pieter de Hooch, *The Card Players*, 1658



Pieter de Hooch, *Boy Bringing Bread*, c 1662
(Wallace Collection)



Pieter de Hooch, *A Dutch Courtyard*, 1658-60

Constructed in pretty much the same way as his interiors, but without the back-lighting, de Hooch's courtyards are highly ordered and have the same escape into the distance. They resemble actual sites in Delft - towers and the old town wall make appearances - but they are thought to be imaginary. His *Courtyard with Arbour* (1658) – sold for £4.5M in 1992 - and *The Courtyard of a House in Delft* each have the same plaque, which originally hung over the entrance of the Saint Hieronymus Cloister in Delft and is now in the garden behind No 157 Oude Delft. The inscription reads: “*This is St Jerome’s vale, if you wish to repair to patience and meekness. For we must first descend if we wish to be raised. 1614.*”



Pieter de Hooch, *The Courtyard of a House in Delft*, 1658

In April 1661 Pieter settled in Amsterdam and his paintings seem to celebrate the proper arrangement of a Dutch household. Reflecting society, interiors are richer with more decorative touches and the figures are more substantial. Fewer figures by a fireplace becomes a popular composition in de Hooch's paintings. *Woman Peeling Apples* is the best example available. The ornamental fireplace gives Pieter scope for glinting highlights and, with the floor tiles, satisfies his thirst for geometrical arrangements – which, nevertheless, are nowhere near as complex as the painstaking brickwork paving of his courtyard scenes. He must have enjoyed, too, producing the tremulous shadows of the window pane on the plaster wall. An important aspect of Dutch households was the passing down of methods from mother to daughter. Here the little girl happily watches a domestic chore.

In the later 1660s, Pieter adopts grander and even more elegant interiors and in doing so lost his grasp of depicting space and connecting figures. *The Burgomaster's Room in Amsterdam Town Hall* (1666-8) shows how badly his art slipped, affected perhaps by the death of his wife in 1667 aged only 38 and leaving him with a young family. Nothing is known about his death. His son, Pieter, was admitted to the Amsterdam lunatic asylum and died in 1684. Some historians confuse son with father.



Pieter de Hooch, *Woman Peeling Apples*, 1663 (Wallace Collection)

In *Woman nursing an infant* (1659), while the mother breast-feeds her baby, her little girl shows she understands the importance of nurturing dependents by feeding the dog. De Hooch painted at least two more works depicting breast-feeding; *Mother Lacing Her Bodice beside a Cradle* (1661-63) and *Mother Nursing and a Maidservant with Child* (1670-75). Wealthy couples had wet nurses, despite advice to the contrary. Dutch physician Johan van Beverwijck strongly recommended in a book published in Utrecht in 1651 that mothers suckle their own children, believing that the mother passed on not only nourishment but also her morals and intellect. Jacob Cats emphasised mum's duty to nurse, issuing a lengthy warning against wet nurses who might be a drunk or degenerate or stupid. This has echoes of Michelangelo's conviction (which would have dismayed the much more scientific Leonardo) that he inherited his skills in sculpture from his wet-nurse, the wife of a stonemason! Eventually, in accordance with this advice even the richest Dutch women began to nurse their own children.

Not all interiors were of Dutch elegant households. **Quirijn van Brekelenkam**, a Leiden artist, began with scenes of women working at home but in the early 1650s began a series illustrating craftsmen. Cobblers, coopers, spinners, smithies, apothecaries, barber-surgeons and blood-letters all fell under his brush, usually working next to a window from which they got the light necessary for their work, and shown with their sons. The young being instructed by their elders so that crafts were passed down generations was just as vital as daughters learning from mothers.

Quirijn had skill but often failed to apply it. His best painting is *The Tailor's Workshop*, "and it is a mystery how a painter who found so much quiet poetry in the humdrum activity of an artisan's shop could produce so many weak pictures (Slive)."

