Gerrit Dou's Niche Pictures: Pictorial Repetition as Marketing Strategy

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Gerrit Dou exemplified the commercially successful genre painter in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic. His small, jewel-like paintings made him one of the most celebrated Dutch artists of his time. From the mid-1640s to the 1670s, Dou repeatedly framed his genre scenes with an illusionistic stone window. In this so-called "niche picture" format, Dou positions one or two principal figures just behind a window in a shallow foreground. These figures, brightly lit by a raking light from the upper left, stand silhouetted against a deep, dark background. The recurrence of this distinctive compositional scheme is the focus of this essay. While nineteenth- and early twentieth-century criticism regarded Dou as a limited, unimaginative artist, most recent studies defend him as someone who succeeded in satisfying the preferences of his contemporaries. This paper acknowledges and extends the latter view by contending that the framing window functioned as a signature feature for the artist. It considers Dou's strategy in relation to contemporary social and cultural practices associated with the ownership of paintings, and argues that his reuse of the window motif was a positive marketing ploy in the top tier of a complex art market.

Gerrit Dou's "Niche Pictures"

Dou was not the only seventeenth-century Dutch painter to construct compositions around a limited range of themes and motifs. Indeed, the prevalence of repetitive imagery has been a topic of interest to historians of economics. In a seminal article from 1987, John Michael Montias investigates the way in which the forces on the open Dutch art market influenced the visual characteristics of the paintings.[1] Following his analysis, it could be argued that repetition of stock motifs reduces the time required to finish a painting, and thus brings the economic benefit of improved productivity.[2] However, it is unlikely that speed of execution was an important consideration for Dou. He was known for a time-consuming manner of painting that involved the rendering of minute details. His paintings were highly valued and, as shall be explained later, he was not under financial pressure to maintain a large output. If we cannot look at Dou's reuse of motifs as an attempt to expedite production, how do we account for this practice? Some recent studies offer a different economic explanation, namely that Dou was responding to his customers' demands. Scholars maintain that early modern viewers had very different conceptions of "originality" and "creativity" from our own. The repetition of motifs and themes would not have struck them as objectionable.[3] While such attempts to situate Dou in the proper historical context enable a fuller understanding of his art, such an argument does not fully acknowledge the complexity of Dou's imagery. This paper suggests that the recurrence of the niche window was seen not only as *acceptable*, but as *desirable* by discerning collectors. Dou's pictorial strategy was intimately linked to the preferences of his buyers. It is therefore important to consider what those preferences entailed, and how repetition of certain devices emphasized his ability to meet or exceed those expectations.

The niche picture format highlights Dou's abilities in creating illusionistic effects. *The Doctor* from 1653 (Figure 1) demonstrates how the painter uses the motif as a vehicle for displaying his skill. The combination of elements indicate that this is a scene of a doctor examining a urine sample brought to him by a maidservant. Dou thematizes the act of careful observation in the figure of the doctor, who holds up the flask

1 John Michael Montias, "Cost and Value in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art," *Art History* 10 (1987): 455-466.

2 Several historians have drawn on Montias's idea of "process innovation" in considering the use of stock motifs. See for example Filip Vermeylen, "The Commercialization of Art: Painting and Sculpture in Sixteenth-Century Antwerp," *Early Netherlandish Painting at the Crossroads: A Critical Look at Current Methodologies*, ed. Maryan Ainsworth (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2002) 46-61; Elmer Kolfin, *The Young Gentry at Play: Northern Netherlandish Scenes of Merry Companies, 1610-1645*, trans. Michael Hoyle (Leiden: Primavera Pers, 2005) chapter 4. It must be pointed out that Montias does not suggest that the painters' practices were determined by economic considerations. Instead, he posits that if an innovation originating from artistic impulse also reduces production costs, the economic benefit remains regardless of the painter's intention. Once that innovation proves successful, competing painters would be compelled to imitate it in order to survive in the market.

