

Hegel: “In their paintings we can study and get to know men and human nature”

Seventeenth-century Dutch paintings at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston

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The remarkable exhibition, *Class Distinctions: Dutch Painting in the Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer*, will be on view at the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) in Boston until January 18. Anyone able to should make the effort to see this display of splendid 17th-century art.

The exhibition is not huge, but its 75 paintings from 40 institutions in the US, Canada and Europe, a third of which have not been seen in the US before, were thoughtfully chosen.

The organizers obviously felt the need to include the names of Rembrandt van Rijn and Johannes Vermeer in the title of the exhibition, but this is not one of those cases where a handful of paintings by well-known figures draws the spectator to a show made up of mostly mediocre works.

Whatever preconceptions one might have, Rembrandt, Vermeer and Frans Hals do not dominate the exhibition. There are important canvases here as well by Gerard ter Borch, Pieter de Hooch, Jan Steen, Gerrit Dou, Nicolaes Maes, Adriaen Brouwer, Adriaen van Ostade and Jacob van Ruisdael, and also by, to me, lesser known names such as Jacob Backer, Paulus Potter, Pieter Duyfhuysen, Jan van Bijlert, Jacob Ochtervelt, Job Berckheyde and others.

The title of the show also includes the significant allusion to “Class Distinctions.” The curators have organized the paintings into the following categories: Stadtholders [de facto hereditary heads of state] and the Court, Nobles and Aspiring Nobles, Regents and Wealthy Merchants, Professions and Trades, Women at Work, Labor, The Indigent and Where the Classes Meet.

One of the MFA exhibition’s first wall texts explains, “We invite you to think about class distinctions then and now and to revel in the beauty of the finely crafted paintings that represent a past culture not so very different from our own.”

The text refers to Dutch society in the 17th century as “marked by great disparity in wealth.” The organizers announce their intention to consider the art works “through the lens of social class” and point to the existence of three main classes “much like our own.” The text continues by identifying the nobility, the richest and most powerful element, as the Dutch Republic’s equivalent of America’s top “1%.”

Whether the curators’ sociological comments are apropos is secondary (there are, for example, only two principal classes in modern capitalist society). Such a reference to America as a country sharply divided along class lines would have been inconceivable at a major art exhibition in the US not so terribly long ago. Likewise the identification of the American corporate-financial elite with European aristocracy. These social realities are now widely taken for granted. No one bats an eye.

The Netherlands experienced an enormous artistic development,

especially in painting, in the 1600s. The introduction to the current exhibition’s catalogue notes, “By some recent estimates, over five million works were painted in the Northern Netherlands in the seventeenth century.”

What accounted for this explosion of artistic production and consumption? As the German philosopher Hegel suggested in his *Aesthetics*, “In order to ascertain what engrossed the interest of the Dutch at the time of these paintings, we must ask about Dutch history.”

The Seventeen Provinces, including present-day Netherlands and Belgium, rose in revolt against Spanish Habsburg rule starting in the 1560s. However the uprising by the Dutch may be characterized, it was clearly bound up with the transition from feudalism to capitalism. In a newspaper article written in 1848, Karl Marx noted that the model for the French Revolution of 1789 was only the English Revolution of 1648 and the model “for the revolution of 1648 only the revolt of the Netherlands against Spain.”

The northern Dutch provinces, under the leadership of William the Silent, Prince of Orange, established the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands in 1581. The fierce conflict—known as the Eighty Years’ War—between the Spanish armies and the Dutch independence forces did not officially end until 1648 (as part of the Peace of Westphalia), but the northern cities in the Dutch Republic were not threatened with the restoration of Spanish rule after the 1580s.

Amsterdam, which grew until it was the third largest city in Europe, became a center of global commerce and finance. As the catalogue’s introduction observes, “The Dutch Republic was one of the most densely populated and urbanized regions in the world. Its population of 1.9 million was large by seventeenth-century standards, and in about 1675 more than 40 percent of its inhabitants lived in cities (in the province of Holland, more than 60 percent).” Even the rural districts of certain provinces felt the impact: “The industrialized countryside of Holland bore little resemblance to the traditional rural society known in the rest of Europe.”

Foreigners traveling in the Dutch Republic, according to Henk van Nierop’s essay “The Anatomy of Society” in the MFA catalogue, “were struck by the prevalence of a strong egalitarian ethos characterized by lower classes that accorded little deference to the higher classes.”

In *Capital* Marx referred to the Netherlands as “the model capitalist nation during the seventeenth century,” with all the significance this comment implied. Marx took note of the savagery of Dutch colonial rule in the East Indies and, after citing the comment of an economist that by 1648 the “total capital of the [Dutch] Republic was probably more important than that of all the rest of Europe put together,” pointed out that “by 1648, the people of Holland were more over-worked, poorer and more

brutally oppressed than those of all the rest of Europe put together.”

