

The Portrayal of Women in Dutch Art of the Dutch Golden Age: Courtship, Marriage and Old Age¹

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"Interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art. Even more. It is the revenge of the intellect upon the world. To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world - in order to set up a shadow world of meanings" (Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation" (1964).

Dutch art of the early modern period, the Dutch Golden Age, appeals to many viewers because of its apparently realistic portrayal of everyday life. The viewer need not have a classical education or be an expert in mythology, theology or classical history to appreciate Dutch art's portrayal of ordinary men and women, young and old, well-off or modestly middle class, burghers and gentry, peaceful landscapes and townscapes, modest urban houses and country estates, merchant and war ships, and depictions of game, fowl, meat, flowers, fruits, vegetables, cheese, carpets, maps, and pottery. Eighteenth century academic art critics, although they admitted Dutch art was a feast for the eyes, did not think its subject matter was very interesting or elevating. In more democratic times the depiction of ordinary people going about their daily tasks amid ordinary surroundings became much more popular in the visual arts. Dutch landscape painting served as an important inspiration to the depiction of rural and natural scenery as industrialization and urbanization threatened the survival of the rustic countryside and small town and village life. The twentieth century taught us, however, that reality rarely appears to be as it looks at first sight. Historians of Dutch art have debated the nature of the art of the Dutch Golden Age but have not reached a consensus on "the art of describing." They have, however, provided us with a rich literature on the iconography and cultural context that allows us to appreciate that the realism of Dutch seventeenth century picture making hides many meanings beneath its descriptive surface. Wayne E. Frances' influential study, *Paragons of Virtue: Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art* (1993) is an excellent introduction to the scholarship on how women were portrayed in the Dutch Republic.

¹This essay is largely based on the important study of Wayne E. Franits, *Paragons of Virtue: Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art* (1993).

During the 1960s social historians launched a new branch of history that studies the family and private life in Western Europe. The field has taught us the importance of the nuclear family² and how it evolved during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and created a much more “sentimental climate” within the family and a bourgeois style of family life³. The burgeoning field of Women’s History has associated the origin and growth of a cult of domesticity with the nineteenth century and the Victorians, although much recent scholarship has pushed this back into the late eighteenth century. It has long been understood that industrial capitalism brought with it an increased separation between places of work and the family home, and that this played a large role in the development of a social ideology and reality of separate and domestic spheres for bourgeois women. The removal of middle class women from economic roles in the family business has especially been associated with the period of the industrial revolution from the mid eighteenth-century to the first half of the nineteenth century. Modern historical scholarship has also emphasized that it was not uncommon for relatively well-off women to work in the family business while also assuming responsibility for managing the household⁴. During the seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth century, the Dutch Republic enjoyed the highest per capita income in Europe, and probably in the world. While the Dutch Republic is today best remembered for its precocious capitalist financial and commercial innovations, it was also the most advanced industrial producer during the period and the most urbanized society in Europe. These factors resulted in a greater separation between the place of work and the home than elsewhere and, thus, it should not be surprising that a strong ideology of separate spheres for middle class women was articulated in the Dutch Republic already in the seventeenth century.

² See the readable and pioneering work on European historical demography, Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost: England Before the Industrial Age*, 3rd ed. (1984).

³ For a good overview, see Steven Ozment, *Ancestors: The Loving Family in Old Europe* (2001).

⁴ For good introductions, see Bonnie Smith, *Changing Lives: Women in European History Since 1700* (1988); Renate Bridenthal, Claudia Koonz, and Susan Stuard, *Becoming Visible: Women in European History* (1998); Merry E. Weisner-Hanks, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (1993); Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (2002); and Erna Olafson Hellerstein, Leslie Parke Hume, and Karen M. Offen, *Victorian Women: A Documentary Account of Women’s Lives in the Nineteenth Century England, France and the United States* (1981).

Traditionally, historians of Dutch art focused on studying women associated with vice rather than on portrayals of domesticity. Franits noted that Simon Schama helped bring the topic forward in his popular *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (1987). Schama sought to portray the Dutch *mentalité* of the period, which, he argued, revolved around a dialectical play of inherent tensions between piety and morality, on the one hand, and unprecedented prosperity and materialism on the other. The Dutch celebration of domesticity and its “obsession” with cleanliness is placed within this context. Home existed within the polarity of the world and the street, which brought the reality of the world literally to the doorstep. “The struggle between worldliness and homeliness was but another variation on the classic Dutch counterpoint between materialism and morality” (Schama p. 389). Franits argued that his polarities were too sharp.

For Franits the study of domesticity in Dutch art must inevitably be about women, particularly women in relatively comfortable economic circumstances, since they were pictured as being involved in sewing, spinning, the supervision of servants and the care of children. In order to understand the well-known Dutch paintings that feature domestic scenes, Franits urges us to study them within the context of portraits, prints and contemporary literature. Prints are particularly enlightening, since they often contain interesting inscriptions. They were also cheap and widely available. He also urges us to study popular treatises of the period on the domestic roles of women. He concludes that such a study will not provide us with a realistic view of women of the period, but will offer idealized expectations of how men wished women to behave in a patriarchal society.

Franits examines “images of domestic virtue” in seventeenth century Dutch genre paintings, by which he means “works of art that represent women in a variety of wholesome situations, most of which pertain to the home and the family.” The depiction of domesticity was an important form of Dutch genre painting during the 17th century and he does not view these works as neutral reportage of reality. He maintained that his study “is grounded in the assumption that the paintings were carriers of cultural significance, that they shaped and in turn were shaped by a formally established system of beliefs and

values about women that were endorsed within the patriarchal social order of the day” (p.1). He begins with the example by Casper Netscher, *The Lace-Maker*.



Casper Netscher, *The Lace maker*, 1662, Wallace Collection, London

A modestly dressed woman makes lace in a stark interior whose only decoration is a print nailed to a cracked plaster wall. She is diligently absorbed in her work with her face turned slightly toward the wall, eliminating interaction between the viewer and the woman. Pose, expression and attire offers a compelling construction of domesticity and

ideal femininity of the period. We see it as a typical Dutch painting of the period that offers us a glimpse of what we perceive to be a typical Dutch characteristics of the period—a vision of quiet modesty and the centrality of domestic life in an early and relatively democratic Republic.

Franits framed his study around Jacob Cat's popular advice book, *Houwelyck* (*Marriage*), first published in 1625. Twenty-two editions appeared during the seventeenth-century. The book was aimed not at men but at women and discussed the



Frontispiece from Jacob Cats, *Houwelyck*. *Dat is de ganze gelegenheit des echte staets*, Middleburg, 1625, Amsterdam Universiteits Bibliotheek

stages of their lives. Adriaen van den Venne provided the many illustrations (a number of Dutch editions and an English translation are available on line). The book was divided into six chapters that are illustrated in the engraving below-- *Maeght* (Maiden), *Vryster* (Sweetheart), *Bruyt* (Bride), *Vrouwe* (Housewife), *Moeder* (Mother)' The stages of a woman's life are seen as ascending and descending as she ages. This was a popular way to depict human life. Franits organized his study according to these stages.



Claes Jansz. Visscher, *Trap des ouderdoms*, engraving, Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam

With their extensive detail, seventeenth-century pictures of domestic life appear to be a realistic rendition of contemporary life. However, Franits suggests that their realism is merely plausible, since they do not simply transcribe daily life during the period, but served as a representation of ideas and associations. An important art

historian, Eddy de Jongh, had already argued this in his 1967 iconology of Dutch art.⁵ De Jongh contended that the purpose of seventeenth-century Dutch art, especially genre paintings, “was to instruct and delight the viewer. The sheer visual beauty of these paintings engaged the viewer, who was consequently stimulated to uncover the concealed meaning of the work, one that was largely didactic or moral in nature.” Influenced by Erwin Panofsky’s “disguised symbolism.” De Jongh observed that “didactic meaning of paintings are conveyed by symbolism that is not immediately apparent but lies beneath the ostensibly ‘realistic’ representation of itself” and that this veiled symbolism of the art of the period can be deciphered with the help of prints with inscriptions, popular literature, and emblem books (Franits, p. 10).

Franits, however, asks, if symbolism was concealed and complex, how were contemporaries or us, who are far removed from their world, to interpret it? The presumed symbolism seems difficult to reconcile with the carefully crafted naturalism characteristic of Dutch art of the period. Some of the art undoubtedly contains symbolism but was it a general characteristic of the art of the period? Dutch art theory at the time saw historical painting—particularly biblical, classical and medieval subjects—as the highest category of art and especially associated symbolism and emblems with this category of art, such as a halo for a saint, for example. Svetlana Alpers challenged De Jongh’s approach in her influential *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth-Century* (1983). According to Franits, “Alpers argues that historians of art have erroneously entangled Dutch art within the theoretical framework of Italian Renaissance art with its predominantly narrative and literary nature. In contrast to Italian art, the *sine qua non* of Dutch art is its ‘description’ of the surrounding world. For Alpers, meaning is not hidden beneath the surface but is directly visible as an attestation of the empirical knowledge gained by the Dutch in the seventeenth century, an era of great scientific discovery” Franits suggests that Alpers’ position may be overstated, but “she nonetheless rightly observes that efforts to uncover the purportedly concealed meanings of paintings compromise their visually stunning surface features—hence the need to emphasize the realistic aspects of Dutch art more strongly” (Franits, p. 11).

⁵ Eddy de Jongh, *Questions of Meaning; Theme and Motif in Dutch Seventeenth-Century Genre Painting*, Translated and edited by Michael Holye (1995).

Dutch seventeenth-century art theorists were not primarily interested in the emblematic messages of the visual arts, but concentrated on aesthetic issues. Seventeenth-century collectors and connoisseurs also emphasized the visual qualities of art. Moreover, the visual qualities of paintings attracted poets of the period who “sometimes wrote in a “pictorial style,” characterized by implicit as well as explicit references to paintings, a literal application of [what the Italians called] *ut pictura poesis*” While this pictorial style was especially associated with history paintings, Franits argued that it can also be applied to other styles of literature, and in particular to genre paintings, because of its potential to elicit both emotional and intellectual responses from its staging of everyday narratives from contemporary subjects (Franits. p. 12).