3 Eric Jan Sluijter, "On *fijnschilders* and meaning," *Seductress of Sight: Studies in Dutch Art of the Golden Age* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2000) 265-271; Pieter Hecht, *De Hollandse fijnschilders van Gerard Dou tot Adriaen van der Werff* (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 1989) 18-19. Ronni Baer posits that Dou "fortuitously" found pictorial formulae that appealed to buyers, and subsequently adhered to these popular schemes throughout his career. I believe that such an argument leaves unanswered questions about the nature of consumers' expectations, and places the artist in a highly passive role. See Ronni Baer, "The Paintings of Gerrit Dou (1613-1675)," diss., New York U, 1990, 82-83.

and gazes intently at its content.[4] Dou's detailed descriptions of various motifs call for a similarly attentive study by the viewer. He carefully renders the play of light as it passes through the liquid and reflects off the glass container. On the window sill are various objects, all described in minute detail. For example, Dou uses small, parallel brushstrokes to simulate the weave of the carpet, but blends away marks of the brush to suggest the smooth surface of the copper basin. Yet the window does not simply provide a display space for Dou's still life objects. It also allows him to play with the integrity of the picture plane. Because the top and sides of the window and the base of the stone relief closely follow the borders of the panel, a correspondence between the wall surface and the picture plane is implied. The illustrated book on the right protrudes beyond the face of the wall, with a corner almost reaching the right boundary of the painting. The tapestry likewise drapes over the wall, and almost touches the base of the picture. By carefully positioning these objects, Dou creates the illusion that they are physically penetrating through to the viewer's space. The illusion is effective because Dou is able to differentiate the textures of stone, textile, paper and metal by rendering the action of light over these surfaces.

The improbable setting stands in contrast to the verisimilitude of the rendering of individual objects. The arched stone window, so painstakingly described in the paintings, was not a feature found in contemporary domestic architecture. Its presence thus signals the fictitious nature of the depicted scenes, placing it in an order of space different from the viewer's own. The use of such a stage-like setting for different subjects further underscores the artificiality of the paintings.[5] The paradox would prompt knowledgeable viewers to pause and contemplate Dou's skill and wit, as well as the deceptiveness of the art of painting itself.[6] Moreover, the recurring motif encouraged them to recall and compare various paintings by Dou seen over time.

Painting for the Elite: Dou's Audience

Contemporary textual sources indicate that Dou's audience consisted of a small, exclusive circle of wealthy collectors.[7] The agreement between Dou and Pieter Spiering Silvercroon, the ambassador of the Queen of Sweden to The Hague, is often cited as evidence for art-lovers' admiration for the artist. Philips Angel, Dou's colleague in Leiden, recounted that Spiering paid a yearly sum of 500 guilders for the right of first refusal of Dou's works.[8] Furthermore, the prices for individual works by Dou were extraordinarily high. Joachim von Sandrart, a German artist and writer, claimed that the price for one of Dou's palm-sized panels ranged from 600 to 1,000 guilders.[9] To put these figures in perspective, Dou's works were selling at up to 100 times the average market price for a genre painting in the mid-century.[10]

Archival evidence also suggests that Dou's buyers were among the social elite of the Dutch Republic. Apart from Spiering, admirers of Dou in his own lifetime included the

4 Dou's painting depicts a *piskijker* (urinomancer) rather than a *polsvoeler* (a doctor taking a patient's pulse), a character favored by artists such as Jan Steen and Frans van Mieris. Steen and Van Mieris create a satirical tone in representations of a doctor's visit to a female patient, suggesting the amorous nature of the illness. They also accentuate the incompetence of the doctor by presenting him in outmoded dress. In Dou's painting, the costume and accessories—such as the book and the globe—identify the doctor as a man of learning. See Ronni Baer, *Gerrit Dou, 1613-1675: Master Painter in the Age of Rembrandt* (Washington DC: National Gallery of Art, 2000) cat. 26. Dou's emphasis is thus not on the comic overtones associated with the depictions of quack doctors or lovesick women. Instead, his depictions of the *piskijker* (two similar examples are located in Copenhagen and the Hermitage, while the *Dropsical Woman* in the Louvre combines the themes of the doctor's visit and the *piskijker*) all foreground the act of looking.

5 Pictures such as *The Doctor* were described as lifelike by Dou's contemporaries, who praised the artist as "an excellent painter of life in miniature." This has prompted scholars to argue that the contradiction between the lifelikeness of individual objects and the unrealistic scene as a whole was simply accepted by Dou's contemporaries. I suggest, however, that the paradox was recognized, and it formed part of Dou's commentary on the deceptiveness of the art of painting. In his 1901 monograph on Dou, Willem Martin distinguishes between images that were "realistic" and those that were "good as real." He explains that the subject of a painting could be fanciful, but in the seventeenth century "no one cared so long as they were correct, natural and highly finished in drawing and execution." See Willem Martin, *Gerard Dou*, trans. Clara Bell (London: George Bell, 1902) 71. See also Sluijter, "In Praise of Painting," *Seductress of Sight: Studies in Dutch Art of the Golden Age* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2000) 205.