The break with Spanish rule and the accompanying economic and social processes encouraged the Dutch artists to turn their attentions to everyday life in a manner that was unprecedented in the history of art. The subject matter here is not gods, mythology or the lives of kings and queens. The decision to devote intense artistic effort to depicting bakers, notaries, shipbuilders and prostitutes, the interiors of small shops, the family circumstances of a knife-grinder or the courtyard of a modest home in Delft had something heroic about it. This new middle class culture had a revolutionary aspect.

In *The Social History of Art*, Arnold Hauser discussed the peculiarities of Dutch art in this period: “Representations of real everyday life are the most popular of all: the picture of manners, the portrait, the landscape, the still life, interiors and architectural views. ... Motifs of everyday life, of landscape and still life form not merely the accessories of biblical, historical and mythological compositions, but acquire an autonomous value of their own; the artist no longer needs an excuse to portray them. And the more direct, obvious and commonplace a motif is, the greater is its value for this art. ... What art is most interested in is the possessions of the individual, the family, the community and the nation: rooms and courtyards, the town and its environs, the local landscape and the liberated, regained countryside.”

The fate of art in Holland, Hauser argued, was decided “by a middle class which attains importance more by reason of the great number of its well-to-do members, than by the outstanding wealth of individuals. The private taste of the middle class has never before, not even in the Florence of the early Renaissance, let alone the Athens of the classical period, kept itself so free from all official and public influences, and replaced public by private commissions, so much as here.”

It is generally agreed that a sizeable portion of the Dutch population owned paintings. In one of the catalogue essays, “Ownership of Paintings in the Dutch Golden Age,” Eric van Sluijter writes, “In Delft, around 1646, two-thirds of the population had paintings in their homes, with an average of eleven pictures per household. The poorest, of course did not own such luxuries. Nevertheless, the occasional painting was found even among the few possessions of day laborers, and several small paintings were often listed in the estate inventories of simple artisans, though never very many: it has been estimated that half of all Amsterdam households had no paintings at all or only one or two.”

The Dutch artists in the 1600s were “free” in a double sense. They were liberated from the need to produce images that met the demands of royal or church commissions, but they were also deprived of stable, wealthy patronage. For the first time, notes the MFA catalogue, “Paintings were largely made for the open market.” The economic circumstances of most of the artists were wretched, in part because of intense competition and overproduction. The painters were often obliged to pursue other professions (innkeeper, tulip grower, architectural design maker, paint or dye dealer, etc).

Rembrandt fell out of fashion and was insolvent by 1656; his possessions were sold off two years later. Vermeer’s wife attributed his early death at the age of 43, in 1675, to the stress of financial pressures; he left her with substantial debts. Hals’ property and paintings were seized in 1652 because of an unpaid baker’s bill.

The exhibition catalogue includes short biographies of the various painters, and one frequently comes across this sort of thing: A “experienced near-constant financial difficulties,” B “seems to have been in dire financial straits and in 1633 was arrested and imprisoned, likely for unpaid taxes,” C “experienced financial hardship throughout his life,” D “on account of deteriorating financial circumstances ... moved to Amsterdam,” E “was in debt at the time of his death,” etc.

It is impossible to discuss each of the dozens of paintings at the Boston exhibition that merit a comment.

The catalogue’s introduction remarks, “Few portraits of members of the nobility are of extraordinary quality, which suggests that nobles were more interested in documenting their genealogy than in expressing their wealth or success.” This seems an odd way of putting things. Is it not possible, instead, that the painters were not generally inspired by these individuals?

In any event, one of the first striking pictures is Jan Steen’s *Portrait of Jacoba Maria van Wassenae, known as “The Poultry Yard”* (1660), in which a young noble girl sits feeding a lamb in a crowded courtyard. Steen has placed all sorts of poultry, including a turkey (native to North America), around the girl. She is watched by a dwarf with a chicken under one arm and a servant holding a basket. Various references point to her family history and position, but there is nothing very exalted about any of it. This is a girl from the nobility—it is also a girl surrounded by chickens and ducks, who act toward her as they do toward the other two humans.

In the portion of the exhibition devoted to the regents and wealthy merchants, there are a number of outstanding works, including portraits by Rembrandt and ter Borch, two beautiful pictures by Vermeer (*A Lady Writing*, about 1665, and *The Astronomer*, 1668) and Job Berckheyde’s depiction of *The Old Exchange of Amsterdam* (1670), the center of financial activity.

