SECTION 5

Genre Painting

As the statistics from Haarlem show (see p. 40), no single type of painting gained more in popularity between 1600 and 1650 than scenes of everyday life—their audience more than doubled. Pioneered in Haarlem and Amsterdam, genre, like still life and landscape, had emerged only in the sixteenth century. Today we group diverse subjects under the single rubric "genre," but in the seventeenth century different settings would have been denoted by specific names—merry companies, smoking pictures, carnivals, *kermisses* (harvest festivals), and so on. Some serious, some comic, they depict in great detail the range of life and society in the seventeenth-century Netherlands, from peasants in a tavern brawl to the quiet domestic order of a well-kept home. The pictures impart a broad sense of what living in the seventeenth-century Netherlands looked and felt like, capturing the texture and rhythms of life in a particular place and time.

Genre also provides a window on the way people living in the Dutch Republic understood—and valued—their society, surroundings, and moral responsibilities. Especially in the early part of the century, genre pictures tended to have clear allegorical content. The vanities of worldly pleasures, the dangers of vice, the perils of drink and smoke, the laxness of an old woman who nods off while reading her Bible—all these helped promote a Dutch image of rectitude. Genre painting both reflected and helped define ideals about the family, love, courtship, duty, and other aspects of life.

Genre

"Genre" is French, meaning type or variety. In English it has been adopted to: 1) encompass all the various kinds of painting—landscape, portraiture, and so on are different "genres"; and 2) describe subjects from everyday life—tavern scenes or domestic interiors are "genre pictures."

Many genre paintings drew on familiar sayings and such illustrated books as Jacob Cats' *Houwelick* (On Marriage), which was first published in 1625 and sold, according to contemporary estimates, some 50,000 copies. It gave advice on the proper comportment of women from girlhood to widowhood and death. Emblem books were another popular form of "wisdom literature" that advised on the proper conduct of all aspects of life, from love and child-rearing to economic, social, and religious responsibility. These books encapsulated a concept with an illustration and pithy slogan, amplified by an accompanying poem.

By midcentury, most genre pictures had become less obviously didactic. Spotless home interiors with women busy at their tasks or tending happy, obedient children conveyed in a more general way the well-being of the republic and the quiet virtues of female lives. These domestic pictures, in which few men appear, reflect a civic order that was shaped in part by a new differentiation between the private and public spheres. Women presented in outdoor settings were often of questionable morals and depicted in contexts of sexual innuendo. By contrast, male virtues celebrated in genre painting are usually active and public.

In Focus *Subtleties and Ambiguities*

Many kinds of subtleties are found in this painting—psychological nuances as well as refinements of technique. The setting is an upper-class home, with rich furnishings. A young woman, setting aside her music and viol, has risen from her duet to greet a young man. He receives her approach with a sweeping bow. The elegantly dressed pair is regarded with a somewhat dubious expression by a man standing before the fire. At the table another young woman concentrates placidly on her French lute (also called a *theoboro*, it has a second neck for bass strings). This seems a dignified and decorous tableau, but contemporary viewers would have sensed the sexual subtext right away. The picture is transformed by innuendo. The couple's gaze, hers direct, his clearly expressing interest, only begins to tell the story. Musical instruments, whose sweet vibrations stir the passions, are frequent symbols of love and point to an amorous encounter. Gestures are more explicit: with thumb thrust between two fingers, she makes an invitation that he accepts by circling his own thumb and index finger.

Less clear is the outcome of this flirtation—Ter Borch is famous for ambiguity (which influenced the younger Vermeer, see pp. 36 and 84). Dutch literature delved into both the delights of love and the dangers of inappropriate entanglements. This was a theme addressed by Ter Borch's sister Gesina in an album of drawings and poetry. She equated white with purity and carnation-red with revenge or cruelty. These are precisely the colors worn by the young woman here, who was in fact modeled by Gesina (Ter Borch often posed friends and family members; the model for the suitor was his pupil Caspar Netscher). Viewers might also have recalled the young man's hat-in-hand pose from a popular emblem book in which men are warned that a woman's advances are not always to be trusted. Perhaps this gallant is being lured only to be spurned and turned cruelly away? Ter Borch deployed posture and expression as subtle clues to human psychology. As an art critic in 1721 wrote, "With his brush he knew to imitate the facial characteristics and the whole swagger with great liveliness…." His skill in projecting complex emotion was probably honed by his work as a painter of portraits.

During his lifetime, Ter Borch was celebrated for his remarkable ability to mimic different textures. The same art lover went on to say that he knew "upholstery and precious textiles according to their nature. Above all he did white satin so naturally and thinly that it really seemed to be true…."

The skirt in *The Suitor's Visit* is a technical tour de force. No other artist matched the natural fall and shimmer of his silks or the soft ruffle of lace cuffs. Although Ter Borch's brushstrokes are small, they are also quick and lively, and animate the surface.

To Paint a Satin Skirt

Young portrait painters quickly learned that sitters do not sit still. This was especially problematic when painting clothes; the appearance of folds could barely be sketched in before it changed again. One solution was to hang the clothes on a manikin, where they could remain undisturbed for days or weeks. We know that Ter Borch's father thought a manikin an important enough part of an artist's equipment that he provided one to his son.

Of all fabrics, silk satin is probably the hardest to capture because of its smooth, shiny surface. Light falling on satin is reflected instead of being scattered like light that falls on softer, more textured fabrics. One technique Ter Borch used for silk was to increase the contrast between the brightest highlights and the areas in middling shadow. Compare the pronounced alternation of light and dark in the skirt with the very narrow range of tones in the man's linen collar.

Gerard ter Borch II, Dutch, 1617–1681, *The Suitor's Visit*, c. 1658, oil on canvas, 80 × 75 (31½ × 29⁹⁄₁₆), National Gallery of Art, Washington, Andrew W. Mellon Collection

Nicolaes Maes, Dutch, 1634–1693, *An Old Woman Dozing over a Book*, c. 1655, oil on canvas, 82.2 × 67 (32⅜ × 26⅜), National Gallery of Art, Washington, Andrew W. Mellon Collection

Adriaen Brouwer , Flemish, 1605/1606–1638, *Youth Making a Face*, c. 1632/1635 , oil on panel, 13.7 × 10.5 (5⅜ × 4⅛), National Gallery of Art, Washington, New Century Fund

Nicolaes Maes' old woman has fallen asleep while reading the Bible. The prominently placed keys, which often symbolized responsibility, suggest that she should have maintained greater vigilance. Maes created many images of both virtuous elderly women and ones who neglect their duties. He was a student of Rembrandt in the 1640s, and Rembrandt's influence can be seen in Maes' broad touch, deep colors, and strong contrast of dark and light. Neither Rembrandt nor any of his other pupils, however, had Maes' moralizing bent.

Rude peasants like Adriaen Brouwer's naughty lad were a perfect foil to the ideals of sobriety and civility held by the middle-class burgher who must have bought the painting. It was the Flemish Brouwer who introduced this type of peasant scene to the northern Netherlands. At about age twenty he moved to Haarlem, then working in Amsterdam and elsewhere before returning to Antwerp in 1631. Later biographers said he had studied in Hals' studio (along with Adriaen van Ostade, see below), but no clear record exists. His pictures were admired for their expressive characters and lively technique.

While Brouwer was most interested in the faces and expressions of the peasants he painted, Van Ostade focused on action. In *Peasants Fighting in a Tavern*, his bold pen strokes capture the mayhem that erupts after drinking and gambling. The lighter elements of the background were added by Cornelis Dusart, who was Van Ostade's pupil and inherited his studio. He probably included these details of the tavern setting to make the drawing more salable—tastes had changed since the time of Van Ostade's original drawing, and customers now preferred drawings with a more finished look.

Men, women, and children alike participate in the melée, which the jug being wielded by one of the rabble-rousers identifies as a drunken brawl. Some genre pictures may appear to our eye as rather cruel, relying on stereotypes in which physical coarseness—large features, stumpy limbs, or bad posture—is correlated with coarse behavior and character. The assumption was that peasants were naturally prone to drunkenness, laziness, and other vices. Urban viewers of these images would have considered them comic, but also illustrative of the kind of reprehensible conduct caused by immoderate behavior, which they, naturally, avoided. After midcentury, art patrons began to prefer pictures with a more refined emotional resonance, turning increasingly to

Adriaen van Ostade, Dutch, 1610–1685, *The Cottage Dooryard*, 1673, oil on canvas, 44 × 39.5 (17⅜ × 15⅝), National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection

Adriaen van Ostade and Cornelis Dusart , Dutch, 1610–1685; Dutch, 1660–1704, *Peasants Fighting in a Tavern*, c. 1640, pen and dark brown ink over graphite (by Van Ostade) and pen and light brown ink with gray-brown wash (by Dusart) on laid paper, 14.9 × 26 (5⅞ × $10\frac{3}{16}$), National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Edward William Carter and Hannah Locke Carter, in Honor of the 50th Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art

pictures of their own milieu. Peasant pictures, too, took on a more generous character—the simplicity of country life came to be seen as admirable, characterized by hard work and few of the temptations of city life (see p. 45).

The humble courtyard of Van Ostade's peasant home is an image of domestic virtue. A man enters to find his wife cleaning mussels for the family meal, as an older sister tends her youngest sibling. Washing is hung out to dry. The place is simple but not unkempt. By the time this painting was made, peasant life in the country had come to embody a virtuous way of life. Unlike rich burghers in the city, this simple family is uncompromised by the pursuit of wealth or luxury.

