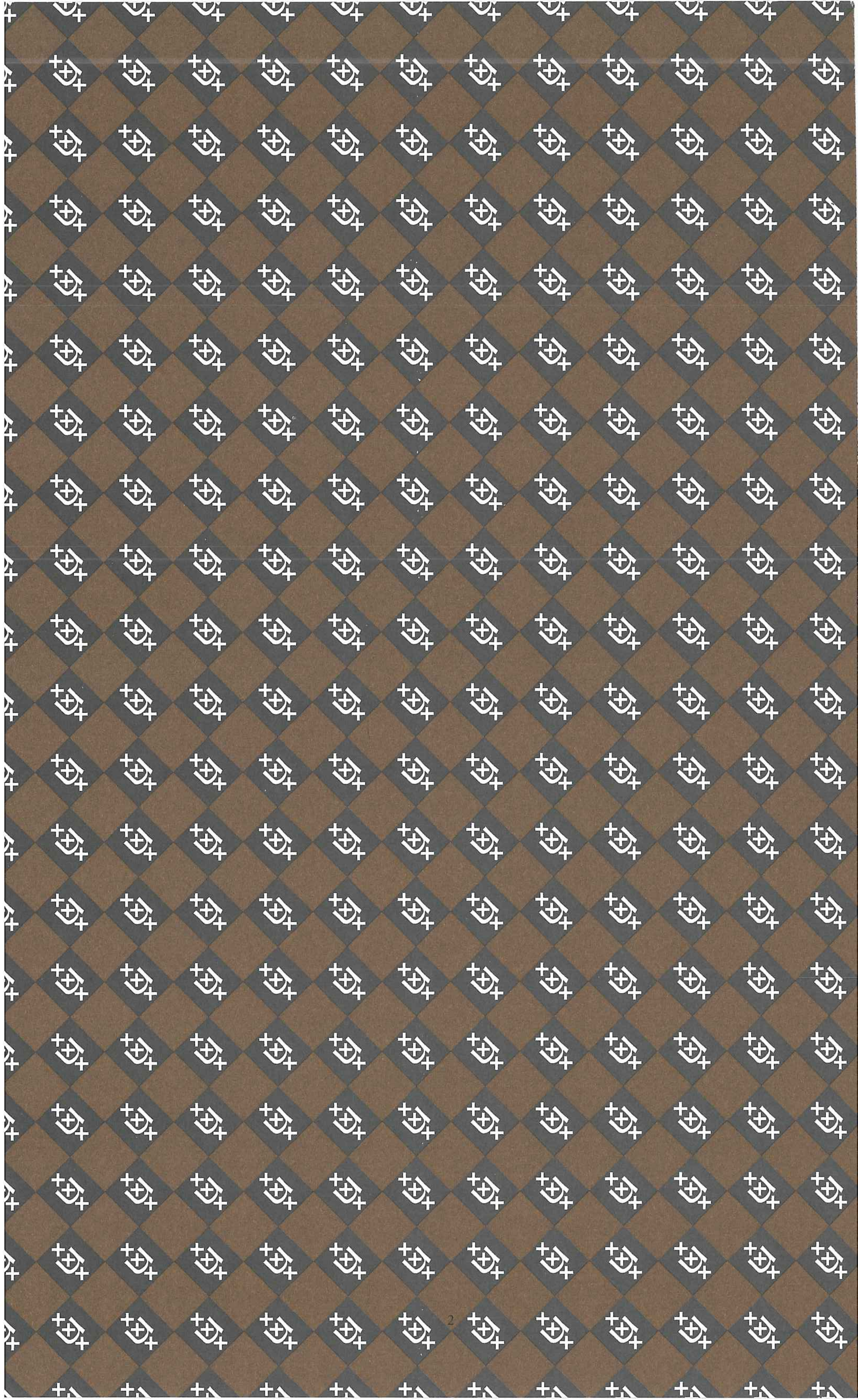
The Dutchness of Dutch Art

CHRISTOPHER BROWN



The Dutchness of Dutch Art

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by Christopher Brown

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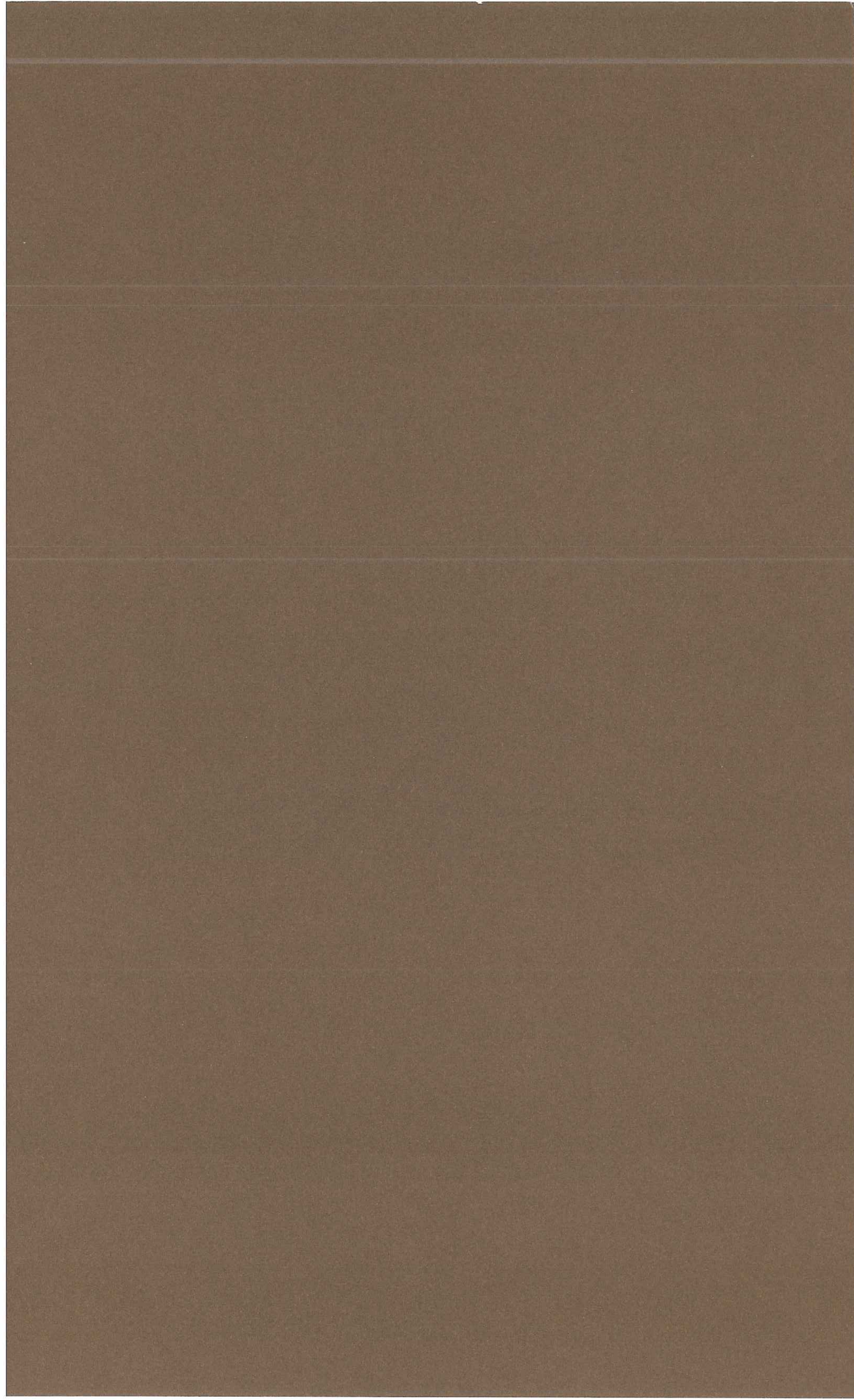


I am very pleased and honoured to have been invited to be the first Visiting Professor in the Centre for the Study of the Golden Age at the University of Amsterdam. The Centre is a hugely important interdisciplinary initiative which brings together historians, literary historians and art historians to share their understanding of this key period. As a historian-turned-art-historian who has long collaborated with historians and literary historians, I feel very much at home. In this inaugural lecture I have been asked to address a general topic which will be of relevance to the study of Dutch art, literature, history and society and this I am very pleased to do.