Franits contends that the ‘reality’ pictured in Dutch genre paintings of domesticity consisted of a limited number of subjects and must be seen as “a selective, fictitious construct. Thus, images of domestic virtue, and for that matter most seventeenth-century Dutch art, are meticulous re-creations of reality that are fictitious because they synthesize observed fact and invention. Moreover, they were forged by artists in response to pictorial traditions, to personal aesthetic interest, and even to the demands of the market.” The choices of people and objects in genre paintings are not only a result of the artist’s imagination, but are determined by the use of popular and conventional imagery. “Thus, meaning in Dutch paintings is not necessarily concealed from the viewer but is an essential constituent, intimately bound up with their mimetic qualities.” In other words, Dutch genre painting both mirror and contribute to the value system of which they are a part. They do this in two interdependent ways, first through their pictorial style. Since works of art are always related to the ideals and mores of the time and place in which they were produced, Dutch artists, who were mostly males working in a patriarchal society, generally represented women as objectified and generalized types, “their individuality and psychic dimensions minimized, in the interest of having them embody an idea, or more accurately, an appropriate feminine virtue.” In Heraldic tradition women were pictured in groups, or in a pair of paintings, and were not only usually pictured to the left of their husbands but also in passive poses and rendered in a comparatively flat and superficial manner. Moreover, “in portraits and genre paintings artists repeatedly surround these women with the same, surprisingly limited number of meticulously

painted objects that could only have been meant to connote virtue.” Secondly, “paintings also impart meaning through objects or motifs replete with significance.” In paintings of domesticity, contemporaries universally understood the domestic role of women and thus there was no need for viewers to figure out veiled or symbolic meanings. Franits concludes that “although symbolic motifs are times difficult to detect for the modern viewer, let alone understand, they must have been readily apparent to the seventeenth-century viewer because they were immediately perceived on the surface of the painting as they were intrinsic to its skillful and engaging presentation of a plausible reality” (Franits, pp. 13-15)).



Gerard Dou, *The Young Mother*, 1658, Mauritshuis, The Hague.

Franits concedes that it is possible that the intent of the artist in producing a painting is not always apparent to the viewer. For example, scholars have shown that Gerrit Dou's *The Young Mother* was intended by the artist to be a *staal kaart*, a pattern and advertisement for his work. Dou was one of the leading artists of his generation and his choice of this composition as an example of his work shows him as "an historically located personality and, as such, was consciously or subconsciously influenced by the value system of his day, an influence that most assuredly extended to his choice of subjects—and though this is difficult to demonstrate—even to the style in which they were painted." Thus, even if paintings may not always contain hidden symbols, they nevertheless mirror and contribute to the value system of the culture in which they were produced. "Weighty, abstruse messages may not lurk behind every representation of domestic virtue, but these pictures nonetheless reverberate with an entire system of values, ideals and even prejudices, all of which reflect men's attitudes toward women that were commonplace in seventeenth-century culture" (Franits, pp. 16-17). While viewers brought various levels of education, social standing and personalities to Dutch domestic pictures, they all shared a patriarchal system of values rooted in contemporary culture that was reflected in art. Franits concludes that literature and the visual arts helped shape society's values in the Dutch Republic. His method is to explain the connections between these two forms of the humanities in order to locate Dutch genre paintings more closely to the culture of the period.

Maeght and Vryster (Maid and Sweetheart)

There are many seventeenth-century Dutch paintings of adolescent girls and women of marriageable age absorbed in domestic tasks, especially doing needlework, or with books, that emphasize modesty and intense engagement on their tasks. One of the most popular subjects for paintings were young well-dressed women in gardens or lavish interiors engaged in the rituals of courtship. There was also a large literature devoted to the difficulties and uncertainties faced by young unmarried women. In Cats' famous advice book, *Houwelyck*, there is a dialogue among women that treats the rules and dangers of courtship and the most desirable virtues of marriageable women. Dutch

culture of the period saw youth as a particular stage of life filled with dangers, temptations and uncertainties about the future. Evidence for this can be seen in the popularity of admonitory literature as well as in art, which provided specific guidance for young women. The goal was to help the parents instill sound moral habits and domestic skills in young women and prepare them for marriage and domestic duties. Cats, for example, encouraged young women “to be chaste, diligent, silent and obedient to their parents and to remain in the home—het *maegdenhof* (maiden’s court) honing their domestic skills while trusting in God to furnish them with suitable spouses” (Franits, p.19).

These domestic ideals also can be seen in the portraiture of the period, since portraits almost always express the ideals of the sitters, and in this case probably of the parents who commissioned the paintings. In Gerard Dou, *Portrait of a Young Woman*,



Gerard Dou, *Portrait of a Young Woman*, Private Collection, in Franits, p. 20.

a young woman sits rigidly in a spacious interior in a passive self-contained pose, reflecting her dignity, humility and sobriety. She has a songbook on her lap and two other books, one is a tightly clasped Bible. It is unlikely that the books were there to demonstrate her intellectual capacities, since women were primarily taught to read so that they could efficiently manage the household as well as study the lives of virtuous women as portrayed in the Bible. Many seventeenth-century songbooks, especially those of sacred music, also had a didactic purpose. Cats used this print of a Maiden's Coat of



Maeghde-Wapen, illustration in Jacob Cats, Houwelyck. Dat is de ganze gelegenheit des echte staets, Middleburg, 1625, Amsterdam Universiteits Bibliotheek.

of Arms at the beginning of his chapter on Maidens. The young women hold a parrot and an embroidery sample stretcher. Songbooks and sewing paraphernalia are on the ground and a dog sits beside it. The inscription in the lower left is *Leer-sucht* (willingness to learn).

Needlework was an important motif in Dutch art. Joachim Wtewael painted his twenty-one year old daughter, *Portrait of a Young Women* (22), holding sheers, lacework



Joachim Wtewael, *Portrait of Eva Wtewael*, 1628, Central Museum, Utrecht.

and an expensive lace cushion in her lap. A sewing basket with more lace is on the floor. A thick book, probably a Bible, lies on a table. The picture is a testament to her training, docility and piety. Compare the picture of Eva with that of her brother, *Portrait of Peter*.



Joachim Wtewael, *Portrait of Peter Wtewael*, 1628, Central Museum, Utrecht.

Although the picture of Eva is full length, the light flattens her face and thus minimizes her interaction with the viewer. The lighting of Peter's face, on the other hand, invests it with a livelier and much more psychological meaning for the viewer. Young girls doing needlework were a common subject and demonstrated their diligence and training. Nicholas Maes' *Young Girl Sewing* shows a maiden intensely occupied in threading a needle within in almost claustrophobic space. She is no mere servant as shown by her elaborate and expensive dress.



Nicolaes Maes, *Young Girl Sewing*, 1667, Private Collection.

Paintings of young women sewing with a parrot nearby are variations of the theme since parrots are easily tamed and can be taught to speak. In Frans van Mieris the Elder's *Young Lady with a Parrot*, a young girl interrupts her work to feed a parrot, but a thimble remains on her finger. She wears a luxurious garment and her braided hair is adorned with colored ribbon. Her porcelain like skin and her clothes emphasize her elegance and female form but also her docility and idealization. She represents an ideal of the moral domestic training of young women which does not actually represent the reality

of young women in seventeenth-century Dutch culture, but serves as an illustration of how they should behave and were represented in contemporary texts.



Frans van Mieris the Elder, *Young Lady with a Parrot*, 1663, The National Gallery London.

A Middleburg schoolmaster explained in his pedagogical treatise on the education and training of maidens that she must learn what belongs to housewifery:

How they should be humbly submissive and loving to their husbands (if God calls them to marriage)

How they should raise their children

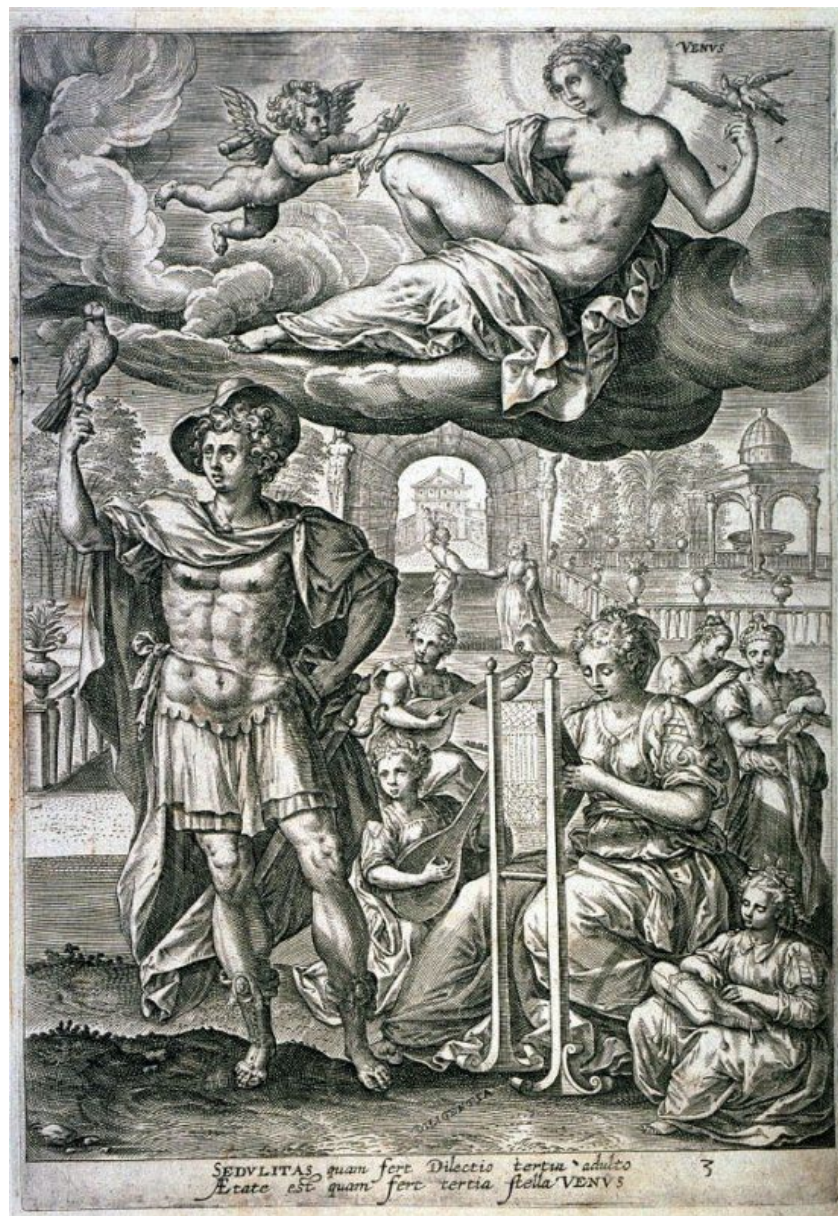
How they should run their household

How to make purchases

How to Sew [and] Spin

Be neat and diligent

And similar things that are part of a woman's callings (Franits, p. 26).