6 This conclusion is similar to Ute Kleinmann's. My approach differs from hers in that I place more emphasis on the commercial motivation for Dou's artistic strategy. See Ute Kleinmann, *Rahmen und Gerahmtes: das Spiel mit Darstellung und Bedeutung* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1996).

7 At the age of 28, Dou was included in the list of illustrious citizens in Jan Orlers's *Description of the City of Leiden* (1641). Orlers stated that Dou was held in great esteem by art-lovers, who paid handsome prices for his paintings. In the same year, Philips Angel praised Dou as an exemplary painter in *Lof der Schilder-konst* (*Praise of Painting*). Angel based his judgment on Dou's skill *and* his commercial success as a painter. See Jan Jansz. Orlers, *Beschrijvinge der Stad Leyden*, reprint of second edition (Leiden/Amsterdam, 1781) 403; Philips Angel, *Lof der Schilder-konst* (1642; facsimile edition, Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam, 1972) 23.

8 Angel 23.

9 A. R. Peltzer ed., *Joachim von Sandrarts Academie der Bau-, Bild- und Mahlerey-Künste von 1675* (Munich: G. Hirth's Verlag, 1925) 196; Eric Jan Sluijter, "Schilders van 'cleyne, subtile ende curieuse dingen.' Leidse 'fijnschilders' in contemporaine bronnen," *Leidse fijnschilders van Gerrit Dou tot Frans van Mieris de Jonge 1630-1760*, ed. Sluijter et al (Zwolle: Waanders, 1988) 51.

10 Montias estimates that the average price for an attributed painting in 1650 was about 9.3 guilders. His calculations are based on price information from a sample of Amsterdam inventories. See John Michael Montias, "Estimates of the number of Dutch master-painters, their earnings and their output in 1650," *Leidschrift* 6 (1990): 68-69. Studies of inventories from other Dutch towns also show that the prices of most paintings were valued at between one and twenty guilders. See John Michael Montias, *Artists and Artisans in Delft: A Socio-Economic Study of the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982) 259-268; Eric Jan Sluijter, "'All striving to adorne their houses with costly peeces': two case studies of paintings in wealthy Interiors," *Art and Home: Dutch Interiors in the Age of*

Leiden residents Franciscus de le Boe Sylvius and Johan de Bye. As an internationally renowned professor of medicine, Sylvius was a prominent member of the city's intellectual community.[11] By the time of his death in 1672, Sylvius has amassed a collection of 172 paintings in his house on the Rapenburg, including eleven by Dou.[12] De Bye, a wealthy merchant, had the most extensive collection of Dou paintings in the 1660s. In 1665, he mounted an exhibition of 27 pieces by the master in the front room of Johannes Hannot's house on Breestraat.[13]

Probate inventories and sale catalogues show that Dou's paintings were also acquired by buyers outside his hometown of Leiden. His works were listed among the assets of Johannes Renialme and Gerrit Uylenburgh, inventoried in 1657 and 1675, respectively.[14] Both were Amsterdam art dealers who specialized in the trading of expensive paintings. The presence of Dou's works in their stocks suggests that he was known to the high-end collectors in the Amsterdam market.[15] Inventories taken in the early eighteenth century regularly featured paintings attributed to Dou. Moreover, several of the owners were from prominent Dutch families.[16]

Dou's clientele was not limited to Dutch towns, however, since foreign collectors also acquired his paintings. Three works by Dou were included in the "Dutch gift" from the States of Holland and Westfriesland to Charles II of England in 1660. Dou reportedly declined a subsequent offer of the position of court painter from the English king.[17] By this time, Leopold Wilhelm of Austria owned at least one of his paintings. Cosimo III de' Medici recorded his visit to Dou's studio during his tour of the region in 1669, on which occasion he possibly bought two works.[18] One year after Dou's death, Cosimo's agent in Amsterdam made "an attempt to move heaven and earth" to acquire a self-portrait by the famous master for the grand duke's gallery.[19]