Jan de Bray’s *Abraham Casteleyn and His Wife, Margarieta van Bancken* (1663) is another remarkable canvas. Casteleyn was a newspaper owner and printer in Haarlem and a Mennonite (a Protestant sect that “espoused humility and an austere lifestyle”). His *Haarlemse Courant*, asserts the catalogue, was “one of the best-informed newspapers in Europe.” But it is the lively, intelligent face of Margarieta, leaning forward, that makes the strongest impression. After her husband’s death, the city council appointed her Haarlem’s official printer.

Two works by Hals are noteworthy in this section. Critic John Berger once commented that “Nobody before Hals painted portraits of greater dignity and greater sympathy, implying greater performance.” Based on the evidence here, there is no reason to argue with this assessment.

In *Regents of the St. Elizabeth Hospital in Haarlem* (1641), Hals paints the group of men in charge of a hospital that served the poor. This was prior to Hals’ own financial difficulties. The painting was meant for the boardroom of the hospital. The men, most of them brewers or from brewing families, are presented in an objective fashion, each with his individual function on the board. The secretary has his minute-book, the treasurer fingers a few coins. Only the chairman offers his full profile. The faces are prosperous, sincere, concerned, perhaps a little smug.

Hals’ portrait of *Issac Abrahamsz. Massa* (1626), a wealthy silk merchant and friend of the painter, is astonishingly informal. The sitter leans over the back of the chair toward the viewer, looking off, a little slyly or knowingly, to his right. John Berger asserted that Massa’s “expression is another one that Hals was the first to record. It is the look of a man who does not believe in the life he witnesses, yet can see no alternative.” The critic may be over-reaching, but there is something of this in the inscrutable gaze.

The section of the exhibition devoted to professions and trades is wonderfully lively. Rembrandt’s *Jan Rijcksen and His Wife, Griet Jans, known as “The Shipbuilder and His Wife”* (1633) is a highlight. The woman rushes into the room to deliver an apparently urgent message to her husband, seated at his desk and working on ship designs.

A notary, a barber-surgeon, a baker (blowing his horn to announce fresh bread), a tailor at work alongside his apprentices—all of them are shown with their instruments, their materials, in their environments. There is enormous respect here for careful, precise, socially valuable labor.

The women at work include a lacemaker (Nicolaes Maes, *The Lacemaker*, 1655), alone, in a halo of warm light. The catalogue suggests that the tonalities “recall Rembrandt’s *Holy Family* composition of the 1640s and imbue the image with an almost spiritual atmosphere.” In

Pieter de Hooch's *Courtyard of a House in Delft* (1658), a young servant and a little girl are coming hand in hand out of the doorway on the right. On the left, through an archway, we see the lady of the house, staring out at the street. The serenity and neatness of the women, the meticulously detailed architecture, the safety and warmth of this courtyard separated from the hectic, cut-throat world of trade ... the picture speaks to how the Dutch middle class saw its private life and perhaps the way that life was in important respects.

One of the more remarkable and startling images is that of a prostitute, with her breasts exposed, holding up a gold coin (Jacob Backer, *Half-Naked Woman with a Coin*, 1636). She half-smiles at the viewer.

Jacob van Ruysdael was famous for landscapes. His painting at the MFA, *View of the Plain of Haarlem with Bleaching Grounds*, about 1660-63, treats an important Dutch activity, the bleaching of linen. The tedious process, which took months, involved repeatedly spreading the treated cloth (with alkaline lye and, later in the process, buttermilk) on the grass to dry. The women who carried out the work were paid "miserable wages," the exhibition wall text informs us.

Ter Borch's *The Knife Grinder's Family* (1653) is another moving, complex work. The painter has placed his knife grinder stretched out on a plank, holding a scythe blade against a turning grindstone, and watched by a customer. But to the right, and truly in the painting's foreground, a woman, presumably the knife grinder's wife, "patiently searches her child's hair for lice," the catalogue notes, "an ordinary and prevalent affliction." She is watched by a cat. The family's circumstances, indicated by the crumbling masonry and beat-up wooden shed, are humble. Why would anyone be ashamed of painting such a picture today?

Adriaen van Ostade and Adriaen Brouwer, both pupils of Frans Hals, were known for painting peasant life, tavern carryings-on, village fairs and such. Ostade and his brother, Isack (also represented at the MFA), had a "working class background," explains the catalogue. Their father was a weaver. Adriaen van Ostade's *The Fishwife* (1672), whose central figure is captured in the act of cleaning a fish, while other transactions go on in the background, reflects first-hand knowledge. Brouwer's *Interior of an Inn*, about 1630, treats the various customers in a noisy tavern: one sleeps and snores, another drinks, a third sings or laughs loudly, a fourth vomits. Brouwer's works were sought after by his fellow artists. Rembrandt and Peter Paul Rubens, two of the greatest figures of the day, for example, collected his paintings.