Gabriel Metsu, Dutch, 1629–1667, *The Intruder*, c. 1660, oil on panel, 66.6 × 59.4 (26½ × 23⅜), National Gallery of Art, Washington, Andrew W. Mellon Collection

Pieter de Hooch, Dutch, 1629–1684, *The Bedroom*, 1658/1660, oil on canvas, 51 × 60 (20 × 23½), National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection

In Metsu's *The Intruder* we find just such well-off city dwellers. Its convincing textures—fur, velvet, and satin clothing, the grain of wooden floorboards—pull us into the well-appointed room. We get a vivid sense, too, of a drama unfolding, responding to the postures, gestures, and expressions of the actors. A handsome, well-dressed man has burst through the door, stopped momentarily by the friendly intervention of a maid. Within the chamber a sleepy young woman, with wan expression, reaches for her shoe as she tries to dress quickly after having been lounging abed. Seated at the table, another woman performs her toilet with an ivory comb, a possible signal not only of cleanliness but also of moral purity; with her is a small dog, often a sign of loyalty. Is this contrast between the women—their activities, the colors they wear, even the way they are lit—a reminder of the daily choices between uprightness and sloth? Metsu is a master storyteller, and like Ter Borch, he does not always make his endings clear. Perhaps, though, the artist gives us a clue to this man's choice in that he and the virtuous woman exchange a warm and smiling greeting and are framed by similar arches.

In De Hooch's *The Bedroom*, a woman folds bedclothes in an immaculate house as a young child—because they were dressed alike at this age, it is impossible to say whether it is a boy or a girl—pauses at the door with ball in hand, apparently just returning from play. A pervasive sense of calm and order derives not only from the cleanliness of the room and the woman's industriousness but also from the balanced composition itself. Measured horizontals and verticals make for stability and link foreground and distance. Mood is also created by the clear light that gleams off the marble tiles and makes a soft halo of the child's curls. The light unifies colors and space. De Hooch is known for his virtuoso light reflections and layered shadows, which he must have carefully observed from life. This same interior also forms the backdrop for some of his other scenes—perhaps it is his own home. It has been suggested that the woman is his wife and that the child,

Jan Steen, Dutch, 1625/1626–1679, *Merry Family*, 1668, oil on canvas, 110.5 × 141 (43½ × 55½), Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

who reappears in another painting, is their daughter Anna.

Compare the serenity of De Hooch's interior with Jan Steen's unruly scene. Steen acquired a great reputation for pictures of messy households. Here the adults merrily sing, drink, and smoke, as do the children. The jumble of strong colors and the energy of the diagonals in the composition add to a sense of disorder. The picture is a visual rendition of the popular saying, "Like the adults sing their song, so the young will peep along," which also appears on the sheet tacked to the fireplace above the merrymakers' heads. Quite appropriately, perhaps, for an artist with such a strong interest in proverbs, Steen himself became proverbial. A house where everything is in disarray is called a "household of Jan Steen" in Dutch.

Their quiet mood, serene light, and ambiguous intention make Vermeer's paintings more universal, less telling of a public narrative than many genre pictures. His figures exist in a private space, poised between action and introspection.

Consider this woman writing a letter. To whom is she writing? Her pen still rests on the paper but she has turned from it. Is she looking at us, the viewers? Are we surrogates for another figure in her room, an unseen maid or messenger perhaps? Is she looking instead into her own thoughts? Uncertainty enhances the poetic possibilities of our experience with the painting. Contemporary Dutch viewers would have been able to answer at least one of these questions with confidence. They would have known that this woman is writing to her lover. Letters in Dutch pictures are almost always love letters, and here, the idea is reinforced by the painting on the wall behind her. Dark and difficult to see, it is a still life with bass viola and other musical instruments. Music, like love, transports the soul.

The painting's mood is achieved by many means: the woman's quiet expression; the soft quality of the light that falls from some unexplained source; or the composition itself, in its organization of dark and light and disposition of shapes. Three deeply shaded rectangles frame the woman's leaning form, which is bright and pyramidal. The pale wall in the upper right occupies an opposite but equal space to the dark table on the lower left. The only strong colors in a muted palette are balancing complements—yellow in her rich, ermine-trimmed robe, blue on the tablecloth.

The woman's outward look is unusual for letter writers in Dutch genre pictures, and it is possible that this may also be a portrait, perhaps even of Vermeer's wife. She wears what is very likely the yellow jacket listed in their household inventory.

Johannes Vermeer, Dutch, 1632–1675, *A Lady Writing*, c. 1665, oil on canvas, 45 × 39.9 (17¾ × 15¾), National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Harry Waldron Havemeyer and Horace Havemeyer, Jr., in memory of their father, Horace Havemeyer