Since Dou's prices were far above market averages, and his buyers included both the Dutch and foreign elite, he had been regarded as a painter who operated outside the competitive art market.[20] However, separating transactions for paintings into two opposing categories—open market purchases and private commissions—obscures the complexity of the interactions between painters and buyers. Citing Dou's agreement with Pieter Spiering as evidence, historians of art and economics claim that the artist painted for private patrons. However, the annual sum of 500 guilders gave Spiering the first choice of Dou's works, but not the right to specify subject matter, dimensions, or the price of each piece.[21] This arrangement reflects the desire of the buyer to secure a portion of the artist's output, over which he had little direct control. Hence the relationship between Dou and Spiering could not be described as a traditional form of patronage. Yet Dou was clearly not working in the open market, where products by different painters were considered interchangeable. Instead, Dou operated in a market segment where the artist's reputation was a

Rembrandt, ed. Mariët Westermann (Zwolle: Waanders, 2001) 227-228 n. 14; John Loughman, "Een stad en haar kunstconsumptie: openbare en privé-verzamelingen in Dordrecht, 1620-1719," *De zichtbaere werelt: schilderkunst uit de Gouden Eeuw in Hollands oudste stad*, ed. Peter Marijnissen et al. (Zwolle: Waanders, 1991) 51-53; Marion E. W. Goosens, *Schilders en de markt Haarlem 1605-1635* (diss., U Leiden, 2001) 288-294. Goosens puts the average price of a genre painting in the period at 16 to 20 guilders. However, she only takes into account artists with established reputations, such as Jan Miense Molenaer and Adriaen van Ostade. Unattributed paintings would have been much cheaper.

11 E. D. Baumann, *François de le Boe Sylvius* (Leiden: Brill, 1949) 2-20; Sluijter (2001) 106.

12 Sluijter (2001) 107.

13 An advertisement in the *Haarlemische Courant* announced the exhibition, stating that 29 paintings would be on view. However, a list of paintings taken by the notary A. Raven contained only 27. For discussion of the event see Martin 72; Sluijter (1988) 36-37.

14 Johannes Renialme's assets were inventoried after his death in 1657. The paintings were evaluated by Adam Camerarius, a painter, and Marten Kretzer, a "gentleman-dealer." Three works by Dou were recorded in Renialme's possession. Two tronies were listed at 40 and 30 guilders each. A picture of a "kitchenmaid" was valued at 600 guilders. See Abraham Bredius, *Künstler-Inventare* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1915-1922) 230-239. Gerrit Uylenburgh's assets were inventoried after he declared bankruptcy. A picture of St. Francis by Dou was listed. See Bredius 1662-1673.

15 For an analysis of the stocks of both dealers, see John Michael Montias, "Art Dealers in the Seventeeth-Century Netherlands," *Simiolus* 18 (1988): 249-256.

16 For example, Gerard Bicker van Zwieten, a wealthy and titled collector, had five paintings by Dou in his possession, including one at 1,290 guilders. The collection was put on auction in 1731, and the price information is derived from a catalogue of the paintings on sale. See Gerard Hoet, *Catalogus of naalyst van schilderyen, met derzelver pryzen* vol. 2 (The Hague, 1752) 10-30. Anthony Grill, an official of the Wisselbank (Amsterdam Bank of Exchange) and heir to a considerable fortune, owned two paintings by Dou. See Hoet, *Catalogus* vol. 1, 325-330. For information on Anthony Grill see Jaap van der Veen, "Dit klain Vertrek bevat een Weereld vol gewoel: negentig Amsterdammers en hun kabineten," *De wereld binnen handbereik. Nederlandse kunst- en rariteiten-verzamlingen, 1585-1735*, eds. Ellinoor Bervelt and Renée Kistemaker (Zwolle: Waanders, 1992) 320. Also with two Dou paintings in his collection was Isaac Gerards, the owner of the largest collection of paintings in Leiden. The Gerards family was also related by marriage to the prominent Van Buren and Van Bambeeck families in Amsterdam. See Gemeentearchief Amsterdam, Notarial archive 4256 ff. 801-866. See Johan E. Elias, *De vroedschap van Amsterdam 1578-1795* vol. 1 (Amsterdam: Israël, 1963) 729-730.

17 Ronni Baer, "The Life and Art of Gerrit Dou," in *Gerrit Dou 1613-1675: Master Painter in the Age of Rembrandt*, ed. Ronni Baer (Washington DC: National Gallery of Art, 2001) 31-32.

