

Johannes Vermeer and Dutch Scenes of Daily Life in the 1600s

Artists now use the term *genre*, a French word meaning “type” or “kind,” to describe scenes showing people at work, play, or rest. The seventeenth-century Dutch, who did more than any other nation to popularize such images, did not see them as a single category but spoke of “merry companies,” “picnics,” “bordello scenes,” and the like. Regardless of the term, the intention of genre painting is not who people are, as with portraiture, but rather what they are doing.

Genre paintings were very popular in the United Netherlands during the 1600s, in part because they allowed the newly founded Dutch republic to celebrate its emerging national identity by depicting many aspects of its society. Quiet, middle-class households were the specialty of Vermeer and De Hooch, while Ter Borch and Metsu focused on wealthy patricians. Rowdy, rustic humor marks the work of Steen, Potter, and the Van Ostade brothers, all of whom depicted peasants.

Whether comical or dignified, Dutch genre pictures often probed social values. Sometimes the activities and objects illustrated folk sayings or served as moral emblems and religious symbols.

Guild Masters and Apprentices

Artists’ guilds normally included painters, sculptors, printers, potters, weavers, and art dealers. Students worked as apprentices in guild artists’ studios until they gained enough experience to submit a “masterpiece” to be judged worthy of becoming masters themselves.

Johannes Vermeer entered Delft’s guild in 1653 and served four terms on its board. No documents prove that Vermeer had any apprentices, but a comparison of two small works in the National Gallery suggests that he may have trained at least one pupil.

Barely seven inches wide each, the panels are remarkably similar in motif but differ slightly in handling. Both show women wearing fanciful hats while seated before tapestries. *The Girl with the Red Hat*, bearing Vermeer’s initials at the top, reveals exquisite color harmonies as light irradiates the hat’s feathers and glistens from the lions’ head carvings on the chair.

Young Girl with a Flute has somewhat flat lighting, and the woman’s right hand and left elbow are cut off, rather awkwardly, at the picture’s edges. If it is not by Vermeer himself, this second painting was created by someone intimately familiar with his work—possibly an apprentice, perhaps even one of his many children.



Johannes Vermeer
The Girl with the Red Hat,
about 1665
Andrew W. Mellon Collection
1937.1.53



Attributed to Johannes Vermeer
Young Girl with a Flute,
about 1665
Widener Collection 1942.9.98



Pieter de Hooch
(pronounce: PEA-tare duh HOKE)
Dutch, 1629–1684

A Dutch Courtyard

about 1660. Oil on canvas, 0.680 x 0.584 m (26¾ x 23 in). Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.56

Working in Delft, Pieter de Hooch specialized in orderly, intimate spaces where housewives or maids go about their chores or pause to rest. Here a woman sips from a “pass-glass,” with rings marking equal portions for passing around to share. The little girl carries a brazier of hot coals for the men to light their long-stemmed, white clay pipes.

To create a stable, sheltering environment for this depiction of domestic tranquility, De Hooch emphasized the geometry of the brick paving, window shutters, and wooden fence. Over the garden wall can be glimpsed the tower of Delft’s New Church.

The Bedroom, another De Hooch in this gallery, depicts a mother changing the linen in a “sleeping cupboard” while her daughter seems to ask to go out in the backyard to play. The tidy parlor, lined in blue-and-white glazed tiles, recalls that Delft was a major ceramic center. It is noteworthy that even this modest household proudly displays three framed paintings and mirrors.



Gabriel Metsu
(pronounce: HOB-bree-ell MET-sue)
Dutch, 1629–1667

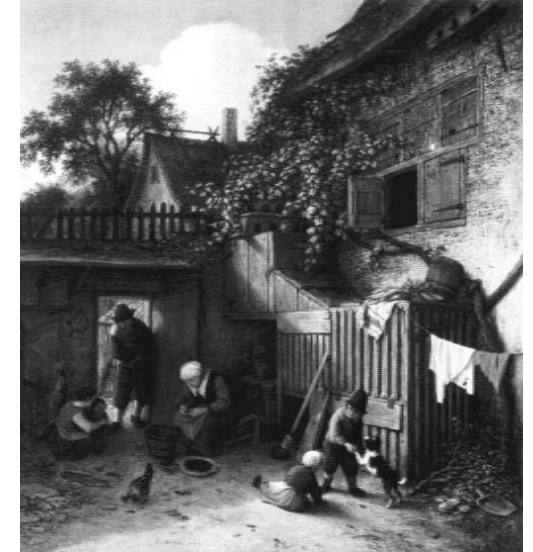
The Intruder

about 1660. Oil on panel, 0.667 x 0.597 m (26¼ x 23½ in). Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.57