Paintings of the very poor and destitute were rarely done in the Netherlands in the 17th century. This is hardly surprising. Respectable Dutch citizens no doubt did not care to be reminded of poverty and degradation any more than the affluent petty bourgeois of today. Several works in the exhibition contrast the well-to-do with beggars appealing to them, either because the social differences disturbed the artists or because they wished to moralize at the expense of the indigent, or both.

The 1627 work, *Distribution of Bread in the Almshouse*, by an unknown artist, is an exception. The hungry and poor crowd around looking for food: "mothers and their children, the disabled, the elderly, a boy in a blue cap at center with open mouth," all "clamoring for attention" (catalogue essay). The painting is not the most sophisticated, and even includes an element of caricature, but the worried face of the woman at the extreme right who looks directly at the viewer (one wants to say "the camera") is unforgettable.

Pieter Duyfhuysen's *Seated Boy Eating Porridge* (mid-1650s) is also memorable, even if, as the catalogue asserts, it tends toward the "stereotypical." A "bedraggled [peasant] boy [halfway out of his shirt, one shoe off] sits slightly hunched on a chair with a wicker seat, his legs splayed. He holds a bowl of gruel on his lap and looks directly at the viewer. His rosy lips are in a slight pout and the directness of his expression may be a bit insolent."

The paintings on display at the Museum of Fine Arts are not

photographic reproductions of everyday life. One strongly feels the artists' concerns and viewpoints. The painters regard humanity with varying degrees of sympathy and skepticism. Obviously, the ability of a given artist to translate his pressing ideas into painted images varies according to his skill and depth of knowledge and feeling. What unites the artists here is their commitment to artistic truth in general and to the presentation of concrete, sensuous life in particular. Their efforts mark a qualitative advance in the capacity of art to recreate the world subjectively in line with its objective properties.

The Dutch painters of the 17th century have inspired many critics and thinkers. One of those whose writings were among the most insightful and poetic on this subject was the philosopher Hegel. The Russian Marxist Georgi Plekhanov commented that in his lectures on aesthetics the idealist Hegel "readily descends to 'concrete historical ground', and then his observations on the evolution of art become truly enlightening." Plekhanov specifically referred to "the superb pages he [Hegel] devotes to the history of Dutch painting in the seventeenth century." Perhaps only classical Greek sculpture and Shakespeare lifted Hegel to similar heights of eloquence.

In Dutch art (which he studied in Amsterdam), Hegel saw, above all, "a triumph of art over the transitory, a triumph in which the substantial is as it were cheated of its power over the contingent and the fleeting."

He beautifully evokes the imagery of the Dutch paintings: "Velvet, metallic lustre, light, horses, servants, old women, peasants blowing smoke from cutty pipes, the glitter of wine in a transparent glass, chaps in dirty jackets playing with old cards—these and hundreds of other things are brought before our eyes in these pictures, things that we scarcely bother about in our daily life, for even if we play cards, drink wine, and chat about this and that, we are still engrossed by quite different interests."

Art does not idly or passively set about its work, argues Hegel. It furnishes us with the objects of the world in images after they have passed through consciousness and taken on new meaning. So art "exalts these otherwise worthless objects which, despite their insignificant content, it fixes and makes ends in themselves; it directs our attention to what otherwise we would pass by without any notice. The same result art achieves in respect of time, and here too is ideal. What in nature slips past, art ties down to permanence: a quickly vanishing smile, a sudden roguish expression in the mouth, a glance, a fleeting ray of light, as well as spiritual traits in human life, incidents and events that come and go, are there and are then forgotten—anything and everything art wrests from momentary existence, and in this respect too conquers nature." A brilliant passage!

And finally this: "If we look at the Dutch masters with these eyes, we will no longer suppose that they should have avoided such subjects and portrayed only Greek gods, myths, and fables, or the Madonna, the Crucifixion, martyrs, Popes, saints male or female. What is an ingredient in any work of art is one in painting too: the vision of what man is as man, what the human spirit and character is, what man and *this* man is. The poetical fundamental trait permeating most of the Dutch painters at this period consists of this treatment of man's inner nature and its external and living forms and its modes of appearance, this naïve delight and artistic freedom, this freshness and cheerfulness of imagination, and this assured boldness of execution. In their paintings we can study and get to know men and human nature."

Along these same lines, is there anything that contemporary artists might learn from this exhibition? Yes, a good deal.



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