18 G. J. Hoogewerff, *De twee reizen van Cosimo de Medici Prins van Toscane door de Nederlanden (1667-1669). Journalen en Documenten* (Amsterdam: Johannes Müller, 1919) 251.

19 Baer (2001) 31.

20 Montias (1987) 462-463.

21 Sluijter, "In Praise of Painting" 215-217.

crucial factor in determining the value of his/her works, and his success depended on his ability to meet and stimulate his buyers' interest.

Modes of Display

Dou's paintings featured in some of the most important collections in Europe in the second half of the seventeenth century. Such collections shared one characteristic: a large number of paintings, of different subjects and styles, hung in a dense pattern. Even if Dou did not know in which collection a particular picture would be hung, he would have been aware of the conventional modes of display in such spaces.[22] In a princely gallery, or a reception room in a wealthy Dutch residence, there could be as many as sixty paintings vying for the viewer's attention. It stands to reason that a painter needed to distinguish his/her work in some way. Dou's niche pictures not only underscored his virtuosity, but they also addressed their own display environment in a witty manner.

In a private collection, where paintings were not installed as part of an architectural ensemble, the frame was an important device that established each picture as a discrete entity on the wall.[23] In *The Doctor* (Figure 1), the stone window serves as a second frame to the figural scene. Beneath this is another framed image, that of the stone relief. This arrangement is repeated in *The Trumpeter* (Figure 2) from about a decade later. As he did in the earlier paintings, Dou lavishes attention on the figure and the still life objects in the foreground. He uses small, lightly blended strokes to render the trumpeter's face and costume and captures nuances of reflections on the silver ewer and dish with a smooth finish. Dou differentiates the textures of the carpet and the leather curtain by providing stronger highlights and angular folds in the latter. The trumpet, which projects beyond the window, shows Dou's ability to depict foreshortened objects. Once again, the top and sides of the window and the base of the stone relief follow the borders of the picture, hence doubly framing the scene.

Dou's most explicit meditation on the frame is shown in his *Painter with Pipe and Book* (Figure 3). He has included a feigned curtain hanging from a brass rod, which in turn is attached to the top edge of a counterfeit frame. The fiction is that the curtain is drawn to the right to reveal a painting fitted with an ebony frame. In other words, this is a painting of a painting. The curtain refers to the common practice of protecting valuable works in a collection. It also alludes to the contest between legendary Greek painters Zeuxis and Parrhasios.[24] By the seventeenth century, this story had become a *topos* for discussing illusionistic painting in Netherlandish commentary. A knowledgeable collector would have immediately understood *trompe-l'oeil* drapery hanging over an image as a reference to the legend. Hence the combination of the frame and the curtain in this picture addresses its display context and underscores the painter's reputation as a skilled practitioner of illusionistic painting.

Each of the three paintings discussed above shows a principal figure occupying the shallow foreground, with no logical transition between this zone and the background. Although it has been suggested that Dou favored the niche picture format because it eliminated the need to produce a convincing spatial construction,[25] paintings such as *The Young Mother* in the Mauritshuis or *The Dropsical Woman* (Figure 4) in the Louvre show that he was adept at evoking depth by arranging zones of light and shadow. This discussion argues that Dou deliberately produced the spatial disjunctions in his niche pictures to highlight the deceptive nature of pictorial representations.

But why emphasize the painting as an artificial object at all? To address this question one has to consider Dou's strategy in relation to the concept of perfection in painting as it was understood in his milieu. As mentioned above, the ability of the painter to deceive the viewer with lifelike representations was a major theme in seventeenth-century Dutch commentaries.[26] Sluijter has persuasively argued that Dou's paint-

22 Although the Dutch burghers' collections could not compare with their princely counterparts in other parts of Europe, the number of paintings recorded in inventories combined with the smaller dimensions of Dutch houses suggest that paintings were likely hung closely together and possibly in several tiers. Since only the wealthiest collectors could afford the prices, Dou's best works were destined for such an environment.