My subject is one that has long been discussed. To what degree does Dutch art of the Golden Age differ both in style and subject-matter from that produced elsewhere in Western Europe at the same time? And if it does differ, why does it differ? In my choice of title, *The Dutchness of Dutch Art*, I have to some extent prejudged the argument and answered the first question, but I could not resist it. It echoes, of course, the title of a famous book, based on a series of lectures, by Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Englishness of English Art.*[1] Pevsner argued that the historical circumstances, economic, religious and social, of English society in the eighteenth century produced a distinctive kind of art, which was significantly different from the art produced by contemporaries elsewhere in Europe. This, applied to the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century, is essentially my argument today.

This lecture is in one sense an apologia for something I wrote long ago, an *Apologia pro sua juvenilia.* Many years ago, not long after having been appointed Assistant Keeper (or Curator) of Dutch and Flemish seventeenth-century Painting at the National Gallery in London, I was invited by the Phaidon Press to write a picturebook on Dutch painting. It was to be part of a series, having fifty colour plates, facing text of each of the illustrations and a short introductory essay. As a junior and underpaid curator, I jumped at the opportunity, made my selection, dashed off my few thousand words and gratefully banked my cheque. Since then I have written a shelf full of books and exhibition catalogues which have been published, reviewed, some translated, some bought, some remaindered, almost all now out of print. Only one volume has proved a sufficiently steady seller to remain in print since 1976, the first, *Dutch Painting.*

The introductory essay of *Dutch Painting* concludes with a rhetorical flourish: 'Yet, despite the special features of the Dutch art market for pictures and the low social status of the painter in Dutch society, we must not imagine that Dutch painting was entirely cut off from developments in the rest of Europe. This is a misconception that even the great Dutch historian, Johan Huizinga, expressed in his essay on Dutch seventeenth-century civilisation, written in the patriotic days of the German occupation. Art has its own self-perpetuating history, regardless of the demands of patronage. Ruisdael's lowering skies and Vermeer's billowing curtains are as much a part of the European movement we call the Baroque as Rubens's altarpieces or Lanfranco's frescoes. The scale is different, but the 'domestic Baroque' of the Dutch painters reveals a similar delight in dynamic, swirling compositions and rich colour, and possesses an equal emotional intensity.'[2]

I now believe that this is profoundly misleading and no longer consider that there is a phenomenon known as the 'domestic Baroque' or, at least, not in the Dutch Republic. The implied similarities between Jacob van Ruisdael and Rubens, and between Vermeer and Lanfranco, simply mystify me. It now seems to me that what really happened in the Dutch Republic - and I am thinking of the great majority of paintings made between about 1620 and 1670 - had very little to do with what was happening elsewhere and that the very special circumstances of the north Netherlands led to the creation of an art which is strikingly different from the art of elsewhere in Western Europe.

This belief represents a return to a traditional, even nineteenth-century, view and runs contrary to a recent tendency in the study of Dutch art which chooses to emphasize the continuity of medieval traditions into the seventeenth century and the links of Dutch art of the Golden Age with non-Dutch, and especially Flemish and Italian, art. However, rather than any sense of continuity, I am constantly struck by the novelty of the art of the Dutch Golden Age and by the fact that it is so often very difficult to trace the origins of particular developments in, and indeed entire genres of, Dutch art. And, rather than links with elsewhere, I am increasingly struck by its isolation and, indeed, its self-confident independence. A new society, a society created by war, mass immigration and rapid economic development, gave rise to a new art, an art which represents a quite decisive break with the past. It was a society in which art often played a new role, a secular role, a celebratory

role, a decorative role. That is my argument today. It is an argument, however, which calls for a series of lectures rather than one because it requires a survey of the art of the Golden Age, a consideration of the role of patronage and the art market, patterns of collecting, the social position of the artist, contacts with painting in other European countries, and much more.

Today I want to look briefly at just three particular aspects of this question. I will survey the origins of Dutch landscape painting in Haarlem in the 1620s; look at the recent debate about meaning in Dutch painting, particularly genre and landscape painting; and investigate the concept of modernity in discussions of painting in the Dutch Republic. Even this is probably over-ambitious.

My general argument is closely related to that in the magisterial account of the Dutch economy recently published by Jan de Vries and Ad van der Woude.[3] They argue that the north Netherlands in the seventeenth century witnessed the emergence of the first modern economy. There were, of course, many non-modern elements but in that this was the first economy based on urban trade, industry and technology rather than agriculture and in which most workers were wage-labourers who could move relatively easily from one place, and one type of work, to another, it was a modern economy. This is to say that the modern capitalist economy traditionally thought to have developed in Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was in essence up and running in Holland in the seventeenth century. The argument continues that the Republic can be viewed as the first modern western society not only because of its economy but also because of its stability on the basis of toleration and religious plurality, and its republican, decentralized political structures. My argument naturally continues that this modern society characterized by economic, social and political structures which were unlike those elsewhere in Europe also produced a new art, an art which in its subject-matter and its style - or rather styles - was significantly different from that elsewhere in Europe.

This line of argument raises, of course, questions about the responsiveness of artistic developments to economic, social and political change. This is complex but what I think can be said is that in a society in which the demand for art was to a significant extent controlled by a commercial art market which for the first time had all the by now familiar apparatus of dealers, commercial galleries, auctions and even

1. Jan van Goyen, A Windmill by a river, 1642, oil on panel, 29,4 x 26,3 cm, London The National Gallery, inv. 2578.

lotteries stylistic change and changes in subject-matter were inevitably more responsive to economic, social and political change than in a society in which, as for example in Italy or indeed nearby in Flanders, the demand for art was dominated by the patronage of the church, the prince and the aristocracy. However, any consideration of this issue requires great care and a recent exchange throws an interesting light on it. There is a style of landscape painting adopted by a number of artists in the late 1620s, the 1630s and early 1640s which is known to art historians - no doubt the artists would have been horrified for their work to be categorized in this way - as the monochromatic or tonal style.
The landscapes are drained of colour and represented in shades of grey and brown. Esaias van de Velde, Jan van Goyen (ill. 1), Pieter Molijn and the young Aelbert Cuyp all paint for a while in this monochromatic manner, and it was a style also adopted by still-life painters. In 1987 Michael Montias, whose contributions to the study of Dutch collecting and the art market have redefined the subject, argued that this style of

painting was a 'market innovation', a term he borrowed from the history of technology, enabling artists to paint quickly and cheaply and so sell more paintings to the new mass market.[4] In an article written ten years later, Jonathan Israel argued that this stylistic change was a consequence of the non-availability or high price of certain colourful pigments, among them ultramarine and cochineal lakes, because of the economic downturn of the 1620s and the relatively slow recovery in the late 1630s and early 1640s.[5] His argument was that a stylistic change was a direct response to very particular economic circumstances. As well as wanting to raise questions about the extent of the economic downturn and the availability and price of pigments, this seems to me far too mechanistic. I would argue that this was in fact essentially an artistic change, that is to say, one artist rendered the landscape in this deliberately simplified way, others admired it and took it up, it pleased collectors, was sought after for a while and then gradually fell from favour. That the paintings could be made quickly and cheaply was no doubt a significant factor but both explanations take insufficient account of internal stylistic change and the role of fashion, both major considerations to be kept in mind when considering the responsiveness of art to economic, political and social change.