On the back wall of *The Tailor's Workshop* in a black frame is a contemporary river landscape. That this should appear in an artisan's studio underlines Peter Mundy's observation, "... and many times blacksmiths, cobblers will have some picture or other by their forge and in their stall." Which brings us to ...



Quirijn van Brekelenkam, *The Tailor's Workshop*, 1661

Landscapes (separate file) which had an urban component

Architecture

Jan van Eyck had painted over-sized Virgin Marys in churches in the 15th century [see notes; Annunciation (1434), Madonna of the Church (1438)], but 17th century Dutch painters minimised people in architectural pictures. Church interiors with sunlight and shadow creating mystical moods were popular, with most scenes being imaginary. Impossibly detailed and ornate church interiors were done by Hendrick Aerts, Bartholomeus van Bassen and Dirck van Delen. The first artist to abandon the fanciful was **Pieter Saenredam** who specialised in faithful reproduction of churches. Although his method was mechanical, a tracing from a large drawing based on measurements and building plans was used, his works have a sensitivity. For example, his earliest *St Bavo* captures the purity of the plain walls (which Protestants had white-washed) and open sunlit space so appealing to worshippers the world over.



Pieter Saenredam, *Interior of St Bavo, Haarlem*, 1628

The Dutch Republic used former Roman Catholic churches for Protestant services, after clearing away statues and altarpieces. Saenredam painted many versions of the interior of St Bavo. In his 1648 painting, the organ is prominent and has inscriptions of quotes from the bible urging folk to use music and songs to praise God. There was great debate among Calvinists over this: strict ones thought music too frivolous but most churches had organs.



Saenredam signed and dated his works unobtrusively, as if part of church markings. His inscription appears on the right foreground column in his interior of the 11th century St Mary's in Utrecht. Protestants retained the ornate decoration of the piers which Pieter reproduced faithfully in great detail, with the help of gold leaf. He shows visitors on the left peering at the famous image of the bull.

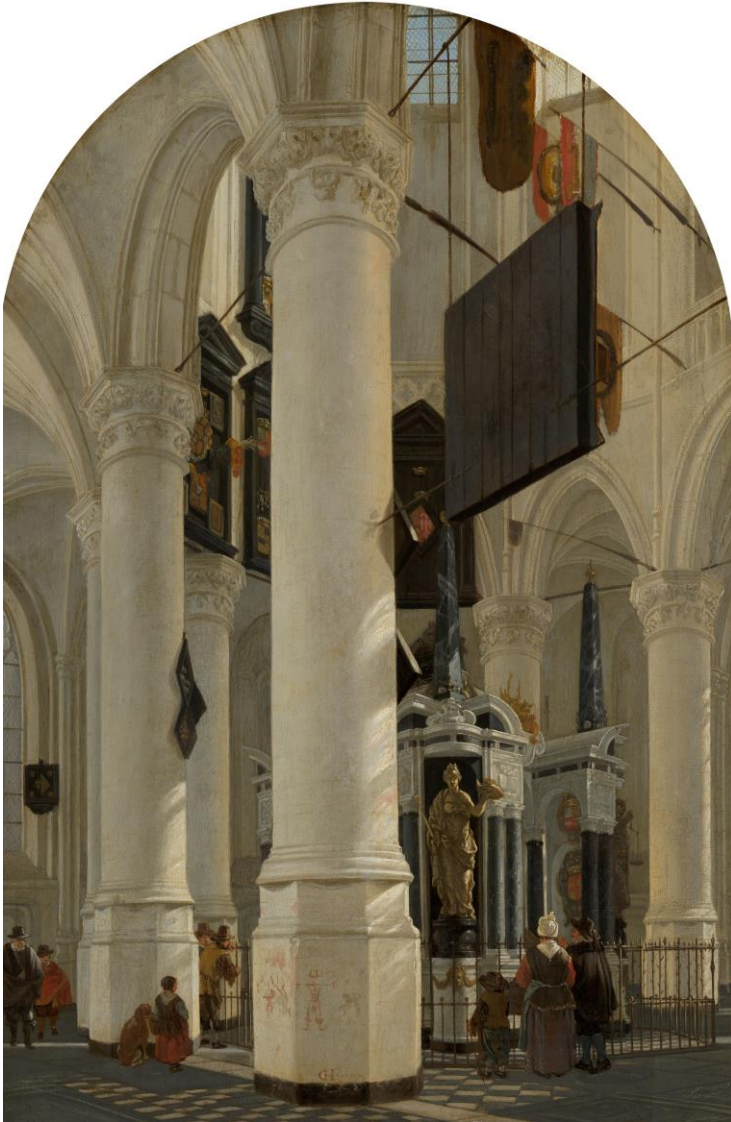
Pieter painted a couple of exterior views of St Mary's – one from either end. His 1662 painting shows the Dom Tower in the centre. Dating from the 14th century it was to be the tower of St Martin's Cathedral. Money ran out after the tower and part of the nave were built. When the latter collapsed in 1674 the Dom was left as a free-standing monument; the tallest church tower in the Netherlands. The Buur Church tower on the left was never completed, but in 1577 a cannon was installed there, pointing at a castle used by the Spanish which was under siege. Pieter's painting is based on a drawing he made 26 years earlier.