23 According to Stoichita, a new kind of painting, the "tableau," developed as the private collection replaced the church as the primary exhibition space for art. Many of these paintings became reflexive, that is, they took the redefinition of the identity of painting as their theme. One of the ways in which painters could comment on the new role of painting in a collection was to address the issue of framing. Stoichita argues that seventeenth-century painters experimented with various forms of margins, such as niches, doors, and windows. In doing so, they incorporated the frame within the pictorial field and underscored the status of the picture as a representation. See Victor I. Stoichita, *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight into Early Modern Meta-Painting* (Cambrige: Cambrige UP, 1997), chapter 3. While I draw on Stoichita's insights, I do not treat Dou as a philosopher contemplating the nature of pictorial representation. Instead, I argue in this paper that Dou's use of framing elements has to be considered in relation to contemporary artistic ideals, as well as cultural practices associated with paintings.

24 Pliny the Elder described the event in *Natural History*. Although Zeuxis painted fruit so lifelike that birds tried to peck at the picture, Parrhasios won when he deceived Zeuxis himself with an illusionistic curtain. See Pliny the Elder *Natual History* 35:65.

25 For this opinion, see Martha Hollander, *An Entrance for the Eyes: Space and Meaning in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2002) 64-65. I believe that the compositional device played a much more complex role than simply masking the painter's supposed deficiencies.

26 See Eric Jan Sluijter, "Didactic and Disguised Meanings? Several Seventeenth-Century Texts on Painting and the Iconological Approach to Northern Dutch Painting of this Period," *Art in History, History in Art: Studies in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Culture*, eds. David Freedberg and Jan de Vries (Santa Monica: Getty Center for the History of Art and Humanities, 1991) 175-201.

ings constituted a pictorial counterpart to Philips Angel's *Lof der Schilder-konst* (*Praise of Painting*). Despite, or because of, Angel's lack of theoretical sophistication, his text unwittingly offers insights into a practicing painter's view of his art, as well as the reception of paintings in Leiden, Dou's hometown, in the 1640s.[27] Angel maintained that illusionistic imagery was the key to arousing the art-lover's desire for art.[28] He referred to painting as "semblance without being," for it could simulate all kinds of materials and phenomena on a two-dimensional surface.[29] Samuel van Hoogstraten, writing later in the century, defines painting as "a mirror of Nature that makes things which do not actually exist appear to exist," and deceives the viewer "in a permissible, pleasurable, and praiseworthy manner."[30] The tension between naturalistic appearances and conspicuous artifice in Dou's niche pictures echoes the ideals expressed in the treatises. The format may not carry meaning traceable to a textual source, but when it reappeared in multiple paintings, it could be seen as a sign of the painter's ability to create convincing fictions. Through subtle variations, the painter wove a self-referential pictorial dialogue among his own paintings.

Conversations and Connoisseurship: Social Rituals in the Collection

Collectors could only follow Dou's inter-pictorial dialogue if they saw more than one of these pictures, and there are indications that they were able to do so. First, we know from inventories and visitors' accounts that some of Dou's buyers owned several of his works.[31] Second, it was likely that collectors knew of works in one another's possession. Princely courts in Europe had been entertaining traveling dignitaries with their *Wunder-* and *Kunstkammern* since the sixteenth century. The new genre of the published catalogue, with engraved illustrations, allowed mediated access to a wider audience in the seventeenth century.[32]

In the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, communal viewing of paintings had become a social ritual. Entertaining at home was common, allowing individuals in the same circles to see each other's collections.[33] In addition to viewing art owned by acquaintances, it was possible, provided one had the credentials, to gain access to famous collections. Von Sandrart, for example, viewed paintings in the residences of Spiering and Sylvius.[34] Balthasar de Monconys, the French connoisseur and diplomat, visited Johan de Bye in Leiden, as well as several collections in Rotterdam in 1663.[35] The French engraver and author Abraham Bosse wrote in 1649 that a collection of fine paintings could inspire "satisfying admiration of other true connoisseurs."[36] It would thus appear that paintings played a role in social rituals among prominent citizens.[37]

The ownership of paintings was not the most effective form of conspicuous consumption in the seventeenth century. Paintings were generally less expensive than tapestry, jewelry, or goldsmith work.[38] However, since the sixteenth century, humanist writers and artists had striven to elevate the status of painting among the crafts. The ability to discuss paintings, crafted objects that had an intellectual dimension, became a mark of cultural distinction. Instructional manuals on conducting such conversations first appeared in France in this period. These publications showed aspiring collectors how to distinguish between originals and copies, and provided a vocabulary for discussing the authorship and quality of paintings.[39] Although the Dutch did not produce such books, a variety of sources suggest that connoisseurship became an increasingly important practice in the course of the century. The average size of collections grew, as did the proportion of attributed paintings within them. Treatises on paintings, such as Karel van Mander's *Schilder-boeck* and Angel's *Lof der Schilder-konst*, set out the standards for artistic evaluation. Constantijn Huygens, the secretary to the House of Orange, was an example of a member of the patrician class who had

[27] Sluijter, "In Praise of Painting," 201.