Let us look now at landscape painting in Haarlem in the 1620s. I want to stress that in order to make my argument in full I would, of course, have to look at all the other types of painting that make the Golden Age so distinctive - genre painting, portraiture, marine painting, architectural painting, animal painting, still life - and I believe that in each of those cases a similar pattern could be discerned. However, my time is limited and I consider that in many respects landscape is the best example.

Two years ago at the Royal Academy in London we celebrated in the exhibition '*The Genius of Rome*' the remarkable revolution that took place in that city in the early seventeenth century, the naturalistic revolution which was begun by that perennially fascinating figure, Caravaggio. I believe that it is arguable that a far more important revolution, a revolution which had an even greater impact on the course of Western European painting over the following three centuries took place in the north Netherlands, and, more particularly, in Haarlem, just a few years later.

The nature of this apparently modest and yet immensely significant revolution can best be seen by looking at this *Winter Landscape* painted by Esaias van de Velde (ill. 2). It is a picture of extreme simplicity, of unmediated naturalism and yet represents a radically new way of looking at and describing the natural world. You may well say that I am exaggerating: surely Van de Velde simply looked about him and transcribed what he saw. This is not, however, how artists work - or at least not how they worked in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They were trained in traditional ways of looking at and representing the world, and only exceptional artists - or groups of artists - were able to break the mould.

In order to explain how Esaias van de Velde and his Haarlem contemporaries broke the mould and how the special circumstances of the practice of art in the Dutch Republic encouraged them to do so, it is necessary to begin in Antwerp in the previous century.

The separation of religious and secular art had taken place in the North in Antwerp in the mid-sixteenth century, a development which is particularly associated with the studio of Pieter Bruegel the Elder. In the series of paintings of the *Months* made in the 1560s for the house of Nicholas Jonghelinck in Antwerp, Bruegel placed the activities of the months within landscape settings (ill. 3). However, although they are so celebrated, the *Months* are in many respects a culmination of the Flemish tradition of the world landscapes of Joachim Patinir and Herri met de Bles rather than a precursor of naturalistic Dutch landscape. Far more important for the circulation of Bruegel's ideas were the prints made to his design, and for the development of landscape especially important is *Pagus Nemorosus* in which Bruegel shows a wagon crossing a country ford (ill. 4). He has lowered the viewpoint of the spectator from the bird's-eye view of the *Months* and represents the

2. Esaias van de Velde, *Winter Landscape*, 1623, oil on oak panel, 26 x 30,5 cm, London, The National Gallery, inv. 6269.

scene with quite remarkable descriptive naturalism. In his paintings Bruegel had been unable to entirely abandon the conventions and mannerisms of sixteenth-century Flemish landscape - and this observation introduces a key element into the development which I am tracing. Painting was a long-established medium in the north which had its own self-referential history and well-established conventions which were passed from master to pupil. Printmaking, by contrast - and by printmaking I mean engraving and then, increasingly, early in the seventeenth century, etching - was far more experimental. Bruegel is characteristic of many artists - Rembrandt is another - who were experimental in their prints and conservative in their paintings, unable or unwilling to transfer the new developments in landscape naturalism from the medium of printmaking to that of painting. Two series of prints by the as yet not satisfactorily identified Master of the Small Landscapes were published by Bruegel's principal publisher Hieronymous Cock in 1559 and 1561 (ill. 5). Here the typical Flemish bird's-eye view is abandoned in favour of a human eye level but even more significant is the choice of subject-matter. The prints show scenes of everyday rural life - villages and hamlets, small groups of thatched cottages and barns, a manor house with cattle grazing in a field in the foreground, a village street with a herd of cattle being driven along it while a woman walks past with a pail of milk on her head.

3. Pieter Brueghel the Elder, *Hunters in the Snow*, 1565, oil on panel, 117 x 162 cm, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv. 1817.

The subjects are self-consciously picturesque, carefully selected and rearranged to delight the eye, the urban eye, but they nevertheless possess an authentic air of nature closely observed and reaistically described. When they were first published these landscapes had little impact on contemporary Flemish artists but they were re-edited and republished in Antwerp in 1601 and then, crucially, by Claes Jan Visscher in Amsterdam in 1612. At that time they were attributed to Pieter Bruegel and play their part in the so-called Bruegel Renaissance of the

4. Johannes and Lucas van Doetecum after Pieter Brueghel the Elder, *Pagus Nemorosus*, s.d., etching and engraving, published by Hieronymus Cock, 321 x 425 mm, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts. Helen and Alice Coburn Fund 1934, inv. 34.13.

early seventeenth century. Visscher himself and Cornelis van Wieringen then applied the descriptive manner of the Master of the Small Landscapes to a greater variety of subject-matter in their own print series. As well as villages and farms, there are harbours, iced-up estuaries, windmills, rivers with fishermen at work, and so on. The three series published by Visscher in 1611, 1612 and 1613 treat almost all the subjects depicted in Dutch landscape painting until about 1640. They almost constitute pattern books for landscape painting in Haarlem.

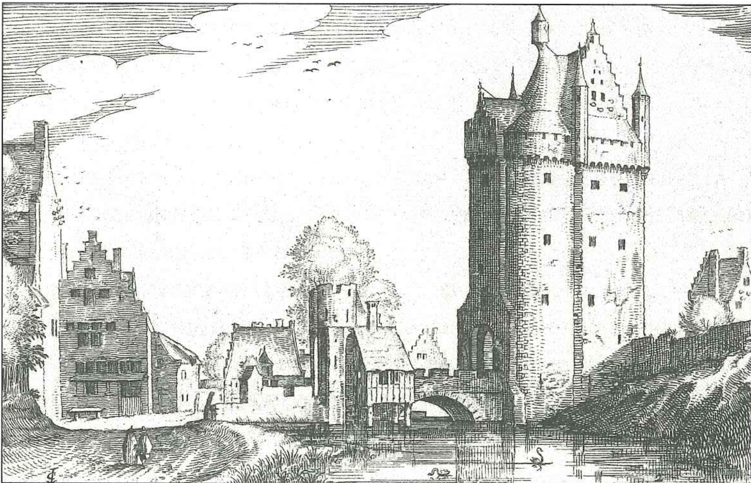
The half-century between the first publication of the Master's work in Antwerp and their republication in Amsterdam were years of war with Spain, the reestablishment of Catholicism in Flanders, the large-scale movement of population from the southern to the northern Netherlands and what De Vries and Van der Woude call the 'explosive urbanization' of the North Netherlands. The publishing history of these modest prints is symptomatic of the shift in economic power from south to north, as these years saw the continuing decline of Antwerp and the dramatic rise of Amsterdam. A new society was being formed: it was prosperous, urban and tolerant and called into being new forms of art.

Among the many emigrants from the south were a number of artists. They left the south either for religious reasons - as, for example,

did the so-called Frankenthal artists including the influential Gillis van Coninxloo (ill. 6) who settled in Protestant Frankenthal before moving on to Amsterdam, or for economic reasons, as Carel van Mander from Kortrijk did, settling in Haarlem. David Vinckboons, among whose pupils were Gillis d'Hondecoeter and Esaias van de Velde, both key figures in the early years of naturalistic Dutch landscape, had moved to Amsterdam as the child of Protestant parents by 1586.

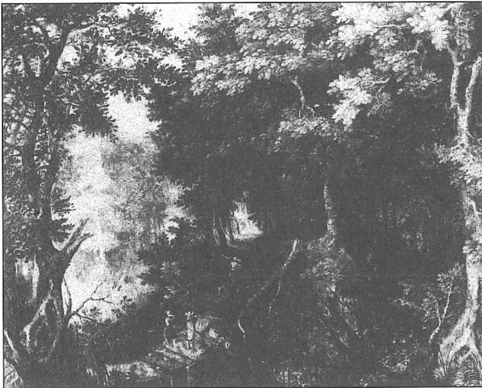
The city of Haarlem, thirty kilometres west of Amsterdam, plays the central role in this story. It was there that Hendrick Goltzius had drawn a small number of remarkably naturalistic landscape panoramas (ill. 7) as early as 1603, drawings which, however, had had no impact whatever on the development of his painting style. It was in Haarlem in 1612 that Willem Buytewech from Rotterdam, Esaias van de Velde from Amsterdam and Hercules Segers, who had been born in Haarlem but trained in Amsterdam with Gillis van Coninxloo, all joined the Guild of St Luke. Jan van de Velde, Esaias's cousin, a printmaker, joined two years later; Pieter Molijn, born in London of Dutch parents, joined in 1616; Cornelis Vroom's date of admission into the guild is unknown but his first dated landscape is from 1622; Salomon van Ruysdael, like Vroom a native of Haarlem, was admitted in 1623. It is an extraordinary concentration of talent, not unlike Rome in 1600. They are all, of course,

5. Claes Jansz. Visscher after the Master of the Small Landscapes, *A Castle*, 1612, etching and engraving, 103 x 158 mm, Amsterdam, Rijksprentenkabinet. (Reprint after Hieronymus Cock: *Praediorum villarum et rusticarum casularum icones*, 1561)



remarkable individual talents and their work is easy to distinguish but they do share a common aim: the convincing representation of the familiar landscape, not an attempt at strict topographical accuracy, but the representation of a generic type of landscape with which the citizens of Haarlem would be well acquainted through their experience of walking in the nearby countryside or viewing it from the city's ancient ramparts.

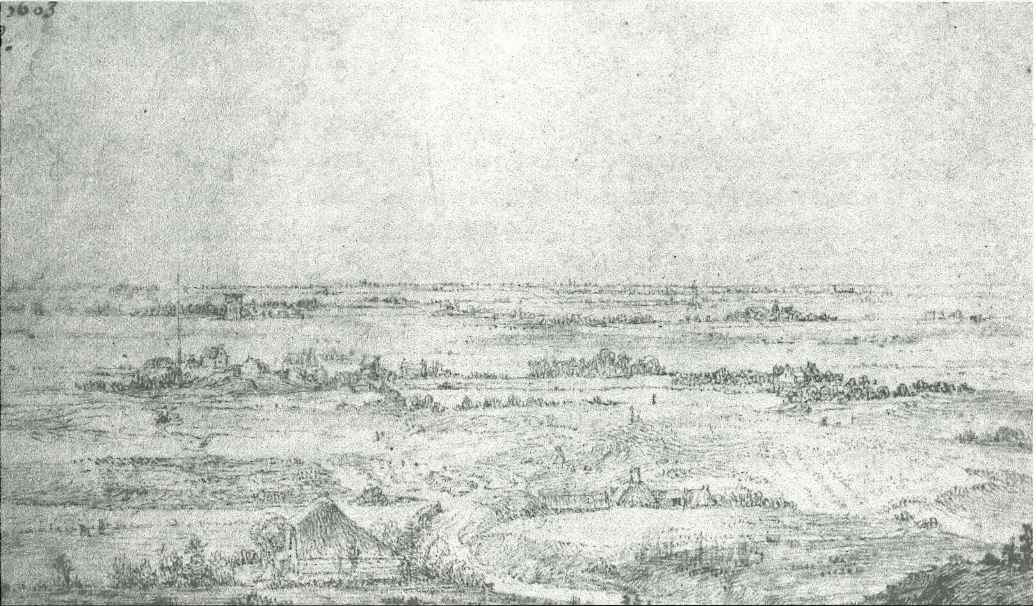
The earliest years of Haarlem landscape are characterized by the colourful, animated panels of Esaias van de Velde; the delicate, lyrical prints of Jan van de Velde (ill. 8); the complex rock formations and extensive panoramas of Hercules Segers; the elegant, frond-like trees of Willem Buytewech (ill. 9); and the powerfully atmospheric forests and river valleys of Cornelis Vroom This was the first generation, the generation which simply created a new way of seeing and representing landscape. They did this by studying the prints of Visscher, looking again at the natural world around them and applying naturalistic principles to painting. The truly radical step was to apply the principles of Visscher's naturalism to painting and the radicalism of this generation can be appreciated when their work is compared with that of their teachers, many of whom had come from Antwerp where they were familiar with the landscape style of the Bruegel circle. Although, as we know from the writings of Carel van Mander, Coninxloo and Vinckboons were much admired in the north for their new style, they were in fact never able to truly abandon the formulae of Antwerp landscape painting.



6. Gillis van Conixloo III, Landscape with Hunters, 1658, oil on panel, 58,5 x 83,5 cm, Speyer, Historisches Museum der Pfalz, inv. H.M. 1957/122.

The breakthrough, the real revolution, came with Esaias van de Velde and his Haarlem contemporaries.

The second generation, who built on the achievements of the first, were the artists of the 1620s and 1630s, the monochromatic landscape painters, Pieter Molijn, Salomon van Ruysdael (ill. 10) and Jan van Goyen. These artists drained their landscapes of colour: sea, sky, woods

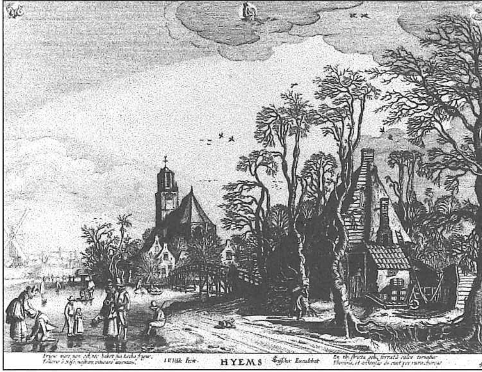


7. Hendrik Goltzius, Landscape with Dunes near Haarlem, 1603, drawing, 87 x 153 mm, Rotterdam, Museum Boymans - van Beuningen, inv. H253.

and fields were all represented in striations of greys, greens, yellows and browns which give an impression of a unified, drab tonality, an intriguing and extremely effective exercise in a deliberate, self-imposed restriction of means.

In the work of the third generation - or, more accurately, in the third phase, as the same artists are involved - in the late 1630s and 1640s colour reappears - brighter blues, deeper greens, pure whites and arresting touches of red, yellow and black. Haarlem in the 1640s saw the emergence of a new generation of landscape painters which, once again, built on the achievements of its predecessors. The vocabulary of naturalistic landscape had now been mastered and in the works of the new generation - and of Jacob van Ruisdael, the greatest of all Dutch landscape painters above all - it was used to more ambitious effect (ill. 11). Jacob van Ruisdael joined the Haarlem guild at the age of twenty in 1648, a date which conveniently marks an end to the remarkable revolution which I have briefly traced. There is nothing in contemporary European art remotely like the landscapes of the Haarlem painters Esaias van de Velde, Cornelis Vroom, Pieter Molijn and Salomon van Ruysdael. The idyllic landscapes of Claude, the dramatic landscapes of Salvator Rosa, the classical landscapes of Annibale Carracci, the peasant landscapes of the le Nain brothers, the visionary landscapes of Collantes, even the lyrical landscapes of Rubens - all are quite different from Haarlem landscape in technique, subject-matter and, most importantly,

in the attitude towards natural appearances which they reveal. All are, to a greater or lesser extent, ideal landscapes; all these artists subscribed to the conventional Renaissance view that natural appearances should be improved upon and that the best painting of a landscape, like the best painting of a naked goddess, was one which took different elements from a large number of examples, whether landscapes or women, and combined them artfully to the greatest effect. The Haarlem landscapists did not subscribe to this view.



8. Jan van de Velde the Younger, *Hyems (Winter)*, s.d., etching and engraving, 253 x 353 mm.

Why did this revolution take place in Haarlem at this time? The desire to innovate was driven by the market and the market had special demands. There are a number of familiar reasons for the emergence of a market which encouraged the development of naturalistic landscape. Protestantism is one. Calvin urged the painter to 'represent what he has seen with his own eyes' and some landscape specialists were Protestants and indeed Calvinists: Coninxloo, Vinckboons, Jacob van Ruisdael, Paulus Potter and Aelbert Cuyp certainly were and their religious beliefs may well have caused them to specialize in landscape and so give a new energy and impetus to this branch of painting. There was certainly a demand for secular painting from Protestant art lovers. Another factor, hard to quantify yet extremely important, was a nostalgia for the countryside which was a feature of the rapid urbanization of the North Netherlands. The hectic rate of urbanization from 1580 until 1670 is the single most important social factor in the entire development at which we are looking today. Already having a remarkably high level of urbanization in 1500, the North Netherlands was by far the most urbanized area in Europe throughout this period. Purchase of a painted or engraved landscape would transport a first-generation town-dweller from the insanitary, crowded conditions of Amsterdam or Haarlem to his native village or countryside. Visscher's title page informs the reader that the prints are

intended for 'Liefhebbers die geen tyt en hebt om veer te reijsen' (Art lovers who have no time to travel far). Town dwellers made more and more use of the countryside: foreign visitors comment on the habit of going to taverns in the countryside on Sundays, on the popularity of the beach at Scheveningen and, among the richer strata of society, the purchase of country estates in the Beemster, the reclaimed polder north of Amsterdam, and houses along the Vecht between Amsterdam and Utrecht.

Yet essentially the market for naturalistic landscape paintings is a popular market: cheap, plentiful paintings for a large, artisan market. It was a market which encouraged speed of execution and repetition once a successful formula had been arrived at. Though often quoted, it is worth reminding ourselves of Peter Mundy's account following his visit to Amsterdam in 1640: Town dwellers wished, he tells us, 'to adorn their houses, especially the outer or street rooms, with costly pieces. Butchers and bakers not much inferior in their shops, which are fairly set forth, yet many times blacksmiths, cobblers, etc. will have some picture or other by their forge and in their stall. Such is the general notion, inclination and delight that these country natives have to paint-

9. Willem Pietersz. Buytewech, *Etching from the Verscheijden Landschapjes (Various Landscapes) Series*, 1621, etching, 88 x 124 mm.

ings.'[6] Until relatively recently we had to rely on such anecdotal evidence for the existence of this large market for inexpensive paintings. Now, however, the work of Montias and his followers, notably Marten Jan Bok and John Loughman,[7] on collecting patterns in particular towns based on the examination of notarial archives, has confirmed it and provided quantitative evidence. What is clear is that the mass market which flourished between about 1620 and 1670 favoured types of painting which are rarely encountered outside the Republic.

The demands of those buyers were very different from picture buyers elsewhere and the paintings which artists produced in response to that demand were also very different. It was a market which, as Marten Jan Bok has shown, was very sensitive to economic movements. And yet, however carefully we may analyse and describe these religious, social and economic factors, however precisely we may imagine we can pinpoint particular influences and exchanges of ideas, the mysterious fact remains that in Haarlem in 1612 a group of prodigiously talented individuals happened to come together to effect an apparently modest but in fact immensely significant change in both the perception and representation of the visible world.

I want now to turn to my second topic, the fascinating debate about meaning in Dutch painting. It was launched by a number of publications and a catalogue for an exhibition at the Rijksmuseum in 1976 entitled *Tot Lering en Vermaak* (For Instruction and Delight) written by Eddy de Jongh, Professor of Iconology at the University of Utrecht, in the 1970s and 1980s.[8] The argument, in very basic terms, is that many Dutch genre paintings rather than being straightforward representations of everyday life, as at first sight they appear to be, sometimes contain specific meanings and that these meanings can be discovered by the study of contemporary emblem books and engravings with texts. His method was similar to that developed by Erwin Panofsky in his study, *Early Netherlandish Painting* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953). Panofsky wrote of 'disguised symbolism' in the work of Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden, and De Jongh also subscribed to the idea that the symbolism of Dutch painting was sometimes disguised. He quoted the great Dutch poet and emblem deviser Jacob Cats in his foreword to his emblem book *Spiegel vanden Ouden ende nieuwen tijdt* (Mirror of ancient and modern times): 'That they (that is, proverbs and maxims) are particu-

larly attractive, thanks to a certain agreeable obscurity, and while they appear to be one thing, in reality they contain another, of which the reader, having in due time seized the exact meaning and intention, experiences wondrous pleasure in his soul; not unlike one, who, after some searching, finds a beautiful bunch of grapes under thick leaves. Experience teaches us that many things gain by not being completely seen, but somewhat veiled and concealed.' The implication was that paintings too have to be puzzled out and their meanings revealed.

This method of approaching Dutch paintings was widely admired and taken up by many scholars, some of whom - ignoring De Jongh's careful warnings - applied it rather uncritically and laid heavier meanings on paintings than they were able to sustain. Following De Jongh's approach Professor Josua Bruyn, formerly Professor of the History of Art in this university, argued that if genre paintings could be interpreted in this way, so could landscapes.[9] Indeed, he went on, the allusive or symbolic cast of mind of the seventeenth century which this approach revealed made it likely that all landscapes had meanings of this kind. The argument was, in essence, that symbolic modes of thought were as

10. Salomon van Ruysdael, *A View of Rhenen, 1648,* oil on panel, 30,5 x 41,3 cm, London, The National Gallery, inv. 2578.

much a part of seventeenth century art as they were of medieval art. So, for example, cities in the distance were the heavenly Jerusalem and travellers on the road were those in search of it. This is Bruyn's account of Jacob van Ruisdael's *Landscape with Bentheim Castle* of 1651 (ill. 12): 'Why then has Ruisdael... depicted in this and other pictures with the same motif a forested hill with a castle as a dramatic climax? Relatively vague artistic considerations have always been adduced to explain this and other similar liberties. Artistic considerations evidently determined the composition and colour scheme of the picture to a large extent, but the conscious and recurring deviations from reality are governed without a doubt by an iconographic programme. Bentheim Castle does not appear here for the sake of the topographic motif... but as the castle on the mountain, the eternal city on Mount Zion. Felled trees in the foreground and lacerated or nearly dead trees emphasize the vanitas symbolism of the forested area, through which the tiny travellers must move in order to reach their goal.'[10] In a similar way he argued that waterfalls represent mortality, broken wheels symbolize human weakness, and so on. Subsequently De Jongh's method has been applied to marine scenes, in which vessels tossed by the storm are interpreted as meaning the virtuous man tossed by the storms of the world's evil.

11. Jacob van Ruisdael, *Dunes near Haarlem*, s.d., oil on canvas, 70 x 65.6 cm, Southampton, Art Gallery. inv. 1/1964

More recently this approach to Dutch painting has been questioned. A painting, it has been counter-argued, is neither an emblem nor a sermon in paint and there is no hard evidence that contemporaries viewed paintings in this way. In fact there is evidence that they did not. In the rare accounts we possess of reactions by seventeenth-century Dutch viewers to paintings they praise their truth to life and the skill of the artists in deceiving the

eye but they do not admire the artist's ability to conceal a complex meaning within an apparently simple scene.The relation between emblems and paintings is often one of a shared world of ideas rather than a direct dependence. From this extended and intriguing debate it has, I believe, become clear that some genre paintings may well be moral exempla of a simple kind - the well-run household, the proper education of children, and so on, and others refer to love, some delicately, others with remarkable directness, while a few are allegorical and announce themselves clearly as such, but that 'disguised symbolism' in its Panofskian sense is not a feature of Dutch seventeenth-century painting - and indeed there are those who argue that it is not a feature of fifteenth-century Netherlandish painting either.[11]

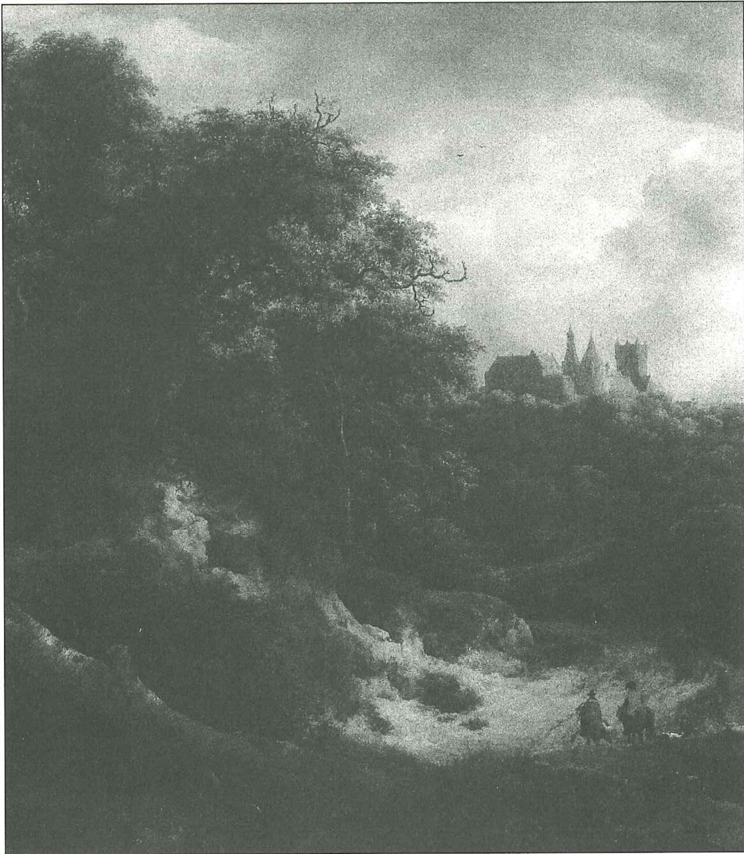
I am unable here to give you any real idea of the complexity and sophistication of this debate but I hope that my point in introducing it to you has become clear. Whether this art is didactic or morally neutral, what I believe we can say with assurance is that there was in the seventeenth century a break with medieval notions of the allegorisation of everyday life, an end to the need to see religious meaning in every representation of the world around us. This is, we should not forget, a crucial break between the medieval and early modern worlds. There is no medieval baggage, any more than there is any classical baggage, to much Dutch art of the Golden Age.

And yet there is a certain reluctance among scholars to accept that it is, to a significant extent, a new, secular and, most importantly, truly popular art which does not possess meaning of a kind which is familiar from Italian art and indeed from medieval Netherlandish and German art. In fact, there is almost a sort of embarrassment that much Dutch art lacks serious, that is, literary, allegorical or religious, subject-matter. There are few great iconographic schemes susceptible to detailed interpretation of the kind that can be applied to those created by Italian humanists. In fact much Dutch art of the Golden Age is truly a product of popular culture and its study often calls for the techniques of social history - as we see, so effectively, in Montias's work - or indeed social anthropology rather than conventional art history.

I would like now to turn to my third and final topic, the question of modernity in Dutch art. If, as I have claimed, a new kind of art, an art which both stylistically and in terms of its subject-matter represented a break with the medieval past and was very different from the kind

of art being produced elsewhere in Europe, emerged in the North Netherlands in the seventeenth century, there should have been some contemporary awareness of its modernity. Does the art literature of the time record any such awareness?

It is a truism that, when compared to the Italians, the Dutch did not theorize about their art, at least until the last quarter of the seventeenth century. We struggle to extract meaning from the few texts that were written, notably those by Carel van Mander and Philips Angel. This is significant. The type of popular art I have been describing, often simple in both content and execution, required no theoretical underpinning, no rules of the kind to be devised by the French *Académie*. To some degree, however, it can be defined by its critics. At the end of the seventeenth century Samuel van Hoogstraten, Gerard de Lairesse, Andries Pels and Jan de Bisschop all attack the popular art of the earlier part of the century and promote classical ideals in art. The terms in which this criticism is expressed are intriguing. We now think of these classicists as repressive and conventional. Actually, they were attacking the prevailing conventions in the name of a new movement, classicism. De Bisschop, whose book *Paradigmata* appeared shortly after his death in 1671, explicitly refers to his opponents as 'modern' artists: he deplores their vulgarity, their choice of subjects from peasant and domestic life rather than from classical literature, their lack of competent figure drawing and the lack of heroicisation in their figures. In the dedication to Jan Six, he says that it was 'an obvious perversity of our judgement to be persuaded that whatever is unsightly in nature is pleasing and praiseworthy in art, and that consequently a deformed, wrinkled and tottering old man is more suitable for painting than a handsome and youthful one; a dilapidated and irregular building than a well-built one in good repair... torn and patched clothes than fresh and neat ones...Yet only recently this error had taken hold of many of even the greatest of our artists, that everywhere it had the strength of an accepted opinion; and to such a degree that almost everything unpleasing to the eye was especially chosen as an excellent thing to paint.'[12] This diatribe is essentially against excessive naturalism and while it seems quite likely that, without naming him, he had Rembrandt in mind, his strictures apply equally well to genre painting and landscape. Andries Pels had no such reservations: writing ten years later, in 1681, he echoes De Bisschop and directs his attack, on all these points,



12. Jacob van Ruisdael, *Landscape with Bentheim Castle*, 1651, oil on canvas, 97,7 x 81,3 cm, England, Private Collection.

against Rembrandt, the most prominent and representative artist of the previous generation.

In many respects, however, the most interesting single account of 'modern' painting is in Gerard de Lairesse's *Het Groot Schilderboek*, published in 1707. Lairesse had been a pupil of Rembrandt and reveals considerable sympathy with 'modern painting'. In the present context his discussion of what we know as genre painting is especially suggestive: it reflects the popular success of genre painting and also recognizes the theoretical dilemma of art imitating nature, but not all nature. 'How are the beauties and probable uses of painting either sunk, obscured or slighted since the Bambocciades are multiplied in this country', he wails[13]. (This translation is from the first English edition,

published in 1778.'Bambocciades' is explained in a marginal note, 'The followers of Bamboccio, a celebrated painter of mean subjects.') 'We scarce see a beautiful hall or fine apartment of any cost, that is not set out with pictures of beggars, obscenities, a Geneva-stall, tobacco-smokers, fiddlers, nasty children easing nature, and other things more filthy. Who can entertain his friend or a person of repute in an apartment lying thus in litter, or where a child is bawling, or wiping clean? We grant that these things are only represented in pictures: but is not the art of painting an imitation of life; which can either please or loath? If then we make such things like the life, they must needs raise an aversion. They are therefore too low and unbecoming subjects for ornament, especially for people of fashion, whose conception ought to surpass the vulgar. We admit indeed that all this is art or at least called so, when life is thereby naturally expressed; but how much the beautiful life skilfully handled, differs from the defective life of modern painters, let the curious determine.'[14] Lairesse constantly stresses the inferiority of modern painting, principally on the grounds of its limitations for the display of noble ideas and emotions. 'Although modern things seem to have some prettiness, yet they are only to be esteemed as diversions of art. I moreover maintain that such painters as never produce more than one choice of subjects, may truly be rated among tradesmen; since such representations cannot be called an exercise of the mind, but a handicraft trade.'[15] Despite this, there are modern painters whom Lairesse admires: "Francis Mieris (ill. 13.) has not only curiously followed his master Gerard Dou, in the elegant modern manner, but is, in some things, his superior... It is more commend-

13. Frans van Mieris, *Musical Entertainment*, 1658, oil on panel, 58,5 x 24,6 cm, Schwerin, Staatliches Museum

able to be like a good Mieris in the modern manner than a bad Raphael in the antique.' He even goes on to encourage the development of the 'elegant modern manner' by suggesting appropriate subjects: 'parents permitting their children to take some diversion in bathing' and 'city-like subjects; which daily afford plentiful matter for a modern Painter' such as 'two virgins... seen at a table drinking tea.'. This subject is chosen by Lairesse as 'an example in treating and refusing' - one tries to press a cup of tea upon the other who has had enough. This is conceived in terms of a domestic drama: 'these two passions cause contrary motions in the whole body, hands, feet and face.'[16] It is therefore as a vivid enactment of a scene involving various passions that Lairesse - more than a little awkwardly, it must be said - justifies such subjects within his classicistic theory of art and it was guidance which Willem van Mieris followed in his painting of a tea party. 'Such subjects as these,' Lairesse continued, 'are very commendable, and may be nobly disposed, to the credit of the artist: But he must avoid handling cottages, brandy-shops, ale-houses, bawdy-houses, corps-degard, and the like.'[17] Ironically, by the time Lairesse provided modern painting with a spurious theoretical justification, the great age of Dutch genre painting was long over. Only derivative artists like Richard Brakenburgh, Willem van Mieris (ill. 14.) and Matthys Naiveu survived to continue the tradition into the eighteenth century. Their illustrious predecessors, Jan Steen, Pieter de Hooch and Gerard ter Borch had required no theory to justify their vigorous, beautiful and richly inventive practice.

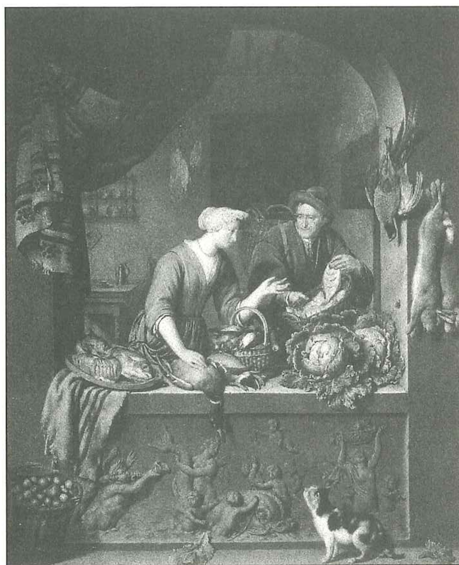
Lairesse also devotes an extended section of his book to landscape, forcefully condemning those landscapes 'with deformed trees, widely branched and leaved, and disorderly spreading from east toward west, crooked bodied, old and rent, full of knots and hollowness; also rugged grounds without roads or ways, sharp hills, and monstrous mountains filling the off-scape, rough or ruined buildings with their parts lying up and down in confusion; likewise muddy brooks, a gloomy sky, abounding in heavy clouds... such a piece, I say, is not to be called a fine landscape.'[18] Instead he describes - at very great length - possible subjects from classical mythology which can be set in landscape: Venus and Adonis, the story of Dryope, Diana bathing with her nymphs, and many others. Against the lamentable modern masters, 'I oppose Raphael, Correggio and Poussin' (he means Gaspard, not Nicholas) and others 'who follow them in their choices.'[19] The Classicist critics of the

late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries recognized that there was a modern art characterized by truth to nature and the depiction of everyday subjects, and that this art had proved extremely popular. It was this modern art which was the distinctive art of the Dutch Republic. It flourished between about 1620 and 1670 and undoubtedly by the last quarter of the seventeenth century had lost much of its momentum and underwent a series of changes which brought it in line with art elsewhere in Europe. The reasons for this are complex and not my subject today but they do have to do - in addition to the cultural hegemony of France - with economic stasis and a new rigidity in Dutch society.

Much of what you have just heard may have struck you as the conventional view and yet I do not think it is. Rather, I consider it to be a necessary corrective. In many modern studies of Dutch painting there has been a tendency to stress its international ideas and character. There have been numerous accounts of Mannerism and Caravaggism - and monographs on the principal artists in both movements. We now recognize, for example, that Joachim Wtewael, Abraham Bloemaert and Gerrit van Honthorst, for example, are major Dutch painters and that Hendrick ter Brugghen is one of the greatest painters of the Golden Age. It is, of course, significant that all these artists worked in Utrecht, a city with a quite distinctive artistic tradition. We know much more about the Bamboccianti, the group of Italianate Dutch genre painters led by Pieter van Laer of Haarlem, Il Bamboccio, who were active - and very successful - in Rome and then returned home to work. There have been important studies in recent years of the so-called Italianising Dutch landscape painters led by Bartholomeus Breenbergh and Cornelis van Poelenbergh and including Jan Both, Adam Pynacker, Nicholaes Berchem and others.

Rembrandt's Italian sources have been explored. And yet far more significant is the fact that Rembrandt did not go to Italy. In the sixteenth century from Jan Gossaert in 1508 onwards it was an essential part of the training of any young artist with ambitions to be a history painter to travel to Italy and, in particular, to Rome. Both Rembrandt's teachers had been to Italy, and his early patron Constantijn Huygens urged him to go. However, Rembrandt was eager to get on with his career, the trip was expensive, as a Protestant he may have been

reluctant to go: these factors may have played a part, but what is really significant is that he felt no need to go. There was a new confidence about Dutch art, a new and very real sense of independence, a sense that this was a new, modern art which did not depend on Italian models. It is important to remember that none of the major artists whose work we think of as characterizing the Golden Age - Jacob van Ruisdael, Meindert Hobbema, Pieter de Hooch, Jan Vermeer, Jan van de Cappelle, Willem van de Velde, Jan van der Heyden, Jan Steen, Frans Hals, Pieter Saenredam, Aelbert Cuyp, Willem Kalf, Pieter Claesz. - travelled to Italy. It was no longer necessary: to make 'modern' art there was no need to copy from the Antique and study Raphael and Michelangelo.



14. Willem van Mieris, *Kitchenmaid*, 1658, oil on panel, 49,5 x 41 cm, London, The National Gallery, inv. 841.

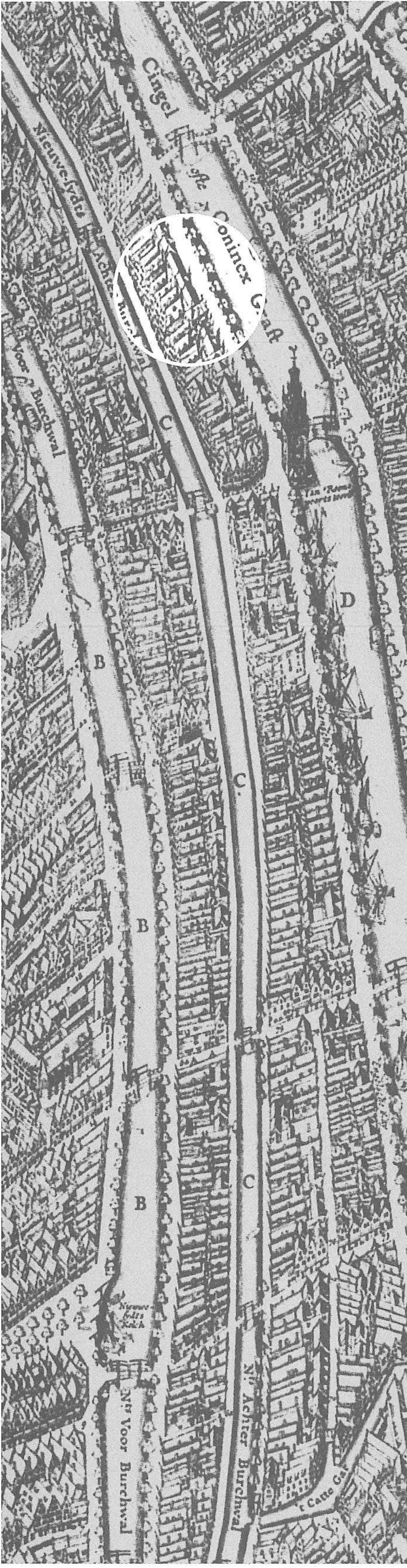
Dutch art of the Golden Age is modern art - secular, realistic, free of the baggage of medieval symbolism and indeed of the baggage of classicism. It presupposes a new way of looking at the world. It was the product of a recognizably modern society, a society which created and was itself formed by the first modern economy. The impact of the Dutch revolution in art can be felt throughout Northern Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in Germany, France and England, in Fragonard's and Constable's reverence for Jacob van Ruisdael and Turner's passion for the seascapes of Willem van de Velde. Long after the éclat of Caravaggio's revolution in Rome in 1600 had died away, the impact of the more modest revolution of Esaias van de Velde and his contemporaries in Haarlem, and that of Pieter de Hooch and his contemporaries in Delft, and of many other Dutch painters, was still being felt.

In my introductory remarks I apologized to the shade of Huizinga. In preparing this lecture, I reread that remarkable essay,

Dutch Civilisation in the Seventeenth Century,[20] for the first time in twenty years. While we might refine Huizinga's economic analysis, question the importance he laid on the Erasmian strain in Dutch religious life, regret the brevity of his accounts of, for example, sculpture and the decorative arts, it remains a remarkably rich and suggestive essay. And his underlying argument - the distinctiveness of Dutch civilisation in seventeenth- century Europe - is undoubtedly correct. He defines the Baroque in this way: 'the urge to conform was one of the strongest impulses of the seventeenth century, be it in doctrine, manners, painting or prosody. Pomp and circumstance, theatrical gestures, strict rules and a closed system were the aims, obedient reverence for the church and state the ideal. While acknowledging the monarchy as the divinely chosen form of government, each region subscribed to the principle of unrestricted autonomy and self-interest. Grandiloquence went hand in hand with etiquette. Ostentation was the order of the day. The renewed faith found its expression in the canvases of Rubens, the Spanish painters and Bernini.' He then goes on: 'This conception of the Baroque, imperfect though it is, fits in fairly well with our general picture of Papal and Venetian Italy, of the England of William Laud and the Cavaliers, and of France at the beginning of its *grand siècle*. But does it also fit our picture of Dutch culture in the seventeenth century? Indeed, there is one figure whom it fits almost perfectly, namely Vondel; but for the rest it does not apply in the least. A landscape by Ruisdael or Van Goyen, a genre piece by Jan Steen, a Civic Guard by Frans Hals or Van der Helst, and the most characteristic work of Rembrandt - all of them breathe a completely different spirit, sound an entirely different note. In fact, in its essentials, the Netherlands in the seventeenth century bore only the slightest resemblance to contemporary France, Italy and Germany. Neither their rigid style and pretentious gestures nor their great pomp is characteristic of our country.'[21]

This remarkable essay was first published in 1941 during the Occupation and not long before the University of Leiden, where Huizinga taught, was closed down by the Germans. Clearly in the face of claims that the Netherlands formed a natural part of the Reich, arguments about Dutch distinctiveness had a special resonance. And yet, this is not a case of historical relativism. Huizinga, at least in my view, was, quite simply, right.

1. Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Englishness of English Art*, Harmondsworth, 1993. The book, the text of the 1955 Reith Lectures, was first published by the Architectural Press in 1956.
2. Christopher Brown, *Dutch Painting*, Second Edition, London, 1993, p. 24.
3. Jan de Vries and Ad van der Woude, *Nederland 1500-1815: De eerste ronde van moderne economische groei*, Amsterdam, 1995. Published in English as *The First Modern Economy: Success, Failure and Perseverance of the Dutch Economy 1500-1815*, Cambridge, 1997.
4. J.M. Montias, 'Cost and Value in Seventeenth-Century Art', *Art History*, vol. 10, 1987, pp. 455-66.
5. J.I. Israel, 'Adjusting to Hard Times: Dutch Art during its Period of Crisis and Restructuring (c. 1621 - c. 1645)', *Art History*, vol. 20, 1997, pp. 449-476.
6. R.C. Temple (ed.), *The Travels of Peter Mundy in Europe and Asia*, 1608-1667, vol. 4: *Travels in Europe*, 1639-1647, London (Hakluyt Society), 1925, p. 70.
7. Montias's work has been based on his work in Delft and, later, in Amsterdam *(Artists and Artisans in Delft: A Socio-Economic Study of the Seventeenth Century*, Princeton, 1982; *Le marché de l'art aux Pays-Bas*, Paris, 1996, and many articles in *Simiolus* and elsewhere). Bok's *Vraag en aanbod op de Nederlandse kunstmarkt 1580-1700*, Utrecht, 1994, draws heavily on his work in the Utrecht archives, while John Loughman's 1993 thesis is based on his study of Dordrecht (*Painting in the Public and Private Domain: Collecting and Patronage at Dordrecht 1620-1749*, Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London).
8. De Jongh's earliest publications on this subject were *Zinne- en minnebeelden in de schilderkunst van de zeventiende eeuw*, 1967, and the Rijksmuseum exhibition catalogue. He has developed and refined his method in a series of articles and exhibition catalogues, most recently, with Ger Luijten, *Mirror of Everyday Life: Genre Prints in the Netherlands 1550-1700*, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, 1997. His recent volume of essays, *Kwesties van betekenis*, Leiden, 1997, brings together his most important articles on this subject.
   In the introduction (p. 16 of the English translation by Michael Hoyle, *Questions of Meaning*, Leiden, 2000) he states his current position concisely and with great clarity: '...certain objects and motifs in seventeenth-century paintings often serve a dual function. They operate as concrete, observable things while at the same time doing something completely different, namely expressing an idea, a moral, an intention, a joke or a situation.'
9. J. Bruyn, 'Toward a Scriptural Reading of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Landscape Paintings', in P. Sutton (ed.), *Masters of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Landscape Painting*, Boston, 1987, pp. 84-103 (Catalogue of an exhibition held in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; and Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1987-8).
10. Ibid., p. 98-9.
11. See, for example, *'The Reality of Symbols:* The Question of Disguised Symbolism in Jan van Eyck's Arnolfini-Portrait', in J.B. Bedaux, The Reality of Symbols, The Hague, 1990, pp. 21-69.
12. J.G. van Gelder and I. Jost, *Jan de Bisschop and his Icones and Paradigmata*, 2 vols., Doornspijk, 1985, vol. 1, p. 228.
13. Gerard de Lairesse, *Het Groot Schilderboek*, Amsterdam, 1707. The translation used here is Gerard de Lairesse, *The Art of Painting*, London, 1778 ('Translated by John Frederick Fritsch, Painter'), p. 98.
14. Ibid., p. 98.
15. Ibid., p. 99.
16. Ibid., p. 105.
17. Ibid., p. 106.
18. Ibid., p. 252.
19. Ibid., p. 252.
20. *Nederland's beschaving in de zeventiende eeuw*, first published in Haarlem in 1941. The translation used here is that by Arnold Pomerans, first published in 1968 (J.H. Huizinga, *Dutch Civilisation in the Seventeenth Century and Other Essays*, London, 1968, pp. 9-104).
21. Ibid., p. 13.



Amsterdam Centre
for Golden Age Studies
Spuistraat 134
1012 VB Amsterdam
The Netherlands
Phone: +31 20 525 4496
Fax: + 31 20 525 4429
E-mail: goudeneeuw@hum.uva.nl
Website: www.uba.uva.nl/goudeneeuw/

Academic Director:
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Universiteit van Amsterdam.

Dr Christopher Brown is Visiting
Golden Age Professor at the University
of Amsterdam in 2002 and Director
of the Ashmolean Museum of Art
and Archaeology at Oxford