The Protestant Dutch had a reputation for strict social conduct. Demonstrations of emotion were encouraged only on rare occasions such as betrothal, when a suitor must prove his passion. This painting chronicles such a prearranged “transgression” among the wealthy classes of Amsterdam. A cavalier bursts into his beloved’s bedroom, much to the amusement of an older woman, perhaps her mother. A housekeeper, identified by keys dangling from her apron, playfully pretends to restrain him.

The sumptuous bedroom contains a number of objects serving as symbols that would be immediately understood in Metsu’s society. The dog is surely an emblem of fidelity, while the unlit candle implies virginity.

To maintain order in this complex pantomime, which is Metsu’s most elaborate composition, the figures are arranged along a diagonal axis. Metsu’s style was influenced by Gerard Ter Borch, whose *Suitor’s Visit* is in this room. Both artists excelled at rendering satins and velvets, laces and furs.



Adriaen van Ostade
(pronounce: AH-dree-ahn van OWE-STAH-duh)
Dutch, 1610–1685

The Cottage Dooryard

dated 1673. Oil on canvas, 0.440 x 0.395 m (17¾ x 15½ in). Widener Collection 1942.9.48

In contrast to the paved, urban gardens portrayed by Pieter de Hooch, this country cottage has only a dirt yard, where the wife cleans mussels for dinner. Laundry dries on a line attached to a shed, which also supports a pigeon coop, and the shelf by the door holds beehives. The clinging vines may allude to family unity.

In addition to such touching and dignified portrayals of peasants, Van Ostade painted bawdy scenes of taverns and barns. He entered the Haarlem guild in 1634, probably after studying under Frans Hals. *Adriaen van Ostade*, a portrait of this artist by Hals, usually hangs in Gallery 46.

Adriaen van Ostade’s students included Jan Steen, represented in this room, and his younger brother Isack van Ostade, whose own scenes of village life hang nearby in the Dutch galleries. Both Van Ostade brothers’ attention to textures is remarkable. Even such common surfaces as thatched roofs, crumbling bricks, and cracked window panes are forcefully described.



Paulus Potter

(pronounce: PAH-loose POT-t'r)
Dutch, 1625–1654

A Farrier's Shop

dated 1648. Oil on panel, 0.483 x 0.457 m (19 x 18 in).
Widener Collection 1942.9.52

Farriers are blacksmiths who shoe horses and serve as veterinarians. This bald, spectacled farrier pulls a bad tooth from a terrified horse restrained in a brake. Potter gained instant fame for his superb depictions of animal anatomy and psychology. For example, the dogs here ignore the horse's dilemma while snarling over a bone, and chickens diligently scratch for food.

Signed and dated on the door lintel above the blacksmith's forge, this painting is an exceptional achievement for an artist only twenty-three years old. In a daring interplay of indoor and outdoor lighting effects, Potter contrasted the sparks flying from the smoking forge, the sunshine that streams through the clouds, and the morning fog still clinging over the cattle pasture.

Trained by his father, Potter was painting by age fifteen. He moved frequently, working in Delft, The Hague, and Amsterdam, where he died at age twenty-eight. Even though his career was cut short, Potter was a tireless worker who left a considerable number of large and small pictures of livestock in farmyards and meadows.



Jan Steen

(pronounce: yan stain)
Dutch, 1626–1679

The Dancing Couple

dated 1663. Oil on canvas, 1.025 x 1.425 m (40³/₈ x 56¹/₈ in). Widener Collection 1942.9.81

This chaotic party, gathered under a grape arbor, is so crammed with potential meaning that modern scholars debate what it signified to contemporary viewers. Many of the paired guests fix their attention on the dancers in the center: a staid, well-dressed girl and a robust country lad. Could this be a wedding feast for a mismatched couple?

Caged birds can stand for virginity, but broken eggshells can refer to its loss. Cut flowers and soap bubbles, fragile and short-lived, suggest fleeting time or love. Another possible interpretation centers on the "Five Senses," including the aroma of tobacco or food, and the sound of a violin or flute.

The rowdy behavior and untidy debris in many of Steen's pictures gave rise to a popular Dutch saying. In Holland today, the humorous phrase "Jan Steen's Household" describes any merry but messy home.

A pupil of Adriaen van Ostade, Steen was among the most versatile and prolific of seventeenth-century Dutch painters. Steen, who also ran a brewery and a tavern, included his self-portrait here. He sits at the banquet table and tickles the chin of an elegantly gowned guest.



Gerard Ter Borch II

(pronounce: HAIR-ard tare BORK)
Dutch, 1617–1681

The Suitor's Visit

about 1658. Oil on canvas, 0.800 x 0.753 m (31¹/₂ x 29⁵/₈ in). Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.58

From a prosperous social class himself, Ter Borch traveled more extensively than any other seventeenth-century Dutch artist, visiting England, Italy, Spain, Flanders, Germany, and probably France. His pictures' calm moods and brilliant renditions of fabrics set a precedent for later painters such as Vermeer and Metsu.

A comparison with Gabriel Metsu's *Intruder* is most instructive about viewers' differing perceptions and expectations. At first glance, the Ter Borch and Metsu seem quite similar. Fashionable rooms hung with tooled, gilt leather are furnished in the most opulent styles. If anything, today's museum-goer would assume that the hilarity in the Metsu was improper. To contemporaries of the artists, though, it was Ter Borch's *Suitor's Visit* that was teasingly ribald.

Ter Borch's "suitor" is a client at a high-class brothel, and the "lady" answering the door is pricing her favors. Among the hidden clues is the other man who, warmed by the fireplace, recalls the heat of love. The seated woman idly strums a stringed instrument as a prelude to passion. Opposing the faithful spaniel in Metsu's work, the dog in Ter Borch's painting may stand for bestiality.



Johannes Vermeer

(pronounce: yo-HAHN-us verr-MERE)
Dutch, 1632–1675

Woman Holding a Balance

about 1664. Oil on canvas, 0.425 x 0.380 m (16³/₄ x 15 in). Widener Collection 1942.9.97

Caught in a moment of reverie, a young woman steadies her scales before weighing her gold and pearls. A framed painting of the Last Judgment silhouettes her serene figure. Just as Christ weighs souls, so the woman tests a balance and is held in balance herself. God's divine light shines through the window directly on her peaceful face, and the mirror on the wall in front of her reflects a search for self-knowledge.

The subtle meaning is reinforced by Vermeer's exquisite refinement of composition and lighting. For example, the hand holding the balance occupies a position directly in front of the picture frame's dark corner. By contrast, the scales are seen clearly against the bare plaster wall—an effect created by manipulating reality. Note that the bottom of the *Last Judgment's* frame is slightly higher to the left of the woman than it is behind her back.

The apparent simplicity of the muted color scheme is deceptive, too. Multiple layers of translucent paint are brushed together softly and, then, touched with tiny points of opaque highlights along the jewels, balance pans, fur robe, and satin scarf.



Johannes Vermeer

A Lady Writing

about 1665. Oil on canvas, 0.450 x 0.399 m (17³/₄ x 15³/₄ in). Gift of Harry Waldron Havemeyer and Horace Havemeyer, Jr. in memory of their father, Horace Havemeyer 1962.10.1

Above all, Vermeer was a painter of light. In his study of optics he undoubtedly used a *camera obscura*, or "darkened chamber," the ancestor of the modern photographic camera. This scientific device employed an adjustable lens and mirrors to capture reflected light and project the scene onto a viewing screen in its lid.

Vermeer analyzed the resulting images carefully because they duplicate the selective focus of the human eye. Only objects at a certain distance from the camera or the eye are in sharp focus. This is exactly the optical effect Vermeer has generated here. Precise white highlights glisten from the writing box, pearl earrings, satin hair ribbons, and the chair's brass tacks—all of which lie equally in the middle distance. The near tablecloth is purposely blurred, and the painting on the far wall is hazy. This is just as they would look to someone concentrating specifically on the woman. Because she directly faces the viewer with an open gaze, the painting may be a portrait.

Most of the thirty-five or so paintings now reasonably thought to have been Vermeer's creations share the same setting, his parents' home, which he inherited.

The works of art discussed here are sometimes temporarily moved to other rooms or removed from display.