[28] Angel 37-57.

[29] Angel 23-26.

[30] Samuel van Hoogstraten, *Inleyding tot de hooge schoole der Schilderkonst* (Rotterdam, 1678) 24-25. For translation and discussion see Celeste Brusati, *Artifice and Illusion: The Art and Writing of Samuel van Hoogstraten* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1995) 157-159.

[31] I have already mentioned Sylvius and De Bye as important collectors of Dou's paintings. According to Von Sandrart, Pieter Spiering owned several of the painter's works. See Peltzer/Von Sandrart 90; Sluijter (1988) 36.

[32] An example is the *Theatrum Pictorium*, a series of 243 engravings after the Italian paintings in Leopold Wilhelm's collection. David Teniers the Younger, the grand duke's court painter, oversaw the publication in 1660. See Jonathan Brown, *Kings and Connoisseurs: Collecting Art in Seventeenth-Century Europe* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994) 180; Stoichita 109-110.

[33] John Loughman and John Michael Montias, *Public and Private Spaces: Works of Art in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Houses* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2000) 30.

[34] Peltzer/Von Sandrart 195-196.

[35] Balthasar de Monconys, *Journal de voyages* vol. 2 (Lyon: H. Boisset et G. Remeus, 1665-66) 131 ff.

[36] Carol Gibson-Wood, "Studies in the Theory of Connoisseurship from Vasari to Morelli," diss., U of London, 1982, 49.

[37] When Johan de Bye mounted the 1665 exhibition of Dou's paintings, he clearly expected his fellow citizens to be attracted by the opportunity to see 27 works by the renowned painter. The event testified as much to the interest in painting among the affluent as to Dou's celebrity.

[38] Elizabeth Alice Honig, *Painting and the Market in Early Modern Antwerp* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1998) 205-206.

[39] Abraham Bosse's *Sentiments sur la distinction des diverses manières de peintre, dessin et gravure et des originaux d'avec leurs copies* (reprint, Geneva: Minkoff, 1973) is the earliest example in 1649.

considerable knowledge about the pictorial arts. He recounted in his autobiography that his father Christiaan had arranged for him to take lessons in drawing, so that he could talk about art intelligently.[40]

Huygens's comments implied a pressure to perform in the social setting of a collection. This essay has argued that ambitious collectors hoped to attract prominent visitors to their collections. In front of paintings, the social elite were expected to demonstrate their knowledge. The topics of conversation could range from interpretations of imagery to technical aspects of painting.[41] Judging from manuals such as Abraham Bosse's, the primary criterion for judging quality was the verisimilitude of the representation.

Painters, through their interactions with collectors and dealers, were aware of these social rituals and expectations. To thrive in these circumstances, painters had to produce works that addressed contemporary standards of artistic excellence, stood out in an assembly of objects, and offered connoisseurs something to talk about. This was the kind of environment in which Dou worked. The niche picture format, far from an arbitrarily chosen formula, was an innovation that underscored Dou's expertise. It became a trademark for the painter through its recurrence in works from around 1650 to the 1670s, and it came to embody his unique combination of virtuosity and industry. Enriched with subtle variations, the repetition of the framing window invited viewers to recall and compare paintings seen in different locations. The art-lover marveled at Dou's descriptive powers, but was never permitted to forget that the paintings were but deceptions. Dou thus exploited the social and cultural practices of his time and presented himself as the exemplary purveyor of pictorial illusions.

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40 Constantijn Huygens, *Mijn jeugd*, ed. C. L. Heesakkers (Amsterdam: Querido, 1987) 70-71.

41 Jochen Becker, "Plaatjes en praatjes. Emblemata, gespreksspelen, conversatie en kunstgeklets," *Zeventiende eeuw* 15 (1999): 118-119.

Figure 1. Gerrit Dou, *The Doctor*, 1653, oil on panel, 49.3 x 36.6 cm, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum. Photo credit: Erich Lessing, Art Resource, NY.

Figure 2. Gerrit Dou, *The Trumpeter*, *c*. 1660-65, oil on panel, 38 x 29 cm, Paris, Musée du Louvre. Photo credit: Erich Lessing, Art Resource, NY.