Adriaen Collaert after Maarten de Vos, 1581, Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam.

A late sixteenth-century print by Adriaen Collaert, *Venus-Adolescence*, links the phases of life with the planets and associates adolescence with Venus. Spring and youth are shown as a young man holding a falcon while maidens work diligently on their needlework, read and play music. “*Diligentia*” is the inscription below the embroiderer. Contemporaries were well aware that adolescence was a stage of life with many temptations and argued that the young should be trained to be industrious, promote virtue and ward off evil. For women, needlework was a crucial part of that training. A similar print contained this admonition: “If one accustoms them to working, they will stay industrious. But if one permits them to remain lazy and indolent, they will take root in it and cherish idleness’ (Franits, p. 26). The connection between needlework and the virtue of diligence was ubiquitous, as can be seen in this illustration of one of the most popular

Frontispiece from Johan Sibmacher, *Newes Modelbüch in küpffer gemacht*,



Cum Priuilegio Ro. Cæs. Majestatis.

Johan Sibmacher Noriberg. fecit et excudit.

2d. ed. Nuremburg, 1604, Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam.

pattern books of the period. It consisted of collections of prints illustrating embroidery patterns that could be copied for decorating textiles. The seated woman is sewing and is described as *industrial*. In the accompanying poem she defends herself against *Ignavia*, on her left, with the help of *Sophia* (Wisdom), on her right. She wins her argument by equating needlework with diligence.

The depiction of young women spinning was also a traditional means of representing diligence as a domestic virtue for women. A few sixteenth-century paintings of women spinning from the sixteenth century have survived, such as the famous picture



Maarten van Heemskerck, *Portrait of a Woman Spinning*, 1529, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

above. There are relatively few painted portraits of women spinning from the seventeenth-century, perhaps because the Dutch imported most of their spun thread from Silesia and, perhaps, because families that could afford to commission portraits associated spinning with the lower classes and preferred to picture their daughters engaged in the more luxurious and artistic pursuit of embroidery associated with upper class women's leisure. The extant sixteenth-century paintings of young women spinning were often accompanied by references to the Bible and thus associated spinning with virtue. One of the most beautiful examples of a young woman spinning is Caspar Netscher, *A Lady at a Spinning Wheel* (see the illustration above on p. 4). Netscher was known as a *fijnschilder* (a fine and meticulous painter). His picture is of a prosperous young woman in rich clothes sitting next to a spinning wheel. She is not actually spinning and the wheel seems to be there to indicate her domestic virtues. A more modest representation of this theme is by Matthias Naiveau.



Matthias Naiveau, *Interior with a Young Woman Spinning*, ca. 1670, present location unknown, in Franits p. 32.

A young girl is actively spinning, controlled by the treadle below. Bright light from the window illuminates the young woman. There is a baby's high chair (difficult to see in this photo) and a lamp. The dark interior is contrasted by the light that shines on the woman's face that seems to purify her and makes her an icon of moral perfection.

Contemporary admonitions about young women courting began with the prescription that women were only allowed a minimum of initiative in courting. An emblem from Joseph Cat's popular *Maeghden-plicht* (1618) illustrates this.



Jacob Cats, *Maeghden-plicht oste ampt der jonckvrouwen in eerbaer liefde, anghewesen door sinnebeelden*, Middleburg, 1618, Universiteits Bibliotheek, Amsterdam

Cupid stands next to a fiery beacon on the shore and points to an incoming vessel. The accompanying poem likens courtship to a beacon that is only capable of guiding a ship into the harbor. Young women were encouraged to meet suitors only in a protective home environment under strict parental supervision. They should avoid wearing too many jewels or provocative clothing but should ornament themselves with the virtues of humility, modesty, piety, tractability, steadfastness and industriousness. Frivolous courtship was discouraged and no one should be allowed to court a young woman without intending to propose marriage (Franits, p. 34).

Petrarch's famous sonnets to his beloved Laura heavily influenced Dutch courting literature, as well as that of much of Western Europe. His sonnets began with describing her physical beauty, which was only surpassed by her virtues, especially her spirituality and chastity. While she was a continual object of adoration, Petrarch lamented the deleterious effect she had on her lovesick admirers. The Dutch used these Petrarchian notions about courtship in their emblem and advice books. They compared suitors to mice caught in traps threatened by marauding cats, squirrels running on caged wheels, stags shot by arrows, or insects attracted to burning candles, while the objects of their desires were compared to stars in the heavens, the sun, the power of the wind, and even to executioners. Popular songbooks of the period contained images and poems with similar ideas and sentiments. The most popular of all the books about courtship during the period, were advice books, many of which owed much to Ovid's *Art of Love*.

Literature and art of the period contributed to the institutionalization of courtship, as seen in the 1607 illustration below by David Vinckboons of a pleasure garden, which appeared on the cover of a number of songbooks and demonstrated the close links between courtship, art and amatory literature. It shows well-dressed couples in a leafy arbor enjoying music at a *buitenpartij* (a garden party) in the countryside as they dance, play music and engage in polite conversation. They are grouped around a large spinet, a forerunner of a piano. Some young people drink and one is shown reclined in a young woman's lap. Although Vinckboon's painting is in the tradition of Renaissance pictures of mythological and religious paintings in garden settings, such as those of the Prodigal son squandering his inheritance on liquor and prostitutes, Vinckboons does not seem to offer a critical moral lesson here, but offers us a view of an elegant gathering of wealthy



David Vinckboons, *Den Nieuwe Verbeterden lust-hof*, Amsterdam, 1607, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, The Hague.



David Vinckboons, *Outdoor Merry Company*, 1610, Gemäldegalerie der Akademie der Bildende Künste, Vienna

young people to celebrate love and a relatively restrained ritualized form of courtship. This picture, and others of this kind, is a useful reminder that a dogmatic Calvinism did not dominate Dutch society of the period as popular culture has often suggested. The amatory literature of the period advocated moral restraint but also portrayed innocent pleasure in its promotion of courtship (Franits, pp. 36-38).

The genre of *buitenpartijen* included many elegant scenes of courting, such as the work of van de Velde, who was probably a student of Vinckboons. Another example of



Esaias van de Velde, *Merry Company Banqueting on a Terrace* (1615 Staatliche Museen, Berlin)

this genre is Gerbrand van den Eeckhout's painting below of young people congregating on a classic portico before a park setting with a statue of Cupid. It is a picture of relaxed elegance and luxury. In addition to the well-dressed young couple these pictures usually included, musical instruments, especially lutes, songbooks, wine, and a servant. The women wear silky dresses, expensive lace collars, and elaborate hairdos that complement their idealized beauty. The beauty of women was often compared to the beauty of nature and the carefully constructed garden settings were designed to complement the women. The young women do not demonstrate much individuality, but have become subordinate to a ritual of courtship portrayed by posture, attire and setting that speak of gallantry, polite conversation and haute couture. Many of these courtship paintings also suggest a



Gerbrand van den Eeckhout, *Party on a Terrace*, 1652, Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, MA.

narrative. In Eeckhout's picture, while the mood appears restrained, the couples are actively involved in courtship. The man in the center holds a hand on his heart to underscore his intentions. She holds a fan, which was common in courtship pictures, and looks at her suitor intensely. The young man standing behind the sitting suitor appears to be more successful in his courting, since he has his arm is already around his object of desire.

Another common theme of courtship paintings is the spurned lover. The sitting young man in van der Eeckhout's *The Music Party*, below, is the focus of this painting, as can be seen by his position and the focus of the light. He sits in a chair with a large hunting dog next to him and in front of a servant and table with music books. He stares wistfully at the young couple singing a duet. His distress can be seen by how he holds his



Gerbrand van der Eeckhout, *The Music Party*, 1652, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

head, a classic portrayal of melancholy. He represents the classic victim of unrequited love that was common in the literature of courtship and in other pictures.

The audience of these pictures of genteel courtship was likely the same people who bought the expensive amatory song and poetry books. By the mid-seventeenth-century, many successful Dutch burghers had bought country houses as bucolic retreats and venues for garden parties and social gatherings. The paintings do not document the actual country houses, gardens or couples. Instead, they adhere to long-standing pictorial traditions. Their description of reality is of the rituals of courtship and of idealized young people. The conventionality of the *buitenpartij* images is evidence of widely shared attitudes and expectations among contemporaries. It seems fair to assume that these pictures of elegant young people set in lovely gardens encouraged viewers to want to also engage in the depicted court rituals and thus actively promoted such courtship and talk of

love. Indeed, many of the pictures include an empty chair inviting the viewer to participate (Franits, pp. 38-45).

There are also many courting paintings set in interiors, known as *gezelschapjes*, which is often translated as merry companies. During the second half of the seventeenth-century artists such as Gerard ter Borch, Jacob van Loo, and Jan Mieris produced ever more elaborate and meticulous renderings of expensive textiles and elegant young women. They “focused on the subtle, natural evocations of light and shadow on figures and objects that occupy carefully constructed spaces, often vertical in format” (Franits, p. 46). Their imagery, however, remained strikingly conventional by repeating a limited



Jacob van Loo, *An Amorous Couple*, 1650, Mauritshuis, The Hague.

number of stock motifs. Jacob van Loo, a well-known painter of amorous scenes, many of which are very sensuous and even bawdy, also produced more traditional scenes, such as *An Amorous Couple*, above. Some have suggested that this picture was updated from a brothel painting because of the presence of a canopied bed, the large glass on the table and the shell, an attribute of Venus. Franits suggests that this may be problematic interpretation since beds could be found in many rooms, even in kitchens, during the period. The shell does not need to be about illicit sexuality since it was often depicted on songbooks without prurient content. Van Loo focuses on the gentle pleading of the elegant young man. The young man has interrupted work and she has set aside her sewing basket, although she does not look particularly attentive to his entreaties. Her foot is on a foot warmer, which appears in many paintings, and was used as an emblem by the painter Roemer Visscher, who suggested that a courting young man must try to convince the lady that he is more important than the comfort of the foot warmer “with sweet, witty and amusing talk, avoiding all boorishness and vulgarity, without reprimanding their cackling and chattering and never mocking their fussy and showy clothes; but praising them for everything they do and propose, then he will be praised in their company as a perfect courtier” (Franits, p. 51). The basket filled with fabric and sewing cushions set aside by the maiden suggests a lover who is so overwhelmed by love that they can no longer perform ordinary tasks. An emblem by Jan Harmensz. Krul suggests this emotion in a picture of a woman who is interrupted in her work by cupid.

My duty requires me to work, but Love will not allow me any rest.
 I do not feel like doing anything;
 My thoughts are nourished by Love, Love nourishes my thoughts,
 And when I fight it, I am powerless.
 Everything I do is against my will and desire,
 Because you, o restless Love, hold me in your power (Franits, p. 47)

The motif of a basket set aside through a pre-occupation with love can also be seen Vermeer’s famous painting, *The Love Letter*.



Johannes Vermeer, *The Love Letter*, 1666, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Pictures of fashionable young people making music in interiors were quite popular in seventeenth-century Dutch art and often appeared on the covers of songbooks. What is striking about such paintings is the conventionality of their subject matter. They almost all consist of elegantly young men and women who sing and play music in well-appointed interiors, using ornately designed instruments, which are often decorated with



Gerard ter Borch, *The Music Party* (1668-70, Cincinnati Art Museum).

brightly colored ribbons. Painters were clearly responding to a market for such pictures and their popularity suggests widely shared ideas and attitudes about love (Franits, p. 52). A good example of this genre is ter Borch's painting above. A woman wearing a silk dress and a yellow jacket trimmed with fur, has interrupted her performance on a large

theorbo held between her knees to examine a page of music. A well-dressed young male admirer holding a songbook has been singing and gazes intently at the object of his affection, but she appears indifferent to him. Another young man stands behind them. While they ignore him, his presence highlights the tension of the courtship.



Jacob Ochtervelt, *Music Lesson*, 1671, The Art Institute of Chicago.

In Ochtervelt's painting, above, there appears to be more than in music in this lesson. The upholstered furniture and fashionable rich clothes suggest elegance and wealth. The lady and gentleman are posed inclining toward each other. The young man playing the theorbo gazes rapturously into the eyes of his beloved. She, however, does not return his gaze but looks at the theorbo and uses her bow to point to a passage in the music book on the table, suggesting that the lady does not only control the music but the heart of the young man as well (Franits, pp. 53-54).

The young man in Verkolje's picture, below, appears to be more successful as he is holding the object of his affection's hand as he begs her to join him in a duet. She appears to return his plea, although her gaze remains a bit ambivalent. The exchange of evocative glances, as well as the rich interior and garments, helps draw the viewer into the picture.



Jan Verkolje, *Elegant Couple in an interior*, 1671, Private Collection, in Franits, p. 58.

Suitors who hope to become the focus of a lady's affection were also subjects of a number of humorous paintings that show men enviously teasing small dogs who sit in a lady's lap. In Frans van Mieris the Elder's painting, the suitor plays with the dog's ear as she attempts to push him away. Some have interpreted this as her attempt to preserve her chastity but Franits suggests that it should be seen as the suitor's jealousy of the dog,



Frans van Mieris the Elder, *Teasing the Pet*, 1660, Mauritshuis, The Hague.

while his beloved remains aloof to his affections. This imagery can also be found in poems of the period.

Fortunate little dog, your prosperous lot is envied:
Fortunate little dog, that so often enjoyed Celestyne's lap,
And, to my regret, was caressed by her so softly (Franits, p. 55)

There are also depictions of a courting young man behaving deferentially, as in this de Hooch painting. A young man brings a letter and bows to a well-dressed and beautiful young woman.



Pieter de Hooch, *A Woman Receiving a Letter from a Man*, 1668-70, Kunsthalle, Hamburg.

Franits explained that paintings of courtship were not always principally about moralizing, as has often been argued, nor were they merely illustrations of polite society demonstrating national pride in textile production, as has also been suggested. Instead, he believes they should be seen as “exemplars of courting etiquette” (Franits, p. 59). This can especially be seen in the portraits of well-off young women being courted, since they invariably strike similar poses and attitudes. They appear reserved and relatively passive with their hands folded demurely at the waist. Custom allowed them to participate in courtship by deploying their proper behavior, beauty, and elaborate clothes in often-luxurious settings, but all further initiatives in courtship belonged to the suitors. Franits concludes that “despite the power that women exert on submissive men in art and literature saturated with popular conceits, their dominance was pure fiction that paradoxically affirmed and endorsed the existing [patriarchal] social order” (Franits, p. 59). Moralist writers, such as Cats, and artists provided a set of rules for courtship that were ideals and did not necessarily reflect the actual courtship customs of Dutch burghers during the period. We know from historical demography that the Dutch married relatively late and thus courtship must have taken place over a long period and thus did not always occur under the watchful eyes of their parents. In fact, many foreign visitors commented on the amount of freedom that unmarried young people enjoyed in the Dutch Republic. The often shrill warnings by Calvinist preachers of the evil consequences of young men and women socializing in unsupervised places, such as at beaches, inns, fairs, and even in churchyards were a testament to the realities of courting in the Republic. There were even published guides produced to places where the young could meet the opposite sex away from the watchful eyes of their parents and others that exercised moral authority in Dutch towns. These courtship paintings and the amatory literature of the period were not just beautiful works of art or depictions of courting reality, but an ideal set of rules and customs, rooted in a particular tradition of courtly love and patriarchal society, to help guide young women to become virtuous housewives and good mothers.

Bruyt and Vrouwe (Bride and Housewife)

In the portrait, below, of the painter and his wife, Michiel stands in a large room



Michiel van Musscher, Portrait of Michiel Comans II and his Wife, Elisabeth van der Meersch, 1669, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

While his wife, Elisabeth, sits beside him with her sewing basket and a book on her lap. She looks at her husband as he displays an inscribed scroll. The props show that he is painter and Elizabeth is a housewife. Franits notes that the figures in these paintings represent gender constructs that were readily recognizable by contemporaries and recalled earlier prints and paintings of this kind (Franits, p. 62). Emblems of gender roles in art extended beyond the paintings themselves, as can be seen in these pendant portraits

(reproduced in Franits, p. 65) by Johannes Spruyt of himself and Judith de Vries. The carved frame of the male pendant includes his tools as an artist, while Judith's frame depicts the tools of a housewife, a sewing box and scrub brush)



Figure 49 (left). Johannes Spruyt, *Self-Portrait*, 1661 (oil on panel, 29 × 23 cm). Private collection. Photo: Rijksmuseum-Stichting.



Figure 50 (right). Johannes Spruyt, *Portrait of Judith de Vries*, 1661 (oil on panel, 29 × 23 cm). Private collection. Photo: Rijksmuseum-Stichting.

Most early modern Europeans had both a patriarchal and theological view of marriage and family life that confirmed and justified their gender status⁶. Dutch views of marriage were especially influenced by the ideas of Erasmus and Protestants, such as Martin Luther and John Calvin. These, and many other thinkers of the period, overturned the traditional Catholic view of celibacy as more virtuous than marriage. Instead, they extolled the moral value of Christian marriage. Although many promoted the moral equality of men and women before God, and some radicals even argued that women should be allowed to be ministers, the overwhelming belief was that a Christian marriage was patriarchal with the father now also taking a leading role in family prayers and moral supervision. These new attitudes were promoted, with the help of the printing press, in a torrent of guidebooks on marriage and the proper spheres for men, women and children. These domestic conduct books, which were designed to appeal to the middle and upper classes, were remarkably uniform in their outlook and prescriptions. They relied heavily upon classical authors, Christian humanists, the Pauline Epistles and the Ten Commandments, and a tradition of Pietism both in England and the Netherlands. These books, of course, did not describe the actual conduct and beliefs about marriage of the Dutch population, but held up an ideal. Calvinism was the official state religion of the Dutch Republic, even though more than a quarter of the population belonged to other religious persuasions. As the state religion, Calvinist ministers had legal authority to enforce codes of conduct and deal with such issues as illegitimacy, marital disputes (such as wife-beating), separation, adultery, prostitution and public immoral behavior.⁷ A wealth of documents has survived about this moral policing by the clergy, especially of the lower classes. However, the exhortations to the sinners did not emphasize God's likely punishments, but concentrated on social conceptions of honor, shame, respectability and the common good.

Writers such as Jacob Cats and his contemporaries considered marriage a natural state instituted by God, one that descended in an immutable form from the Garden of Eden. They did not see procreation as the goal of marriage but its consequence.

⁶ See the influential study by Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986) and Steven Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe* (1985).

⁷ For a good introduction to the regulation of public order and morality, see chapter 28 of Jonathan I. Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness and Fall, 1477-1806* (1995).

Procreation was, of course, necessary for society but Protestant theologians argued that the primary objective of marriage was companionship, just as God had created Eve to be Adam's helpmate. Marriage was a covenant between spouses who agreed to fulfill mutual obligations of love, faithfulness and to provide mutual support for spiritual and material wellbeing. Protestant theologians urged wives to be submissive to their husbands as trusted partners in marriage. They urged each partner to perform their ordained obligations diligently in accordance with their *beroep* (calling), which one early-seventeenth cleric defined as "our appointed charge, and manner of life, in some honest worke, wherein we are daily to labor as we may best profit therein." The man's calling usually took place in the public sphere, while the woman's was usually confined to the home, in the service of family and husband: "if she also be a mother and a mistriss, and faithfully endeavour to doe what by vertue of those callings she is bound to doe, shall finde enough to doe" (Franits. p. 68). It was assumed that a wife's knowledge of the family's needs and management of the household were greater than the husband's. In good capitalist fashion, domestic conduct books argued that the husband's principal role was to provide the goods necessary to run the household and for the wife to manage these:

A housewife needs to take care of what her husband brings home, to put it in its proper place and obediently to take only what is needed; but what needs to be save should be locked up . . . she should not resent being burdened with more chores than other housewives, because she also shares the pleasures of running the whole house, like a ruler and an owner (Franits, p. 68).

Contemporary conduct books often quoted Aristotle and other classical writers, as well as Biblical sources, to explain that separate spheres for men and women were rooted in nature and Divine creation. Men were seen as more rational and physically stronger while women were physically weaker but more nurturing. The image of the turtle was often used as an emblem to express this visually. As a Johan Beverwijck noted, "the praise of a woman mainly exists in the care she gives to her household. For the turtle is always at home, and carries its house along under all circumstances" (Franits, p. 69).



Illustration from Johan van Beverwijck, *Van de wtmentheyt des vrouwelicken geslachts*, Dordrecht, 1639, Universiteits Bibliotheek, Amsterdam.

An image of a woman standing on a turtle accompanies his discussion on the excellence of women. In the background a man digs outside and a woman spins in the house. A common emblem for a bride was to show her holding a key or being presented with one.

An English Puritan writer who was influential in the Dutch Republic explained that there were two main tasks for women in managing the household. She should engage “herself in some profitable employments,” for the good of the household and to govern and supervise her maids (Franits, p. 71). Jacob Cats commented on spinning as an example of a “profitable employment” and refers to Solomon’s Biblical Book of Proverbs.

Choose, oh young lady, the spindle over the game
 Search old times and all past life;
 The richest young lady spun, the mother could weave;

The princes of the country, the highest in rank,
Handled pure wool or white flax.
Consider the esteemed woman described by Solomon,
She is motivated by the sheer pleasure of spinning;
She makes her family turn the spindle
For the good of the house, in the service of her husband (Franits, p. 71).

Although Cats, and other Dutch conduct book writers, saw spinning as a traditional and ideal role for women, there are relatively few paintings of women spinning from the period, perhaps because spinning was not an activity common for Dutch bourgeois women whose families could afford expensive paintings. Gerard ter Borch, celebrated his



Gerard ter Borch, *Portrait of Wiesken Matthy's Spinning*, 1652,
Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam.

stepmother as the virtuous housewife. She is in the process of plying yarn that will be fed to the bobbin of her spinning wheel. This may reflect a contemporary proverb, “Ze spint zuiver garen” (She spins pure thread) that was used by Cats to explain the desired qualities of a wife as one who is diligent and has an unsullied reputation (Franits, pp. 75-76).

Pictures of women doing needlework are more common in Dutch art of the period than those engaged in spinning. Moralists often praised the housewife’s ability to do needlework. Caspar Netscher’s painting is a good example of this genre.



Casper Netscher, *The Lace maker*, 1662, Wallace Collection, London.

A young woman makes lace in a very plain interior whose only decoration is a print tacked to a cracked plaster wall. She is young but already married, which can be seen by a traditional symbol of marriage of clasped hands on her cap. She wears sober, simple and modest clothing and is intensely focused on her work. She is slightly turned toward the wall, which eliminates interaction with the viewer. She is a perfect depiction of femininity and domesticity. Also present are a broom, a pair of shoes, and two mussel shells. Some art historians have written about shoes as a symbol of eroticism but that hardly fits this or other domestic paintings of the period. Instead, as Franits argues, it can be seen as an emblem of domesticity since the ideal housewife remains in the home. The two mussel shells would also not have been placed there arbitrarily. Although shells were often used as an erotic symbol in Dutch art, there was also a tradition of associating them with domesticity, as in this 1623 poem by the artist and publisher, Adriaen van de Venne, under an illustration of a mussel vendor.

Fresh mussels can be compared to
The blessed women folk
Who speak modestly and virtuously
And always look after their household;
All wives must regularly bear
The burden of their 'mussel-house' (Franits, p. 79).

Cats advised women that while their husbands were traveling they should “live at this time like a mussel does. Foreigners often noted that Dutch towns were clean and the broom serves a symbol of one of the duties of a housewife (Franits, p. 80).

Another well-known emblem of domesticity is a birdcage. Joseph Cats' inscription below the birdcage is 'Bly, door slaverny' (Joy through Slavery). The parrot, who is the narrator of the story, declares that “the imprisonment of love” has brought it great joy. This is an allusion to chaste love in marriage. Gabriel Metsu's portrait of a woman in a niche with a sewing cushion on her lap and scissors prominently displayed in the front also contains a birdcage to the left. . Opposite the birdcage a grape vine can be seen on the left jamb of the enclosure. Since antiquity, grapevines have been used as symbols of marriage and fidelity for its tendrils allow it to adhere and climb up (Franits, p. 82).



Emblem from Jacob Cats, *Proteus ofte minne-beelden verandert in sinnebeelden*, Rotterdam, 1627, Universiteits Bibliotheek, Amsterdam.



Gabriel Metsu, *Woman with Sewing in a Niche*, Pushkin Museum, Moscow, in Franits, p. 81.

Another common housewife task was cooking and there are many Dutch paintings of the period that show food preparation, cooking or serving food. The *Portrait of Jacob Bierens and his Family* by Hendrick Sorgh is unusual since here the whole family is seen in the kitchen, except for the oldest son who plays the *viola da gamba*, Jacob Bierens, the head of the family, is modeled more dynamically than his wife and



Hendrick Sorgh, *Portrait of Jacob Bierens and his Family*, 1663, Amsterdam Museum.

interacts more directly with the viewer. He looks directly at the viewer while holding up a fish as he enters the room with his son. The bright light flattens the expressions of the women of the family and makes them more passive. His daughter works at plucking a fowl at a table and demonstrates that she is training for marriage. Fish, vegetables, cooking utensils and a shopping pail are on the floor. The head of the family is the provider as he brings home the fish, while his wife peels fruit and is portrayed in her role as carefully dealing with the food provided by her husband. Music was often seen as providing harmony and we can interpret the son's playing as a demonstration that

everyone here is playing their proper roles and the result is family harmony (Franits, pp. 87-88).

The motif of plucking a duck has been interpreted as sexual imagery but Franits argued that this does not appear to have been the intent here in this domestic picture or in Nicolaes Maes' painting below. Seventeenth-century viewers would have recognized the imagery as a wholesome and tranquil view of a housewife's proper role as a food preparer. Against the back wall stands a rifle that was used by her husband, or if she is a servant, her master, to bring home the fowl (Franits, p. 90).



Nicolaes Maes, *Woman Plucking a Duck*, 1655-56, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Two pendant paintings by Gabriel Metsu provide a commentary on the proper role of women by contrasting two women. In *A Woman Peeling an Apple*, a woman peels an apple in what appears to be a kitchen. A dead rabbit, fruit and a shopping pail are beside her on the table. In *Woman with a Glass and a Tankard*, the woman has been drinking and smoking. She tips her glass in the direction of the apple peeler as if to toast her. The fancy carpet on the table contrasts with the simple tablecloth of the apple peeler. The picture of the drinker includes an ornate fireplace, while the apple peeler's fireplace is simple and modest. The paintings offer a contrast between a life of luxury and excess compared to one of simplicity and domestic virtue (Franits, p. 90-91).



Gabriel Metsu, *Woman with a glass and tankard* and *A Woman peeling and apple*, Musée du Louvre.

Women purchasing food in the market were popular subjects for painters in the Dutch Republic. One of the earliest paintings of a housewife shopping is *The Fish Market* by Jacob Gerritsz. Cuyp. A housewife accompanied by her maid points to some fish that she appears to have purchased. The fishmonger holds some coins in his hand. Cuyp was famous for his animal paintings and the fish are expertly painted. The features of the seller are more prominently painted than those of the housewife but the transaction is the center of the painting, indicating that the main message of the picture is the judicious buying of fish by the housewife (Franits, P. 92).



Jacob Gerritsz. Cuyp, *The Fish market*, 1627, Dordrechts Museum, Dordrecht.

Joseph Cats advised that young women should be taught how to shop by their mothers so that they could manage their own future households wisely. Emmanuel de Witte's painting, below, shows a mother and daughter standing next to a market stall with a display of fish. The fish are displayed brilliantly but this is a portrait and the message of the picture is the housewife haggling with the seller and pointing to the fish with her daughter at her side. This kind of portrait is often referred to as a 'gentrified portrait,' meaning that it draws on a pictorial tradition of genre painting. Thus, de Witte's work celebrates Adriane's virtue and prudence in her role as housewife (Franits. p. 92).



Emanuel de Witte, *Portrait of Adriana van Heusden and Her Daughter at the New Fish market in Amsterdam*, 1662, The National Gallery, London.

Foreigners often commented on the cleanliness of Dutch houses, including their front stoops. Surprisingly, there are very few depictions of women cleaning their homes. According to Franits, this suggests that Dutch “domestic images do not merely record or describe everyday reality but re-create it by representing stock subjects, formulated in response to pictorial traditions, to personal aesthetic interests, and even to market demands. While some subjects were highly popular, others never became firmly established within the limited artistic repertoire” (Franits, p. 95). Pictures of women cleaning are largely limited to women cleaning metal utensils, such as plates and pots, and some of women sweeping. In Gerard Dou’s painting, a servant girl scours kettles on a sill of an enclosure filled with clean shiny vessels.



Gerard Dou, *A Woman Scouring a Brass Pot at a Window*, 1660,
Collection of her Majesty the Queen, London.

Gabriel Metsu did a strikingly similar painting. In both pictures the women have rolled up their sleeves, a motif that suggests a virtuous hard workingwoman (Franits, p. 97).

Brooms are often pictured in domestic paintings near women, but there are few of women actually sweeping. One is of a servant sweeping by Pieter de Hooch.



Pieter de Hooch, *Mother and Child near a Window, with a Woman Sweeping*, 1665-67, The Wherner Collection, Luton Hoo, Bedfordshire.

Brooms are often pictured in domestic paintings near women, but there are few of women actually sweeping. One is of a servant sweeping by Pieter de Hooch. A maid carefully sweeps the floor in an already clean room while a woman behind her nurses her baby as the sunlight streams through the window, A picture of the descent from the cross hangs the mother and child. The viewer eye's eyes are drawn to the mother and child and the brightly framed painting even though the woman sweeping is at the center of the composition. Its meaning is unclear but it certainly adds to the sacredness and feeling of innocence and purity of the painting (Franits, p. 98). . Seventeenth-century writers often

By far the most popular domestic themes in seventeenth-century Dutch genre paintings of domesticity are of the housewife supervising her maids. The theme was commonly included in domestic conduct books of the period. There are many paintings, such as the one below, by Quiringh van Brekelenkam in which the housewife inspects the fish that the maid procured from a fish peddler, who in some pictures can be seen waiting outside through a door (Franits, p. 102-03).



Quiringh van Brekelenkam, *A Housewife Choosing Fish from a Maid*, 1664, Manchester City Art Gallery, Manchester.

There are also many pictures of women cooking with a maid or inspecting food for purchase, as in the de Hooch's picture below.



Pieter de Hooch, *Two Women and a Child by a Fireplace*, 1670-75, North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, N. C.

In de Hooch's painting below, a housewife helps her maid store linens in a large chest. Behind these women a child plays *colf*, a popular Dutch game that is a precursor to golf. Playing golf is an outdoor game and is often shown on ice in Dutch paintings. It is also a leisure game and might be interpreted as folly, except that is not likely the case here since it is associated with a child in this painting. Since the goal of golf is to send a ball straight to a distant target, it serves as a motif here for the diligence of the woman in securing valuable possessions. A seventeenth century viewer would have understood the roles of the women from their costumes. The woman on the left, wearing a black jacket and an

apron is a servant. She takes linens from the more elegantly dressed woman who is her mistress. A contemporary conduct writer observed, “apparel is one of those outward signs whereby the wisdom of masters and mistresses in well governing their servants is manifested to the world” (Franits, p. 104). Contemporaries would also have understood that the woman helping and supervising the servant shows that she is a diligent and careful housewife. Linens were a valuable commodity during the period and taking good care of these was not only good for the well-being of the household but also reflected the Calvinist notion of being a good steward of earthly goods.



Pieter de Hooch, *The Linen Chest*, 1663, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Housewives were expected to supervise the behavior and morals of their servants. One commentator warned the housewife:

She must have a diligent eye on the behavior of her servants, what meetings and greetings, what tickings and toyings, and what words and countenances there be between men and maides, lest such matters being neglected, there follow wantonnesse, yea folly, within their houses, which is a great blemish to the governors (Franits, p. 108).

Idleness was considered to be one of the chief vices of maids. Nicolaes Maes illustrates



Nicolaes Maes, *The Idle Servant*, 1665, The National Gallery, London.

this in a *The Idle Servant*. The housewife, wearing a luxurious jacket with ermine trim, looks at the viewer while gesturing to the sleeping maid. Various cooking pots and utensils are scattered on the floor. A menacing cat near the servant steals a plucked chicken while in the background the diners wait in vain for their meal. A proverb of the time stated “a kitchen maid must have one eye on the pan and the other on the cat” (Franits, p.108).

While there are a number of paintings of idle servants from the period, they are far outnumbered by paintings showing housewives and maids working harmoniously together for the well being of households. There are also some elaborate portraits of servants doing household tasks that show servants as interesting and complex human beings going about their domestic tasks. Since servants could not have afforded expensive paintings, these pictures demonstrate the importance diligent and competent servants to the running of a Dutch domestic household. A superb example of this is the painting above of a milkmaid by Johannes Vermeer, illustration below.

Conduct literature of the period urged servants to serve faithfully in their calling “as unto the Lord” and were urged to pray for their master’s prosperity (Franits, p. 108). Older Dutch social historians took the seventeenth century admonitions of servant behavior as descriptions of reality and argued that servants were treated like members of the kinship family and even ate at the same table. More recent social history research has shown that far from being treated and treasured as members of their mistress’ immediate family, they were hired on short contracts during the Golden Age of the Dutch Republic. Legal records are full of disputes between housemaids and their employers about servants’ wages, paternity suits against male members of the family, and abuse of servants. Dutch municipalities found it necessary to enact many codes to regulate relations between servants and masters (Franits, pp. 109-10). Thus, we should not take the many paintings of excellent relations between housewives and servants and in advice literature in the Dutch Republic as historical reality, but as an ideal toward society should strive.



Johannes Vermeer, *The Milkmaid, The Milkmaid*, 1657-58, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Moeder (Mother)

There are hundreds of images of parents and their children in Dutch Art of the Golden Age, although there are many more of mothers than fathers. Most of these paintings present an ideal of how to bring up children and were a reflection of the ideals

in hortatory books of the time. A universally held belief in the period was that children were a gift of God. As a contemporary expressed it, “our Lorde God . . . after hee had created our children, with his own precious blood hath redeemed them, and committed them to our trust and keeping, to be carefully governed, and diligently instructed” (Franits, p. 112). Whether authors saw children as innately innocent or prone to evil, they all agreed that they were highly impressionable and they could be taught to overcome basic instincts through sound training and education. The primary purpose of child rearing was seen as the creation virtuous and pious adults who would help to preserve a moral society. As Bartholomew Batty explained, “thou has begot children not only for thy self, but also for thy countrie. Which should not only bee to thyself a joy and pleasure, but also profitable and commodious afterwards unto the common wealth” (Franits, p. 112). Moreover, parents were told that the education of children must begin in the home, which should be like “*kleyne kercken*” (small churches) and be guided by scripture. This admonition is pictured in Andries van Bockhoven’s painting of his family.



Andries van Bockhoven *Portrait of the Painter's Family at the Table*, 1629, Centraal Museum, Utrecht.

The painter has arranged his parents and siblings in three rows: the artist and his brother, followed by his sisters in descending order in the second row, and his father and mother with the younger children in the third. His father and two of his sisters are holding religious books.

Dutch humanists, doctors and theologians of the period strongly urged women to breast-feed their own children. They considered this the most significant of all maternal duties. They argued this on the basis of natural and biblical authority. They held that breastfeeding showed the mother's love for her child and that it offered specific psychological and physical advantages. Contemporary medical theory held that mother's milk was actually blood that had withered in the breast and was similar to the blood that had nourished the child in her womb. They believed that personalities were rooted in blood and thus using a wet nurse could pass on unwanted personality traits. Moreover, they warned that a child might learn to love the wet nurse rather than the mother. As Jacob Cats noted, "How many a nice child, healthy and lively, / Has lost its own nature through a wicket wet nurse!" (Franits, p. 115). If wet nurses were necessary for medical reasons, then careful deliberation was needed in assessing the character of potential wet nurses. Pieter van Slingelandt's painting, below, celebrates a nursing mother while the husband provides their livelihood in the background. Each member of the family plays its appropriate role. In the lower right hand corner of the painting, a cat sits besides an overturned cooking pot and a plate of fish. Unlike many cats in other paintings, this cat sits placidly next to a tempting treat. The painting is a celebration of family harmony.

Pieter de Hooch's *Mother Nursing a Child*, illustrated below, focuses on the mother's tender glance at her child. He has provided an almost supernatural aura for the picture by enveloping the mother in a soft gentle light that suggests love and devotion and contrasted this with a sparse and pristine interior. There are numerous Dutch paintings of the period that celebrate mother's nursing her child. While there was a long tradition of paintings of Mary nursing the Christ child, the Dutch were the first to emphasize parental love of their children in secular art (Franits, p. 113-18).



Pieter van Slingelandt, *The carpenter's Family*, 1660-75, Collection of her Majesty the Queen, London.



Pieter de Hooch, *Woman Nursing a Child*, 1676-76, Detroit Institute of Arts.

Dutch artists also pictured mothers caring for their children, nursing sick children, placing them in cradles, and feeding and clothing them. Metsu's picture of a mother with a sick child is a famous picture of motherly love and of the Christian virtue of *caritas*. The frail child in its mother's lap, note its hollow and penetrating eyes. It suggests images of the *Pietà*. There is a picture of the Crucifixion on the back wall. The sick and almost lifeless child's pale skin contrasts with the strong colors in the rest of the picture. Some social historians have argued that because of the high infant and child mortality in the period in early modern Europe, parents were generally aloof to their children's suffering and even their mortality. Paintings such as this make one doubt such interpretations⁸ (Franits, p. 122).



Gabriel Metsu, *The Sick Child*, 1660-65, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

⁸ See, for example, Lawrence Stone's important study, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (1977).



Casper Netscher's *Woman Combing a Child's Hair*, 1669, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

In Netscher's painting, above, a luxuriously dressed young woman combs a boy's hair. This was not just a cosmetic task, but also a hygienic one since she is also delousing him. To her left, a little girl points to a mirror and sticks out her tongue at her reflection. Another woman, probably a maid, stands at the door and watches carrying a basin and

ewer. Various toys lie scattered on the floor. Contemporaries might have seen the painting as relating to the widespread belief that a well-groomed outer appearance can be equated with inner virtue. Toys on the floor are often associated with idleness and perhaps offer a contrast to the woman grooming a child. The same could be said of the girl's behavior, which appears naughty compared to her brother's quiet submission. Mirrors were a common motif in Dutch art and suggests of the need for self-examination (Franits pp. 124-27).



Gerard ter Borch, *Portrait of Wiesken Matthys Combing a Child's Hair*, 1652-53, Mauritshuis, The Hague.

This picture of a woman combing a child's hair, above, depicts ter Borch's stepmother. It is an example of what has been called "gentrified portraits," works in which a sitter participates in a narrative not drawn from literary or historical sources nor from pictorial traditions normally associated with portraiture (Franits, p. 128). The mother holds the comb carefully between her fingers to delouse the child who leans patiently against her. The child holds a piece of fruit. In seventeenth century literature, fruit was often used as a pedagogical metaphor since its growth and cultivation could be compared to raising children. Cats and others compared raising children to preparing land for planting and seeding. Properly trained children were often likened to well cultivated fruit, while their troublesome counterparts were portrayed as unpruned plants, weeds or thistles. The well-reared child in the painting testifies to the mother's skills and virtues as a housewife and mother. A pun in the period, that works in both English and Dutch is: "Lazy mother, Lousy kids" (Maurits, p. 130).

Parents were expected to find proper careers for their children in accordance with their calling. They should carefully observe the inclinations and aptitude of their children and steer them to suitable occupations in accordance with their gender, which was rooted in nature. Jacob Cats illustrated this principle in a print, below, entitled Children's Games. In the lower left of the print, girls play with dolls and replicas of household utensils. A group of boys dressed as soldiers march past them to the beat of a drum. Cats explains that gender based aptitudes are first revealed in in childhood.

See how human nature
Is revealed in early youth!
The little girl plays with the dolls,
The little boy shows more courage;
The little girl rocks the cradle,
The little boy beats the drum;
The little girl plays with the small objects
That are useful in the kitchen;
The little boy plays with a harmless lance
Like rough men do. (Franits, p. 134)



Kinderspel (Children's Games), Houwelijck. Dat is de gansche gelegentheyt des echtes staets, Middleburg, 1625, Franits Collection, Syracuse, NY.



Michael Nouts (attributed to), *Family Group*, circa 1655, The National Gallery, London

Boys are not only pictured playing at adventurous activities but also shown studying for professional careers. In Michael Nouts' *Family Group*, a young girl holds up her doll to the delight of a toddler while the proud father points to his son holding up a thick book, perhaps a Bible. In almost all Dutch portraits of family groups from the period, children are grouped with the parent according to gender (Franits, p. 135).



Quiringh Gerritsz, van Brekelenkam, *Woman Teaching Girls to Make Lace*, 1654, Richard Green Galleries, London.

Dutch artists of the period produced many pictures of women teaching girls household tasks. Brekelenkam shows two girls diligently making lace with a seated woman. A third has risen from her chair to receive what seem to be instructions. The seated woman does not appear to be the mother. A purse hangs from the girl's chair and a cloak is draped over the table behind it. Cushions for making lace are neatly arranged on a shelf. The picture has been interpreted as a 'school' where girls came to learn lacemaking. We know that schools to teach girls needlework existed from seventeenth century advertisements and from the samplers they produced (Franits, pp. 136-37).

Moralists, humanists and theologians urged parents to provide discipline for their children when they strayed from the righteous path. One commentator urged parents in 1622 to apply a "physicke to purge out much corruption which lurketh in children, and as a salve to heale many wounds and sores made by their folly" (Franits, p. 138).



Nicolaes Maes, *The Naughty Drummer*, 1656-57, Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, Lugano

Nicolaes Maes painted a mother threatening a sobbing young boy with a birch branch to stop him from playing his drum while a baby is trying to sleep. Above the mother is a mirror in which the painter is reflected. The presence of the painter has been interpreted as indicating that the virtue of parents in disciplining their children was metaphorically compared to painting. As one writer noted: “Like a painter’s canvas on which nothing is sketched, the painter can picture anything he likes: but does he want? He can decorate it with beautiful flowers, with lands, capes or with pastoral scenes” (Franits, p. 140). Many contemporaries, but perhaps not Puritans, saw a child’s personality, or soul, as a *tabula rasa* on which either good or evil could be imprinted.

One of the most important duties of parents was to inculcate moral and spiritual precepts in their children. Teaching children about religion was also the duty of the church and school but it was believed that the parents should begin this at an early age. Advice books suggested that the best time for teaching young children moral and religious values was when families shared meals. Sixteenth century German prints were among the first to show a family eating around a table. Pietist writers, as well as Erasmus, urged the father to lead the family in prayers before a meal. Dutch artists and writers often referred to King David's description of family life in Psalm 128 (Franits p. 142).

You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you. Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table.



Gortzius Geldorp, *Portrait of a Family Saying Grace*, 1602, Private Collection, in Franits, p. 144.

The use of a grapevine in pictures of families was a motif of the mother's fecundity. Gortzius Geldorp included a grapevine and olive branches in his *Portrait of a Family Saying Grace*. The parents demonstrate the proper way to pray by the folding of

hands and sitting still and the children follow their example. Prayers and religious instructions took place at the mid-day meal when everyone was most likely to be present. The Dutch Pietist Willem Teellinck described his presence at a Puritan family's mid-day meal:

The whole family gathered, and then they read a chapter together; thus prepared by reading the Word, they unanimously invoked the name of the Lord. Afterwards at the table, they spoke about the things that each of them contemplated in the chapter. After the meal they sang a Psalm together, and everyone returned to his work (Franits, p. 147).

The custom of praying before the meal is pictured in many prints



Claes Jansz. Visscher, *Prayer before the Meal*, engraving, 1609, Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam.

There are also paintings of humbler families praying before their meals. In Jan Steen's painting, below, parents prepare to serve food to their children. The little girl with her hands folded in prayer stares straight ahead. Her brother has respectfully folded his hat and perhaps has folded his hands beneath it. A dog in the foreground licks a dinner



Jan Steen, *A Peasant Family at Mealtime, Grace Before the Meat*, pot. The animal seems to violate the sanctity of the moment. Dutch literature often used Plutarch's story about two dogs to illustrate the need to train both dogs and children. One dog learned how to hunt and behave according to his calling, while the other licked the cooking pot and became slovenly and lazy. The dog pictured is a German beagle used for hunting and is used to demonstrate the need for proper training. Jacob Cats' proverb explains the meaning: "Accustom a greyhound to the pot/ A hunting dog becomes a kitchen fool" (Franits, p. 151).



Jan Steen, *Prayer Before the Meal*, 1660,

In Jan Steen's painting above, a poor family affirms its faith in God before a simple meal while a dog licks the pot. The mother folds the young child's hands while the older boy looks up to heaven. Above them is a *belkroon* (a crown with a bell) with the first two words-Pa [ter] Nos [ter] of the Lord's Prayer inscribed on it. The dog licking the pot is a griffon, now an extinct breed. They were French lap dogs of French upper class women and thus do not fit in with the social class of the family. This is perhaps another metaphor of the contrast between the pious family and the untrained and inappropriateness of the dog in this scene (Franits, pp. 152-53).

There are also depictions of children with well-behaved dogs. In Saerendam's print, below, the little girl prays before receiving her food while the boy doffs his hat after having received his. The children carry books as if they are about to leave for

school. The little dog sits patiently on its hind legs hoping for a bit of food and alludes to the docility of well-behaved children.



Jan Saenredam, after Hendrick Goltzius, *Morning*, 1594, engraving from the series, *The Four Times of the Day*, Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam.



Jan Claesz. *Portrait of a Five-Year-Old Boy*, 1609, Private Collection, in Franits, p. 160.

Dutch art of the period also has many images of children with a well-trained horse. Jan Claesz. pictured a well-dressed young boy, illustration above, in an arcade holding a small horse with an ornate breast collar. The boy holds a riding whip in his hand and has a tight grip on the reins. Some historians have argued that dressing children in adult clothes suggests that there was little sense of childhood in the period and that children were treated as small adults. The art of the period suggests otherwise. The art and literature of the period demonstrates that parents did not neglect their children and were well aware of the problems and needs in this distinct stage of life. The pictures of well-behaved children reflected positively upon the training provided by their parents, and especially their mothers who were expected to devote themselves to the training and education of young children (Franits, pp. 159-60).

Weduwe (Widow)

Compared to those produced in other European countries, there are a surprisingly large number of seventeenth century Dutch paintings of the elderly. Rembrandt's *tronies*-pictures without much background that depict a head, bust or sometimes a half-length figure--are famous. There are also many portraits of well-to do older individuals, but there are also many genre paintings of the elderly. This suggests that there must have been a market for these paintings. Some of these pictures show the old as representing vices, such as avarice, but there are also many that show them as virtuous. In Jacob Cat's last chapter of *Houwelyck* is *Weduwe* (Widowhood) he examines the transience of human existence (illustrated by their decrepitude), the need to repent for former sins, and to reject material interests for spiritual ones. He also includes a section with practical advice for widows on whether they should remarry. His ideas were culled from classical, humanist and theological sources and were widely shared by his contemporaries (Franits, p. 161). Writers of the period identified old age as a "sickness" and deteriorating health that would inevitably lead to death. His verses about old age, written in his own *Ouderdom* (Old Age) in his seventies are touching:

Surely old age brings us to Reason,
 Or sends her messengers all through our body;
 She strikes us on our arm, chest or weak foot
 And teaches us that soon we have to depart from here (Franits, p. 162).

Other writers were more critical. Adriaen van de Venne dismissed the aged as already having one foot in the grave. Cats argued that the old had more wisdom, particularly about spiritual and philosophical matters.

The elderly find thousands of lessons in themselves, in their infirmities, in the graveyard of flowers (alluding to the gray hair) growing on their head and in their beard, each of which can serve as a sermon to prepare their house for their heirs, their bodies to the belly of the earth and their soul for the judgment of God (Franits, p. 163).



Pieter Danckerts de Ry, *Portrait of an Old Woman with her Grandson*, present location unknown, Franits, p. 163.

There are relatively few portraits of old women, but those that exist tend to focus on their spiritual qualities. In Pieter Danckerts de Rij's *Portrait of an Old Woman and her Grandson*, above, the grandmother sits with a Bible in her lap, gazes knowingly at the viewer and rests her hand on an hourglass, long a symbol of the transitory nature of life. By contrast the young son points to a celestial globe and completes the *vanitas*. Abraham van den Tempel's portrait, below, presents a similar idea. A widow, identified as such by her mourning veil, sits in an elegant portico with her hand resting on the Bible. The tulips emphasize the ephemeral nature of life.



Abraham van den Tempel, *Portrait of a Woman*, present location unknown, Franits, p. 164.

Many genre paintings focus on the piety of the elderly. In a picture attributed to Abraham van Dyck, below, an aged couple say grace before their simple meal in a plain interior. The woman is the central focus of the painting and her wrinkled face and intense gaze, and gnarled hands, demonstrate the intensity of her prayer. Broken pots are traditional symbol of transitoriness. Their devoutness and old age caution the viewer to practice godliness in one's brief life. The old man's fur hat and heavy clothing suggest winter. (Franits, pp. 166-67).



Abraham van Dyck (attributed to), *Elderly Couple Saying Grace*, Private Collection, Franits, p. 67).

Old age and winter are linked traditionally since many living things lie dormant or are already dead. Johannes Sadeler's print, below, of 1590, *Winter*, shows an old man in the foreground wearing thick fur lined clothing. He sits on a small hill near a fire and is surrounded by provisions to get him through the winter. Note that he is praying and a light from heaven points to his simple meal. The inscriptions states that his provisions are

a just reward for his hard work and are there to get him through the rest of his brief existence (Franits, p. 168).



Johannes Sadeler, *Winter*, engraving, 1580, Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam.

In a series on the months of the year, illustration below, Joachim von Sandrart's *December* depicts an elderly woman wearing fur-lined clothing. She shields a brightly burning candle in a dark interior. The candle illuminates her wrinkled features, the hourglass and especially the skull on the table. Joost van den Vondel, the most important Dutch playwright and poet of the period, wrote a poem in honor of the painting.

How the Winter-month grieves, like a widow in mourning.
 Her candle goes out and her hourglass is near empty.
 The skull predicts Death, who closes the swing-gate of life.
 The bare winter resembles a widow close to death.
 Still roasting chestnuts: her time is running out.
 What is a widow? A shadow with one foot in the grave (Franits, p.168).



Joachim von Sandrart, *December* (from the series *The Twelve Months of the Year*), 1643, Schleissheim Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Schloss Schleissheim.

Gerard Dou's *Old Woman Saying Grace* (1645), illustration below, shows an old woman wearing a garment lined with fur in a ramshackle interior praying fervently. According to the ideal standards of the time, old women whose husbands had died were to live out their lives soberly and circumspectly. They were advised not to remarry but to remain at home, leading a pious and secluded life out of respect for their deceased

husband. She is depicted as a *topos* without any individuality. He has surrounded her with motifs that suggests virtue and *vanitas*. The spinning wheel on the right and the sewing basket on the left refer to domestic virtue. The extinguished candle on the table near the window is a traditional symbol of transitory life. The cleanly scoured metal pot on the lower left foreground is another motif of *vanitas* (Franits, pp. 169-172).



Gerard Dou, *Old Woman Saying Grace*, Alte Pinakothek, Munich

In Godfried Schalken's picture, below, *An Old Woman at a Window, Scouring a Pot*, a wizened old woman scours a gleaming pot in a niche-like enclosure. The enclosure forces us to contemplate the significance of the gleaming pot and utensils. There is also a

broken earthenware vessel, which is a common symbol of evanescence. The leathery skin of the woman and her spectacles send the same message. It has been argued that this picture is an allegory of the fleeting nature of life (Franits, p. 172).



Godfried Schalcken, *An Old Woman at a Window Scouring a Pot*, 1660,
The National Gallery of Art, London.

Rembrandt and his followers popularized *tronies*. They concentrated on a single figure with an exaggerated facial expression and without any decoration of the background and often depicted individuals with wizened skin and wearing furs and heavy clothing. *Tronies* of elderly women are often *vanitas* paintings and allow us to concentrate on their inner emotions and spirituality. A good example is Rembrandt van Rijn's *Old Woman Praying* (Franits, p. 175).



Rembrandt van Rijn, *Old Woman Praying*, 1630, Landessammlungen-Residenzgalerie, Salzburg



Nicolaes Maes, *Old Woman Saying Grace*, circa 1656, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

The genre painting of Nicolaes Maes, *Old Woman Saying Grace*, above, known as *Prayer Without End*, shows a woman earnestly praying before a simple Lenten-like meal of fish, soup, bread and cheese. On the ledge are such *vanitas* items as an hourglass and Bible. The woman in the picture is probably a widow. Books addressed to widows exhort them to lead wholesome, simple lives and to pursue moderation in all things. In a published letter of 1630, a Mennonite provided this advice to his sister-in-law after the death of her husband:

The greatest honor and praise for widows is moderation in all her doings: moderation not only in food, in the care of her body, in her clothing, demeanor and behavior but also with regard to her family, when she is in the presence of other people, in front of authorities and familial friends (Franits, p.176).



Gerard Dou, *Old Woman Eating Porridge*, 1637, Private Collection.

There are also many pictures of old women living in moderation. In Gerard Dou's painting, above, old woman wearing a fur-lined cape, which suggests that this is the winter of her life, eats from a chipped bowl in spartan surroundings that includes a large spinning wheel. On the table beside her a gleaming pot rests on a large book, which is probably a Bible. A broom, a vat, and an empty pitcher are on the floor. All these symbols add up to a *vanitas* painting.



Jacob Cats illustration from *Houwelyck*. *Dat is de gansche gelegentheyt des echten staets*, Middleburg, 1625.

There are also many Dutch paintings of the period that depict widows engaged in domestic tasks. Jacob Cats' print in his *Weduwe* (Widow) chapter in *Houwelyck* depicts an old woman wearing a cap with flaps with a prominent point, which denotes that she is a widow, sews in a large interior. Her basket and scissors are beside her. In the foreground, a skeletal hand places a freshly cut tulip into a glass vase filled with water. According to Cats, the tulip is the widow severed from her husband.

Imagine a little flower, which cut from the stem
 With a sharp knife, has suffered its first death,
 Which now, after being picked, is put in a narrow vase, in water;

There stands the tender plant, confined,
There it withers, covered with tears,
There it mourns, there it droops,
Its consolation, even life, is a sorrowful fluid . . .
See there, oh pious people, see there a true symbol
For those whose marriage has ended and who sleep without a guardian,
For those who have been suddenly separated from their husband
(Franits, p. 179).

Cats goes on to explain the proper behavior for a widow. They should lead secluded lives, shunning all problematic people and profligate behavior. They should be careful when attending gatherings where men are present and even when going to the market. Ideally, they should stay home engaged in domestic tasks.



Nicolaes Maes, *An Old Woman Spinning*, 1650-1660), Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

In a painting by Nicolaes Maes an old woman in a sparse and poorly lit room spins. Light comes in from a small high window and throws a gentle light on her wrinkled facial features as she is absorbed in her solitary and industrious labor.

In an early painting of Gerard Dou, *Old Woman Peeling Apples*, we see an elderly woman wearing a fur-lined garment, which she has turned up to hold the apples she is peeling. Dou stocked the room with objects that appear regularly with elderly women: a chipped bowl, a gleaming metal cauldron, and a lace-making cushion. The only unusual thing in the painting is a painting of Christ and the Samaritan woman on the wall in the background. In the Gospel of John, Christ reproves the woman for having had five husbands. The solitary widow peeling apples offers a marked contrast (Franits, pp. 182-83).



Gerard Dou, *Old Woman Peeling Apples*, 1630s, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz.

The domestic task that elderly women perform most often in Dutch art of the period is the last stage of the spinning process, when spun thread is wound from the bobbin of the spinning, wheel onto a cross-reel. This can be seen in Gerard Dou's painting, *Old Woman Winding Thread in a Niche* (1660-65). The cross-reel is a gauging device. Its presence in the painting can be seen as alluding to temperance, virtue and patiently dealing with her last stage in life. A contemporary noted that near the end of their lives, people "acquire other blessings of the soul, such as wisdom, moderation and other virtues befitting old people" (Franits, pp. 183-84).



Gerard Dou, *Old Woman Winding Thread in a Niche*, 1660-65, Hermitage, St. Petersburg.

There are also Dutch pictures of old women doing domestic tasks in the company of their husband, as in Abraham de Pape, *Elderly Couple in an Interior* (1658). Here an old woman winds thread onto a cross-reel while her white-bearded husband warms his gnarled hands near a fire. Contemporary physiology held that old age was characterized by an excessive loss of heat and moisture. The couple leads a simple life and, according to contemporary writers, such a life allows them to more easily give up worldly material goods and prepare themselves for their eternal reward (Franits, pp. 187-88).



Abraham de Pape, *Elderly Couple in an Interior*, 1659, The National Gallery, London.

Widows were expected to serve as role models for young women and girls. This not only involved instructing them in domestic matters, but they were also expected to model proper moral behavior. In Gerard ter Borch's *A Widow Peeling Apples* (1650) a woman peels apples in the presence of an inquisitive girl. The woman appears to be relatively young but her mourning veil indicates that she is a

widow. The motifs of a sewing basket and embroidery cushion attest to the domestic tasks expected of a widow. The bowl of fruit on the table may refer to a pedagogical emblem of Roemer Visscher, “*Vroeg rijp, vroech rot*” (Early to ripen, Early to rot), suggesting that children need early training if they are to lead moral and productive lives (Franits, p. 189).



Gerard ter Borch, *A Widow Peeling Apples*, Vienna, Gemäldegalerie, Kunsthistorisches Museum

Old women providing virtuous instruction to children can be seen in Quiringh Brekelenkam's picture of a woman carefully combing a boy's hair. The boy's head is turned so that she can inspect his scalp and the way she holds the comb suggests that she is delousing him. Outer appearance was often linked to inner virtue. Thus, the child is not only having his hair combed but also he is also spiritually and morally pure. The hornbook and lunch lying nearby on the floor beside him, which suggests that he is going to school, reinforce this. The woman's leathery skin, pince-nez and gnarled hands suggest she is too old to be his mother. She is fulfilling the expected elderly female role of helping to train the young and demonstrating how to live a pious and moral life (Franits, pp. 191-93).



Quiringh van Brekelenkam, *Old Woman Combing a Child's Hair*, 1648, Stedelijk Museum de Lakenhal, Leiden.

Seventeenth-century images of women in Dutch art provide us with a good deal of insight into the nature of Dutch art of the period, the structure of Dutch society, and the role of women in that society. The popularity and number of paintings depicting mostly bourgeois and ordinary women in domestic environments was a major innovation in Western art. It was part of the larger innovations of Western European art of the period that satisfied a bourgeois demand for paintings of ordinary people doing ordinary things. As such the art reflected the demand of a large middle class in the most urbanized and wealthiest economy in Europe for an art that reflected their values. As Franits concludes, the “pictures do represent plausible realities, but these realities were fundamentally structured by a culture that privileged males. They therefore resonate with an entire set of values, ideals and even prejudices, all of which reflect common attitudes toward women at the time.” This even extended to style, as in portraiture in which “a different aesthetic governs the representation of women as opposed to men” (Franits, p. 196). In genre paintings, “the individuality of women is very often downplayed in the interest of having them signify . . . an appropriate feminine virtue . . . analogous to the prescriptions of contemporary literature.” They reflect the motherly and housewifery roles assigned to them during the period and “illuminate the subordinate position of women in Dutch society.” These norms were not passively reflected in Dutch art “but were actively and gracefully articulated in images that celebrate the virtues of home life with unparalleled beauty and subtlety” (Franits, p. 197). Art, in other words, was a handmaiden in promoting a subordinate and domestic role for women in Dutch society, and it did so more than a century before the domestic role for women that we associate with industrial European society that we call Victorian.