Pieter Saenredam, *Nave and Choir of St Mary's Church, Utrecht, 1641*



Pieter Saenredam, *St Mary's Square and St Mary's Church, Utrecht, 1662*

Gerard Houckgeest began as painter of fantastic church interiors but from 1650 painted realistic scenes, the Old and New Churches at Delft being his favourites. Gerard is important because he uses two-point perspective (with viewpoints on the right and the left), so his scenes have diagonals running away from the viewer. The tomb of William the Silent is seen from an oblique view. Unlike Pieter Saenredam, Houckgeest shows people on a larger scale and active in the church. Their clothing provides colour accents. The Dutch used heraldic emblems and civic banners as decorations. Evidently, graffiti was not considered a great problem. Houckgeest shows red crayon stick drawings on the foremost column in his painting.



Gerard Houckgeest, *The Tomb of William the Silent, New Church, Delft*, 1651

Emanuel de Witte shows children drawing on piers in the Old Church at Delft too. Dogs too were welcome in Protestant churches – all three artists include them. And not just in churches, apparently; Emanuel's *Interior of the Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam* has a couple of dogs.



Emanuel de Witte, *Old Church, Delft*, c 1650

Very few of Emanuel's paintings are faithful. Scenes are rearranged to create more space or massiveness; he ignores the large stone pulpit in the Old Church. His organisation of light and shadow is impressive. He was recognised as the greatest architectural painter of his day.

The most enchanting, however, was **Jan van der Heyden**. He painted mainly from 1666, after he had become wealthy by organising street lighting for Amsterdam and making improvements to the city's fire-fighting services. His town scenes are usually bathed in a bright sunshine. He enjoyed painting the Herengracht, the most important canal in Amsterdam. In the 17th century the city's patricians and rich merchants lived in houses lining the waterway. Jan's scenes were not entirely accurate: in the first of the examples below, to emphasise the curve he shortened the length of the embankment thereby eliminating some of the houses and exaggerated its upward sweep.



Jan van der Heyden, *The Herengracht in Amsterdam from the Leliegracht*, c 1668



Jan van der Heyden, *Amsterdam City View*, c 1670

In *City View* he combined the lock on one canal – the Nieuwezijds Voorburgwal (“New Side Front Bastion Wall”) which was filled in in the late 19th century to form the present street of the same name – and the houses along the Herengracht. Jan also depicted famous squares and churches in Dutch cities and those of the Rhineland (Cologne, Dussel, Emmerich, Xanten).



Jan van der Heyden, *The Church of St Andrew in Dusseldorf*, 1667

Jan also painted still life. His *Room Corner* is filled with luxurious items which reflect the extent and variety of the trade routes plied by the Dutch Republic; Italian marble fireplace, Smyrna carpet, Chinese silk cloth, Japanese ceremonial sword, South American armadillo carcass, ornate African ivory in the cabinet.

The two globes (celestial and terrestrial), the history painting and atlas point to learning. The cabinet is decorated with an image of Minerva, sponsor of arts, trade and strategy. Yet, the bible is open at *Ecclesiastes* which begins, “*vanity of vanities, all is vanity.*” Despite the futility, the painting celebrates collection and education. It represents one of the anxieties of wealthy Dutch Protestants; how to reconcile their austere religion with the riches of their life and leads to the final section.



Jan van der Heyden, *Room Corner with Curiosities*, 1712

Still-Life

Although vanitas still life was popular, many paintings represented the delight in the variety and abundance of nature, especially flower-pieces. The Dutch were the most flower-loving nation on earth. Flowers were available on every street corner in the Netherlands at a small price; buying them was as commonplace as buying a newspaper. **Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder** (who we met in 16th century notes), started a trend at the end of his life with flowers set against an open vista – a bit like old Italian portraits. The vase holds thirty flowers, with rare tulips prominent (along with short-lived insects as reminder of inevitable decay). Collectors had a great interest in unusual flowers and wanted paintings as substitutes for real specimens, especially in winter. Dutch flower painters were among the best paid artists of their time. **Jacques de Gheyn** received 600g guilders for a flower-piece painted for Maria de Medici and his son refused to sell one of his works for over 1000g. The flowers were seldom painted from life (they shown bloom at different times of the year) but from individual studies that served as patterns.



Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder, *A Bouquet in an Arched Window*, c 1620



Jacques de Gheyn, *Flowers in a Glass Flask*, 1612

Flower painter **Rachel Ruysch (1664-1750)**, whose works fall mainly in the 18th century, was the best-known female painter of the Dutch Golden Age. Some historians regard her as the first woman to gain an international reputation as a major artist. Her father, Frederik, was a famous botanist (a good start there, then!) and her mother was the daughter of the architect Pieter Post. Alongside many paintings of the usual format of flowers in vases, Rachel introduced two new types – flowers in mossy forests and a spray on a stone slab or ledge. Both are attractive simpler compositions, featuring fewer blooms. The Elector Palatine loved her work and bought all the paintings she did from 1710-1713. Which may not have been that many, as Rachel worked slowly – looking after her ten children can't have helped her artistic career.



Rachel Ruysch, *Thistle between Carnations and Cornflowers on a Forest Floor*, 1683



Rachel Ruysch, *Rose branch with Beetle and Bee*, 1741

Food was a popular subject, usually in the form of realistic meals.



Pieter Claesz, *Still Life*, 1643

Pieter Claesz painted a lobster and crab meal; the bread and wine, with their Christian meaning, and time-piece are vanitas symbols. Sometimes the meal was simple; a breakfast of herring and beer might not seem a likely artistic subject but the various textures prove a wonderful combination. The beautifully-decorated knife, seeming to jut out of the picture frame, invites us to start eating.

The breakfast piece was popular. **Willem Heda** was the other important exponent. His compositions are carefully worked out; many with the diagonals common to landscapes. However, his crab breakfast is all horizontals and verticals, the draping tablecloth matching the glassware.



Pieter Claesz, *Herring with Bread and Beer*, 1636



Willem Heda, *Breakfast with Crab*, 1648

The master was **Willem Kalf** whose paintings are not really about banquets as meals (Abraham van Beyeren was notable for those) but the luxurious accoutrements associated with them.



Willem Kalf, *A Chafing Dish and other Tableware*, 1640s

Goethe was a huge fan and after seeing a Kalf painting of 1643, urged people to seek out the artist's works, *“to understand in what sense art is superior to nature and what the spirit of man imparts to objects when viewing them with creative eyes ... If I had to choose between the golden vessels or the picture, I would choose the picture.”* This painting was done while Willem was in Paris from 1642-1646.

Back in the Netherlands in 1651 Kalf discovered that wealthy Amsterdam patricians preferred to have golden vessels and the pictures; no painter satisfied that demand better than Willem. During these years, Kalf reduced the number of objects and developed a surer sense of composition, light and colour. Rare porcelain and glistening vessels – including a late Ming Ginger Jar in a painting in Indianapolis – were popular components. In each of these works, Willem places a time-piece, lest the rich folk lose their bearings and think themselves immortal.



Willem Kalf, *Still life with Silver Ewer and Porcelain Bowl*, 1656



Willem Kalf, *Still life with Holbein Bowl and Nautilus Cup*, 1678



Jan Weenix, *Game-piece with Dead Heron*, 1695

Just as hunting landscapes were popular among the new “aristocracy” and regent families, so were hunting trophy still-life paintings. **Jan Weenix** specialised in trophy scenes set against the background of a park with some sculpture included (hunting was reserved only for the privileged few, who must by definition be cultured), usually in the evening.

Ironically, after killing birds, hunters enjoyed ambling round their ornamental lake admiring their swans. In this game-piece Jan shows his skill with flowers. This type of picture caught the attention of the Elector Palatine, Johann Wilhelm, who commissioned Jan to paint, between 1702 and 1712, twelve large hunting pictures for his castle near Cologne; according to Goethe, Weenix surpassed nature.

Jan was trained by his father **Jan Baptist Weenix** whose career, cut short by his death at the age of 38, was devoted mostly to Italian landscapes. Like Frans Hals, Jan Baptist painted a portrait of Descartes in 1649 before Rene left for Sweden, but his most striking painting reminds us of *The Goldfinch*.



Jan Baptist Weenix, *Dead Partridge*, c 1650-52

Mirroring Kalf's approach to banquets, **Willem van Aelst** concentrated on the luxurious equipment associated with hunting. Here the magnificent velvet hunting bag with chamois strap and gold embroidery, and a red and tan falconry hood. The latter is a most unusual item in hunting pieces as the sport was heavily restricted to the most exclusive nobles. Despite this glamour, all is not well for hunters: the dead fly on the partridge hints at how quickly the flesh decays. More disturbingly, the marble slab shows Diana bathing – a reminder of the hunter Actaeon's fate.



Willem van Aelst, Hunting Still-life with Velvet Bag on a Marble Ledge, c 1665

Almost all art historians agree that after the 1670s, Dutch art declined; *“the heroic age of Dutch painting was over (Rosenberg)”*. Life and taste changed in the Netherlands. People were more conservative and where once artistic invention appealed, refinement and elegance were preferred. French style began to permeate the Netherlands, strengthened by the arrival of thousands of French protestants fleeing persecution, especially after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, a vile decision by Louis XIV for which he paid in the hatred of much of Europe, who combined under William to end his schemes for conquest. The rich educated their children in France, French scholars taught at Leiden University and French was diplomatic language. French mode in taste spread to the middle classes. After serving as ambassador in The Hague 1668-70, Temple wrote that Dutch gentlemen there *“strive to imitate the French in their mien, clothes, speech, diet, gallantry and debauchery and are to my mind something worse than they would be ... if they refined the customs proper to their own country.”*

Jan Verkolje captured this shift in *The Messenger*, a depiction of well-heeled society with the emphasis on decorum. However, the background painting, showing Adonis being lured away from his love Venus by the hunt, sets an ominous theme for the main scene. The messenger, clearly military, calls the gentleman (with sword) away from the game of backgammon with the lady – perhaps to serve and die with William against the invasion of France.



Jan Verkolje, *The Messenger*, 1674

The Dutch remained one of the richest folk in Europe until at least 1730 and lost none of their appetite for art. There was no lack of talent. The arrival of the French academic style proved an artistic leveller, rather than a catalyst – as Anthony Blunt observed the main result of the Academy was the stifling of genius. That the Dutch opened their own Academy along similar lines and allowed the guilds to wither is not unrelated to the decline in their art.

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