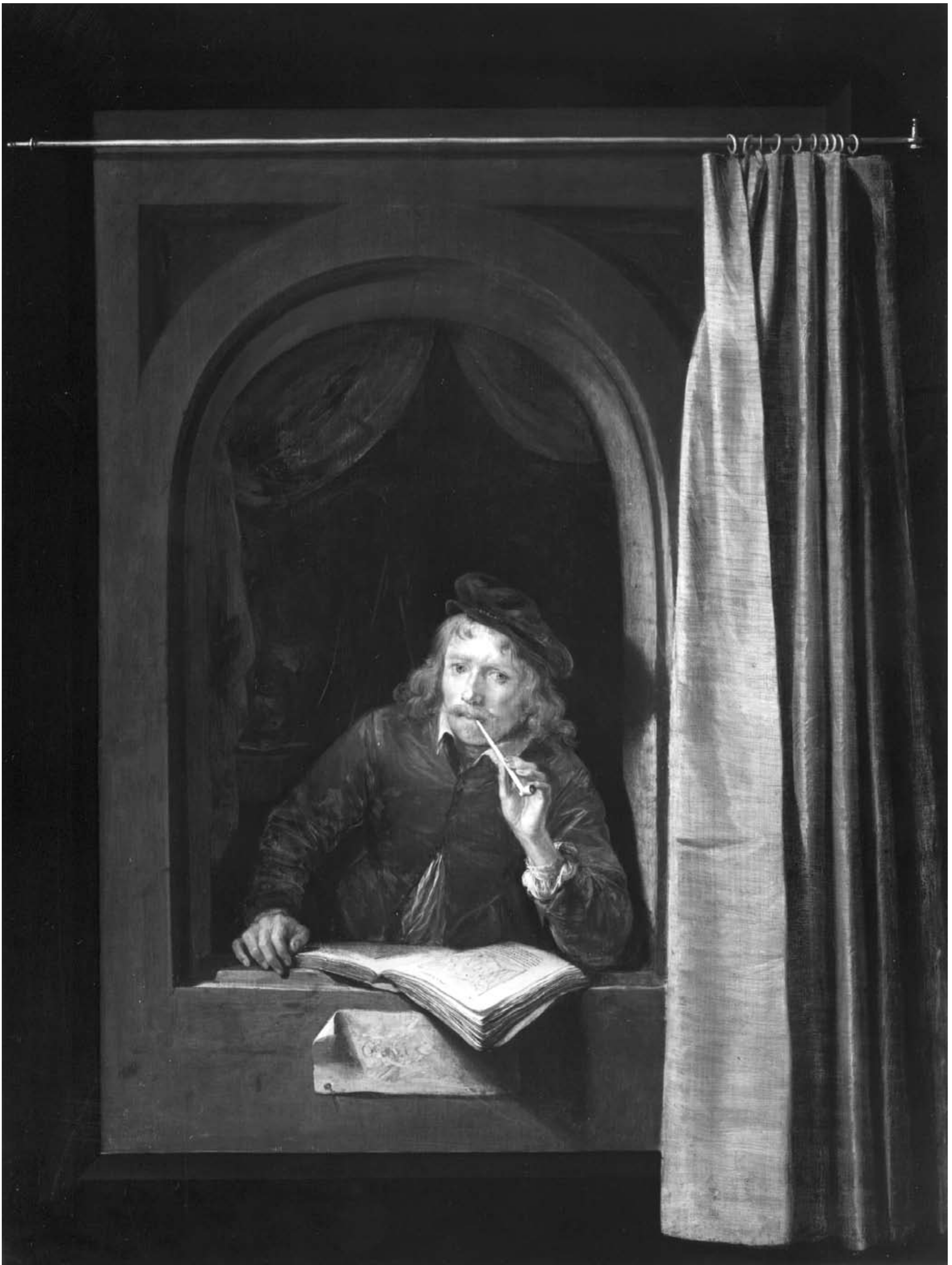

Figure 3. Gerrit Dou, *Painter with Pipe and Book*, *c*. 1645-50, oil on panel, 48 x 37 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum. © Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.

Figure 4. Gerrit Dou, *The Dropsical Woman*, 1663, oil on panel, 86 x 67.8 cm, Paris, Musée du Louvre. Photo credit: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY.