

Domestic Genres and Women Painters in Northern Europe

The conditions that made possible the participation of relatively large numbers of women in the art of Northern Europe predate the seventeenth century. Women in the North appear to have enjoyed greater freedom and mobility in the professions than their contemporaries in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Although substantial documentation is missing, women's names already appear in fifteenth-century archives in Flanders. Archives of the studio of Guillaume Vrelant, which produced many volumes of illuminated manuscripts in Bruges, mention an Elisabeth Scepens who was Vrelant's student in 1476 and did some work for the court of Burgundy (as did Margaretha van Eyck earlier in the century with her brothers Jan and Hubert). After Vrelant's death, Scepens ran the business with his widow (who, like many women of the time, inherited the business on the death of her husband) and she is listed as a member of the artist's guild from 1476 to 1489. In 1482, Agnes van den Bossche secured an important commission to paint the Maid of Ghent on a banner for her hometown; in 1520, a group of marching widows in a procession of the city guilds caught Dürer's eye when he visited Antwerp and he noted their presence in his journal.

Like Anguissola in Italy, the two best-known northern women painters of the sixteenth century were supported by royal families: Caterina van Hemessen as painter to Mary of Hungary, the sister of Charles V of Spain (after she abdicated her regency of the Low Countries and returned to Spain); Levina Teerlinc at the English court of Henry VIII. Van Hemessen, the daughter of the prominent Antwerp painter Jan Sanders van Hemessen, was trained by her father and may be the so-called Brunswick Monogrammist identified with him. Her religious paintings include a *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* (1555) and a *Christ and Veronica*, as well as several paintings by her father on which she appears to have worked.

A pair of signed portraits, executed in 1551 and 1552, depict a stylish couple against a dark ground in three-quarter views with the direct and sensitive realism characteristic of her work. Van Hemessen



49 Caterina van Hemessen
Portrait of a Man c. 1550

married Christian de Morien, the organist at Antwerp Cathedral, in 1554 and the pair were taken to Spain by Mary. Although she provided for the couple for life, no work remains from the Spanish period.

Levina Teerlinc, who was invited to England by Henry VIII and retained as court painter by his three successors—Edward VI, Mary I, and Elizabeth I—was one of a number of Flemish women artists, among them Katherine Maynors, Alice Carmellion, Ann Smiter, and the Hornebout family, who were active in England in the production of miniatures, then extremely popular as articles of dress. Teerlinc was the eldest of five daughters of the miniaturist Simon Bining and was the only portrait miniature painter of Flemish origin known to have been employed at court between the death of Hans Holbein the Younger in 1543 and the emergence in 1570 of Nicholas Hilliard (the first native-born miniaturist in English history and the man whose subsequent career almost entirely eclipsed hers). She married a painter named George Teerlinc and by January 1546 her name appears in court account books as “king’s paintrix.” Not until 1599 was Hilliard granted an annuity equal to hers, forty pounds a year, and hers was higher than that granted to Holbein. Comparisons such as these can



50 First Great Seal of Elizabeth I, 1559, probably after a design by Levina Teerlinc

be misleading, however, as court painters were customarily paid with gifts as well as money.

Although Teerlinc's life at court, where she was Gentlewoman of the Privy Chamber, is well documented, little work has been firmly attributed to her. As gentlewoman to Queen Elizabeth, Teerlinc had to present her with a New Year's gift each year. They begin in 1559 with a small picture of the Trinity and include annual gifts of miniatures. Teerlinc is probably the first painter for whom the Queen sat and Roy Strong identifies these images as important documentary evidence of the appearance of the young Elizabeth before her cult transformed her into an iconic image. Elizabethan state portraiture played an important role in the vast struggle concerning images which divided the reformed and Roman churches in sixteenth-century England and Teerlinc's part in establishing the conventions which led to an imperial iconography of the Elizabethan court deserves further study. Strong has attributed the first frontal majestic images of the Queen, the image on the Great Seal and numerous documents, to drawings by Teerlinc and the origins of the representation of Elizabeth Virgo must be sought in her images.

Van Hemessen and Teerlinc were part of a strong tradition of court patronage for women from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Court appointments exempted women from guild regulation during the Renaissance and they provided women artists with an important alternative to academies and other institutions which increasingly restricted or prohibited their participation. As gentlewomen and painters, women's social and professional lives were elided; their

presence at court both affirmed the breadth of court patronage and ensured that educated and skilled women were available as teachers and attendants.

During the second half of the sixteenth century northern artists continued to travel to Italy for training; after that, they increasingly received their professional training in Holland where the guild system remained firmly in place. Although we know of no women painters engaged in landscape and history painting during this period, the spread of humanism and the educational and domestic ideology of the Protestant Reformation increased literacy among women in the North and their participation in the visual arts. By the seventeenth century, Northern European art was dominated by new, middle-class ideals reflecting the growth of commerce and the Protestant Church. A domestic ideology shifted attention from the church to the home, particularly after the iconoclastic fury of the mid-century restricted art to that produced for the home. The themes that characterize Dutch seventeenth-century painting—still-life, genre scenes, flower painting, and topographical landscape—reflect the prosperity of the middle class and the emergence of painting as a secure investment for a non-aristocratic clientele seeking art for their homes.

Dutch seventeenth-century painting continues to challenge art history's emphasis on Italian Renaissance art as a model. When artists—whether because of Protestant interdictions against religious images in seventeenth-century Holland, or the later focus on leisure by a growing middle class in nineteenth-century France—have turned to everyday life for subjects, the results have often diverged sharply from the conventions of Italian painting. Yet those conventions continue to color our ideas about spectatorship, content, and patronage. To paint everyday life is to paint the activities of women and children, as well as those of men; and to record the realities of domestic spaces, as well as to aggrandize public, historical, religious, and mythological events.

The art that developed in Holland (the term commonly used in English for the seven United Provinces that formed the Dutch Republic) in the seventeenth century reflects the antihumanism of Dutch Calvinism, the rapid growth and spread of the natural sciences, and the wide-ranging changes in family life and urban living that grew out of this prosperous, literate, Protestant culture. Although an official hierarchy of subject-matter reflected in theory that of Italian painting (with historical subjects at the top and still-life at the bottom), in fact, painters of flower pieces were among the highest paid

artists of the time. And although Calvinism recapitulated the medieval call for chastity and obedience for women, the realities of Dutch life encouraged a diversity of activity for women and a level of self-development that enabled a number of them to become professional painters. The variety of subjects in Dutch painting is far greater than indicated here, and the relationship of Dutch artists to Italian art far more complex, but an examination of two areas of Dutch painting—genre and flower painting—reveals new aspects of the intersection of gender and representation.

A famous critique of northern art attributed by Francisco de Hollanda to Michelangelo is among the first accounts to weigh the differences between Italian and northern painting in terms of gender. "Flemish painting . . . will . . . please the devout better than any painting of Italy," Michelangelo is recorded to have said. "It will appeal to women, especially to the very old and the very young, and also to monks and nuns and to certain noblemen who have no sense of true harmony. In Flanders they paint with a view to external exactness or such things as may cheer you and of which you cannot speak ill, as for example saints and prophets. They paint stuffs and masonry, the green grass of the fields, the shadow of trees, and rivers and bridges, which they call landscapes, with many figures on this side and many figures on that. And all this, though it pleases some persons, is done without reason or art, without symmetry or proportion, without skilful choice or boldness and, finally, without substance or vision." This criticism of northern painting as lacking symmetry and harmony (that is, mathematical proportion and ideal form), and as therefore inferior to Italian painting and worthy of the admiration only of women, the pious, and the uneducated, draws striking distinctions between the painting of northern and southern Europe. If, as Svetlana Alpers has argued, Italian Renaissance art elaborates the viewer's measured relationship to objects in space, praises mastery in mathematics and literature, and asserts a process of art-making aimed at the intellectual possession of the world, then Dutch art functions very differently. In Dutch painting, pictures serve as descriptions of the seen world and as moralizing commentaries on life rather than as reconstructions of human figures engaged in significant actions. In "Art History and Its Exclusions: The Example of Dutch Art," Alpers convincingly demonstrates the implications of this distinction for the representation of women in Dutch art and for transforming the relationship between the artist as male observer and the woman observed: "The attitude toward women in [Italian] art—toward the central image of the nude in

particular—is part and parcel of a commanding attitude taken towards the possession of the world." By contrast, Dutch genre painting details women's occupation in the activities of everyday life, while paintings of single female figures in interiors, like Vermeer's many works on the themes of women reading or sewing which begin in the middle of the seventeenth century, use the absorption of these activities to draw attention to the elusiveness of women as subjects. No longer emphasizing the tension between a male viewer and woman as the object of sight, available for male viewing pleasure, Vermeer and other northern artists allowed woman her own self-possession, her own unavailability to control by another's gaze. Instead, the gaze of the artist/spectator lingers over the surfaces of objects, enjoying the play of light on rich fabrics, the subtlety of color and the fineness of detail that make up the painting's surface. What Alpers has called a "mapping" of the surfaces of objects, with its close attention to materiality and detail, has important implications for feminist readings. Elevating grandiose conception over intimate observation, writers on art from Michelangelo to Sir Joshua Reynolds have identified the detail with the "feminine." "To focus on the detail," Naomi Schor suggests in *Reading in Detail*, "and more particularly on the *detail as negativity* is to become aware . . . of its participation in a larger semantic network, bounded on the one side by the *ornamental*, with its traditional connotations of effeminacy and decadence, and on the other, by the *everyday*, whose 'prosiness' is rooted in the domestic sphere of life presided over by women."

Much Dutch genre painting of this period does indeed lovingly catalogue the images and objects of the Dutch household, and its middle-class and Protestant orientation contributed to new social roles for the artist and new kinds of content. The relatively low prices paid by a large public interested in paintings as embellishment for the home encouraged the recruiting of artists primarily from middle- and lower-class families, and a continuing lack of distinction between painting and other craft traditions which provided furnishing for the home. The role of women as spectators in seventeenth-century Holland, actively making decisions about the circulation and consumption of images, remains to be analysed and theorized.

The use of the term "genre" to describe paintings of everyday life is relatively recent. In the seventeenth century paintings were identified by subject; scenes of daily life ranged from banquet and brothel paintings to interiors, family groups, and women and servants engaged in domestic activities. There is evidence to suggest that over

the century the content of these paintings, whose numbers increase steadily up to the 1660s and then grow sharply in the 1670s, moved from allegorical or emblematic to more descriptive. The debate about whether to read these images as symbolic or realist continues, but it appears that many paintings both describe actual scenes and have pictorial sources in popular emblematic literature like Jacob Cats's emblem books (in which a motto, a picture, and a commentary elicit a moral injunction).

Seventeenth-century Holland also had a large and powerful group of non-professional practitioners of the arts. When Houbraken published his *Groote Schouburgh der Nederlantsche Konstschilders en Schilderessen* (The Story of Netherlandish Painters and Paintresses) in 1718, he placed next to a portrait of Rembrandt one of Anna Maria Schurman, an accomplished scholar and feminist who drew, painted, and etched as an amateur (and who was admitted to the Utrecht Guild of St. Luke in 1641). Although two self-portraits are the only works that exist today by Schurman's hand, the woman that Dutch poets called their "Sappho and their Corneille" was an important voice in the call for independent women in Dutch culture.

The Protestantism of Dutch art eliminated the Blessed Virgin as a female model, while the lack of a strong Neoplatonic movement in the North prevented the identification of female form with ideal beauty in painting. Instead, the imagery of the home assumed a central place in Dutch iconography—as a microcosm of the properly governed commonwealth and as emblematic of education and the domestication of the senses. The well-ordered household, a condition for an orderly society, consisted of the family, their servants and belongings. Within the home, the primary emblem of the domestic virtue that ensured the smooth running of society was the image of a woman engaged in needlework, sewing, embroidery or lacemaking.

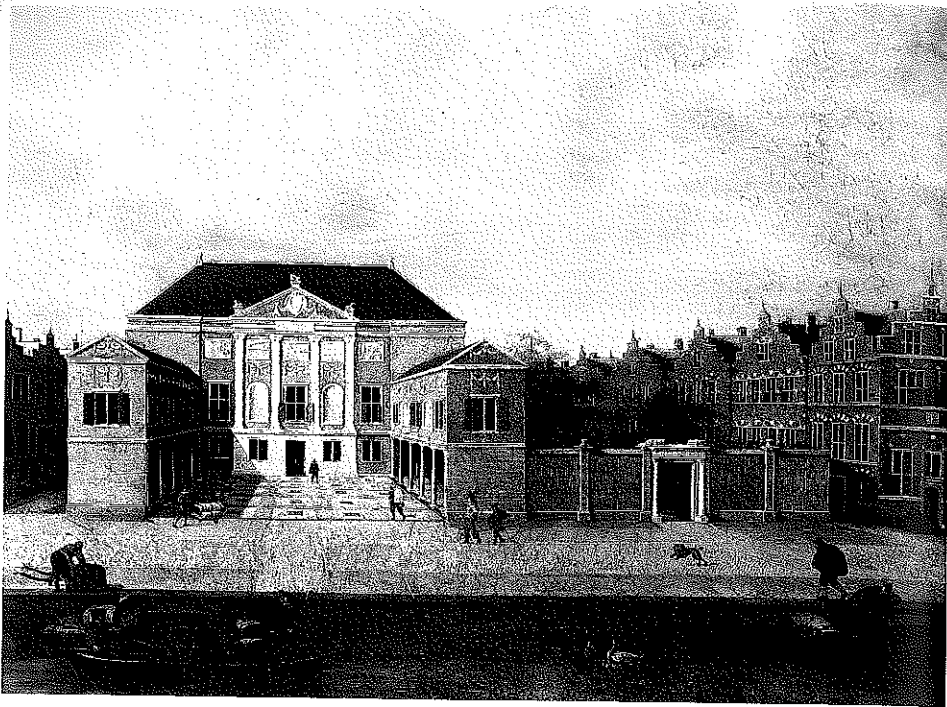
The imagery of the domestic interior provides a context in which to observe the increasing prosperity of the Dutch Republic through the material goods that fill the home. There are surprisingly few paintings that have as their subject the actual commerce and trade that underlie the seventeenth century's wealth, for such subjects could not easily be reconciled with Calvinist ambivalence toward the acquisition of money. The domestic interior, on the other hand, was a worldly embodiment of Christian principles and an appropriate setting for the display of goods. These paintings offer a multi-layered view of the realities of Dutch social and economic life at the time, including the gendered division of labor in key occupations like cloth



51 Anna Maria Schurman
Self-Portrait 1633

production. They also warn of the dangers of unrestrained female sexuality (for example, the negative implications of men and women "exchanging" places in activities related to cloth production).

During the course of the century, images of men and women weaving and spinning underwent significant changes in response to shifts in domestic ideology, as well as in cloth production. In 1602, the governor of Leiden's guild of say-weaving (a cloth like serge) commissioned a series of eleven glass paintings depicting the process of say-cloth manufacture in Leiden (along with Haarlem the major center of cloth production). All that remains are eleven preparatory drawings by Isaac Claesz van Swanenburgh. Linda Stone has shown the drawings to depict the industry in a favorable and idealizing light. In *Spinning and Weaving*, men and women work together in a large room but, as in other depictions of labor, men do the actual weaving while women's activities are restricted to washing, spinning, winding, and carding the wool. Women were prohibited from certain aspects of making cloth in professional workshops and working conditions for women and children were far worse than those for men. Many children, especially orphans, worked fourteen-hour days for a couple of pennies a week. The organization of cloth production by entrepreneurs ("drapiers"



52 Susanna van Steenwijck-Gaspoel *The Lakenhal* 1642

wealthy enough to afford the purchase of raw materials which they then jobbed out to spinners and weavers) encouraged a strict division of labor and the use of women and children as a means of keeping wages low.

By the 1630s, the pure woolen industry in Leiden was prominent enough for its guild to establish a guildhall (*lakenhal*) of its own. A local artist, Susanna van Steenwijck-Gaspoel, was commissioned in 1642 to execute a painting of the new building. The wife of the architectural painter, Hendrik van Steenwijck de Jonge, she was paid six hundred guilders for the painting (an astonishing sum at a time when most non-historical paintings sold on the open market for less than fifty guilders each). The building is rendered in a simplified, almost schematic, style which clearly emphasizes its architectural details, including five sculptured plaques on the facade showing the cloth production process.

By mid-century, paintings by Cornelis Decker, Thomas Wijck, Gilles Rombouts, and others had firmly established the conventions for depicting weaving as a cottage industry in which the weaving itself is always done by a man (though often a woman sews or spins nearby). Such paintings emphasize the accoutrements of weaving and the lower-class nature of the occupation, as opposed to the large-scale manufacture of wool and linen in Leiden and Haarlem. They reinforce a tradition of commending workers' industriousness which originates in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century emblem books and didactic tracts. In Jacob Cats's emblems, the weaver's shuttle is a *memento mori*, a reminder that life flies past as swiftly as the shuttle moves across the loom. There is evidence to suggest, however, that these depictions of industrious weavers replace earlier and more vulgar representations carried over from medieval times which equate the mechanical motion of the loom with copulation. Linda Stone has located the shift from this view to a new respect for a pious laity in the evolution of Reformation thinking. In Biblical and mythological tales, the Virgin appears frequently as the spinner of life, a model of female virtue to be emulated by other women. Representations of women spinning in Dutch art increasingly refer not to the profession of cloth production, as do those of men weaving, but to the moral character of the spinner and the domestic nature of the activity.

The Dutch translation of Cesare Ripa's well-known *Iconologia* in 1644 introduced a wide variety of allegorical female figures into northern art, many of which were subsequently transformed into emblems of domestic bliss. Dr. Johann van Beverwijck's *Van de*

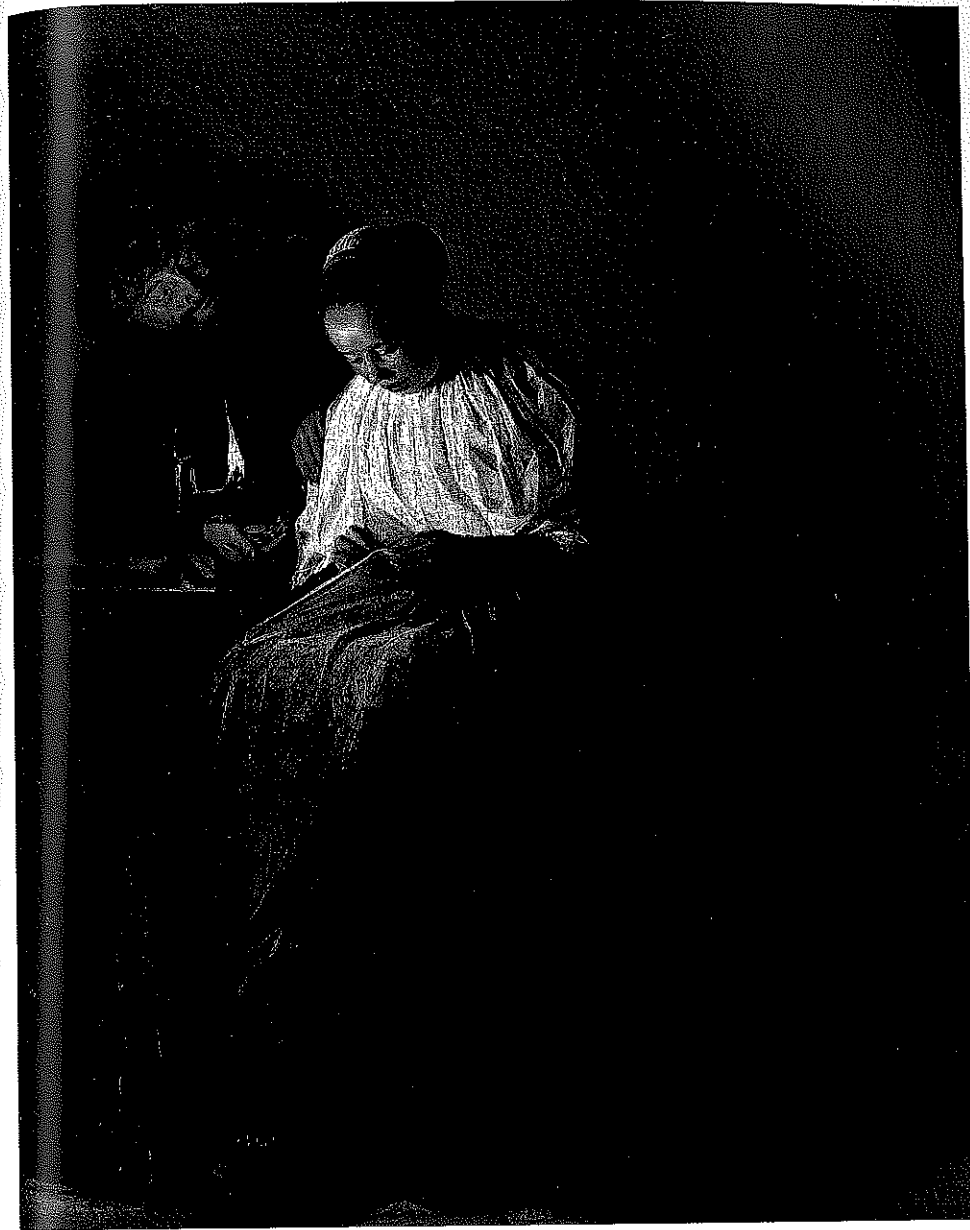
53 Illustration from
Johann van Beverwijck
*Van de Wtinementheyt des
Vrouwelicken Geslachts*
1643



Wtnementheyt des Vrouwelicken Geslachts (On the Excellence of the Female Sex) appeared in 1643 with a portrait of Schurman as a frontispiece and a representation of Dame World transformed into an ideal of the family home, "the fountain and source of republics." Martin Luther had demanded that women labor with distaff and spindle and in the engraving illustrating van Beverwijck's essay, Adam labors in the fields while Eve spins within the house. The author's call for women's emancipation is carefully modulated by his continuing adherence to domestic models in which education and the professions are legitimized for women only in the presence of domestic skills: "To those who say that women are fit for the household and no more, then I would answer that with us many women, without forgetting their house, practice trade and commerce and even the arts and learning." Cats' emblems, on the other hand, reinforced a more conservative and no doubt more widely held view: "The husband must be on the street to practice his trade; The wife must stay at home to be in the kitchen." It was marriage and domesticity which contained women's animal instincts according to both popular and medical sources; it was under the sign of the distaff and spindle that female virtue and domesticity were joined.

One result of growing prosperity in Holland during this period was a focus on woman's sexuality as an object of exchange for money. Representations of women spinning, embroidering, and making lace often conveyed ambiguous and sexualized meanings. Judith Leyster's *The Proposition* (1631) is one of a number of paintings that imbricate the discourses of domestic virtue and sexuality. Here, the proposition is initiated by a man who leans over the shoulder of a woman deeply absorbed in her sewing. With one hand on her arm, he holds out the other hand, filled with coins. Refusing to look up and engage in the transaction, she completely ignores his advances.

Presented as an embarrassed victim rather than a seducer, Leyster's female figure is depicted as an embodiment of domestic virtue at a time when the growth of Calvinism was accompanied by a resurgence of brothels. Themes of prostitution and propositions provided an opportunity for moralizing; paintings based on these themes often exploit the idea that women who reject their "natural" roles become temptresses who lead men into sin. Leyster's treatment of the theme is unprecedented in Dutch painting and its intimate and restrained mood does not reappear until some twenty-five years later. It has been cited as a prototype for later versions of the theme, such as Gerard TerBorch's so-called *Gallant Officer* (c. 1665) and Gabriel Metsu's *An*



54 Judith Leyster *The Proposition* 1631



55 (left) Vermeer
The Lacemaker c. 1665-68

56 (opposite) Judith Leyster
*A Woman Sewing by
Candlelight* 1633



task. In contrast, Roghman's figures are often in strained poses with their heads bent uncomfortably close to their laps as if to stress the difficulty of doing fine work in the dim interiors of Dutch houses of the period. Surrounded by the implements necessary to their activities—spindles, combs, bundles of cloth and thread—they demonstrate the complexity and physical labor of the task. *Woman Spinning* (before 1650) is the fourth in a series of five engravings whose others are sewing, pleating fabric, cleaning, and cooking. Roghman's woman is without the moralizing inscription integral to emblematic representations, and the emphasis on the woman's concentration, her sympathetic relationship to the watching child, and the careful description of objects evoke a mood of balance and order.

If Roghman's engravings express the utilitarian aspects of cloth production in the Dutch home, Vermeer's and Caspar Netscher's paintings of lacemakers rely on rich colors and fabrics to reinforce the intimacy and sensuality of women in repose. Vermeer's lacemaker is a woman making the bobbin lace then popular among prosperous

Offer of Wine (1650s), as well as Vermeer's many paintings of men interrupting women at their work.

Two other paintings by Leyster are among the earliest representations in Dutch art of women sewing by candlelight. *A Woman Sewing by Candlelight* (1633) is one of a pair of small circular candlelight scenes with full-length figures showing the influence of Hals and the Utrecht Caravaggisti. Although art history has been complicit in generalizing such representations into embodiments of domestic virtue, significant differences in fact exist in the presentation of this type of female labor in Dutch art, as well as in the class and material circumstances of the women engaged in it. A series of engravings of domestic work by Geertruid Roghman, daughter of the engraver Hendrik Lambertsz and sister of the painter and etcher Roelant Roghman, made about the middle of the century, emphasizes the labor of needlework rather than the leisure and reverie that it has come to signify in paintings like Vermeer's *The Lacemaker* (c. 1665-68). In Vermeer's painting, a stylish young woman bends over her bobbins completely absorbed in her



7 Rachel Ruysch *Flowerpiece* after 1700

Dutch women, not for profit, but as an indication that northern women were as accomplished at the production of luxury goods as their better-known French and Flemish contemporaries.

Needlework and lacemaking had very different roles in the lives of women of the upper and lower classes. The expansion of the Dutch market for lace exports, after France imposed high duties on its own products in 1667, renewed interest in the skill of lacemaking, long an occupation for upper-class women. The activity became identified with charity and the reeducation of wayward girls in domestic virtues, and provided suitable employment for orphans. The finest bobbin lace was done by professional linen seamstresses, but an ordinance issued by the Amsterdam town council in 1529 indicates that poor girls could earn a living from lacework. Bobbin lace of the kind shown in Vermeer's painting was also made in orphanages and charitable institutions.

The association of needlework with feminine virtue focused attention on this aspect of female domestic life as the site of a growing struggle over conflicting roles for women. In his *Christiani matrimonii institutio*, Erasmus of Rotterdam, the leading Dutch humanist of the sixteenth century, had satirized the preoccupation with needlework at the expense of education for women of the nobility: "The distaff and spindle are in truth the tools of all women and suitable for avoiding idleness. . . . Even people of wealth and birth train their daughters to weave tapestries or silken cloths. . . . It would be better if they taught them to study, for study busies the whole soul." In *The Learned Maid, or Whether a Maid may be a Scholar*, Schurman argued that girls should be taught mathematics, music, and painting, rather than embroidery: "Some object that the needle and distaff supply women with all the scope they need. And I own that not a few are of this mind. . . . But I decline to accept this Lesbian rule, naturally preferring to listen to reason rather than custom."

Throughout the seventeenth century, painting served both domestic and scientific ends; that which was accurately observed pleased the eye and in turn confirmed the wisdom and plan of God. Science and art met in this period in flower painting and botanical illustration. The task of describing minute nature required the same qualities of diligence, patience, and manual dexterity that are often used to denigrate "women's work."³ Women were, in fact, critical to the development of the floral still-life, a genre highly esteemed in the seventeenth century but, by the nineteenth, dismissed as an inferior one ideally suited to the limited talents of women amateurs.

Until well into the sixteenth century, the major source for plant illustrations in popular herbal guides was not nature but previous illustrations. Not until the publication of Otto Brunfels's *Herbarium vivae eicones* in 1530-32, with woodcuts by Hans Weidnitz, did illustrators begin working directly from nature. Many of these herbals were hand-painted and it is known that Christophe Plantin of Antwerp employed women illuminators to color the botanical books he produced. The herbals formed the basis of the development of systematic knowledge of flowering plants which took place in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Side by side with the study medicinal herbs was knowledge through folk medicine largely handed down by country women. In his herbal Brunfels alluded to "highly expert old women." Slightly later, Euricius Cordus remarked that he had learned from "the lowliest women and husbandmen." The rapid growth of the natural sciences, stimulated by botanical and zoological knowledge brought back by European voyagers and explorers, transformed the sciences of botany and zoology. The microscope, invented in Holland in the late sixteenth century, was applied to the study of plants and animals, and systems of plant classification developed. The emergence of horticulture as a leisure-time activity for the wealthy led to the development of the flower book, the transition from the medicinal and practical model of the herbals to the appreciation for beauty alone that encouraged the practise of flower painting.

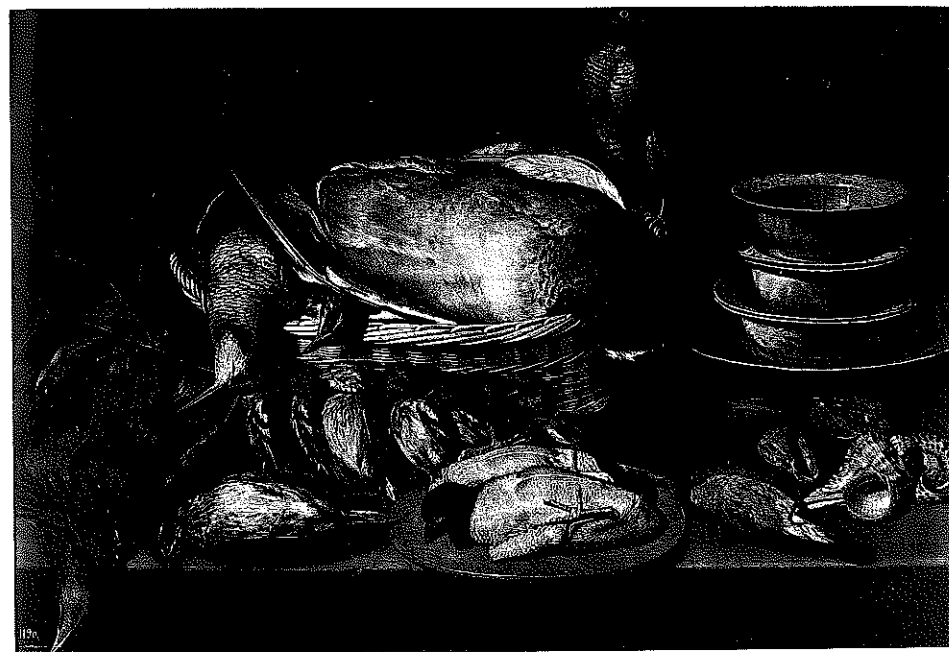
Before 1560, most garden plants were European in origin; during the seventeenth century colonization and overseas exploration led to the importation of vast numbers of new species. According to Herman Boerhaave (1668-1738), "practically no captain, whether of a merchant ship or of a man-of-war, left our harbours without special instructions to collect everywhere seeds, roots, cuttings and shrubs and bring them back to Holland." The century's passionate interest in the cultivation and illustration of flowers proceeded hand-in-hand with a belief that all the world could be brought into the home for study.

The laying out of gardens extended the idea of the *kunstkamer* (collections of rare objects and curiosities including shells, minerals, and fossils). Pattern books of floral designs, like Pierre Vallet's *Le jardin du roy très chrestien Henry IV* (1608), dedicated to Marie de Medici who later commissioned some expensive flower pieces, served as sources for embroidery designs. Crispijn van de Passe's *Hortus floridus*, published in Utrecht in 1614, and an immensely popular work, contained over two hundred plates in which the naturalism of the floral

presentation was heightened by the addition of insects and butterflies to the plant stalks. Jacques de Gheyn was a pioneer among painters of flowers and a man who engraved, limned, and painted on glass as well as oils. During the century, many women also practiced the ancillary arts of botanical illustration or flower painting for textile and porcelain manufacturers, but only two women, Maria van Oosterwyck and Rachel Ruysch (see below), appear to have had a steady and prestigious clientele for their flower paintings.

Between 1590 and 1650, Utrecht and Antwerp emerged as the major centers of flower painting in oils, perhaps influenced by Antwerp's prominent role in botanical publishing during the second half of the previous century. The first school of Netherlandish flower painting developed in Antwerp around Jan "Velvet" Breughel and his followers. The earliest group of painters of still-lives and flowers included Clara Peeters, who was born in Antwerp in 1594 and who worked there with Hans van Essen and Jan Van der Beeck (called Torrentius). The term "still-life" did not appear in the Netherlands until about 1650 and these works were more commonly identified by type: "little banquet," "little breakfast," "flower piece," etc. Peeters signed and dated her first known work in 1608. Of the fifty or so paintings by her hand which have been identified, five represent

58 Clara Peeters *Still-life* (1611)



Bouquets; the others are descriptive paintings featuring glasswares, precious vases, fruits and desserts, breads, fish, shells, and prawns, sometimes with flowers added. Harris and Nochlin have identified her work as earlier than almost all known dated examples of Flemish still-life painting of the type she made, commonly known as the "breakfast piece" because of its assembly of fruits and breads. Although she sometimes included flowers in her still-life compositions, pure flower paintings by her are rare and their arrangements are simple and natural in comparison with Breughel's and Beert's more formal and profuse compositions.

58 Peeters's major contribution was in the formation of the banquet and breakfast piece; four paintings dating from 1611 include elaborate displays of flowers, chestnuts, bread rolls, butter, and pretzels piled into pewter and delft dishes and presented against austere, almost black backgrounds. In one of them, multiple reflections of the artist's face and a window are just discernible in the bosses of an elaborately worked pewter pitcher. These paintings are among the most noteworthy of seventeenth-century still-life, a fact made all the more remarkable by the youth of the artist. Peeters's meticulous delineation of form and the imposing symmetry of her paintings, along with her virtuoso handling of reflective surfaces must have encouraged the spread of still-life painting later in the century, but little documentary material about her remarkable career or her patrons has yet surfaced.

The growing interest in botanical illustration, the emergence of the Dutch as Europe's leading horticulturalists in the seventeenth century, and the development of flower painting as an independent category all contributed to the passion for floral illustration of all kinds. Flowers were often included in *vanitas* and other kinds of moralizing representation as signs of the fleeting nature of life. Their emblematic and symbolic associations followed them into still-life and flower painting.

During the 1630s the tulip, first brought from Turkey to England during the reign of Elizabeth I, came under intense speculation. Between 1634 and 1637 fortunes were won and lost and "tulipomania" dominated economic news with the most famous blooms selling for thousands of times more than any flower painting; by 1637 the craze had burned out. Although Judith Leyster is best known today for her genre scenes, she was a skilled watercolorist who made botanical illustrations that included prized striped tulips like the *Yellow-Red of Leiden* for "Tulip Books," sales catalogues commissioned by bulb dealers to enable them to display their wares to customers when the flowers were not in season.



59 Judith Leyster *Yellow-Red of Leiden*
c. 1635



60 Illustration from Jan Commelin
Horti Medici Amstelodamensis Rariorum
Plantarum Descriptio et Icones 1697-1701

Commissions such as these were profitable for artists like Leyster, although the majority of these books were copies of originals made by unskilled artists. Women did, however, participate in the production of engravings for botanical works and a particularly fine and detailed example of the work of the many women active in illustrations for books can be seen in Jan Commelin's *Horti Medici Amstelodamensis Rariorum Plantarum Descriptio et Icones* (1697-1701). The original paintings made for the illustration of this and other books by the two Commelins are mainly the work of Johan and Maria Moninckx.

The Dutch colonies in the East and West Indies, South America, India, and the Cape acted as a further stimulus to botanical and zoological illustration. Seven volumes of natural history drawings made in Brazil by Albert van der Eckhout, Zacharias Wagner and other artists are now in the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin. Other drawings from the Dutch East Indies are in Leiden. However, the most remarkable of these illustrations were by Maria Sybilla Merian who transformed the field of scientific illustration. Primarily an entomologist, Merian has



61 Maria Merian *African Martagon* 1680



62 Rachel Ruysch *Flowers in a Vase* after 1700



63 Maria Merian *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium* 1705

also been called one of the finest botanical artists of the period following the death of Nicholas Robert in 1680.

Born in Germany of a Swiss father and a Dutch mother, Merian's art, nevertheless, derived almost entirely from the great flower painters of seventeenth-century Holland. Her father was an engraver of some note who contributed the illustrations to the florilegium of Johann Theodor de Bry. Shortly after his death, when Merian was an infant, her mother married the Dutch flower painter Jacob Marrell. Merian showed an early interest in insect life and as a youth began to work with Abraham Mignon. In 1664 she became a pupil of Johann Andreas Graff, and subsequently his wife. In 1675, her first publication, volume one of a three-part catalogue of flower engravings, titled *Florum fasciculi tres*, was issued in Nuremberg. The second volume followed in 1677, and both were reissued with a third in 1680. Together they were known as the *Neues Blumen Buch* (New Flower Book), a work which, although less well-known than her work on insects, contains delightful, hand-painted engravings of garden flowers, colored with great delicacy. The plates in several cases depend closely on her

father's edition of de Bry's *Florilegium* of 1641 and on Robert's *Variae ac multiformes florum species expressae . . .*, published in Rome in 1665. Merian was also a skilled needlewoman and the book was intended to provide models for embroidery patterns, and perhaps also for paintings on silk and linen.

In 1679 Merian published the first of three volumes on European insects illustrated with her own engravings, *Der Raupen wunderbare Verwandlung und sonderbare Blumennahrung* (The Wonderful Transformation of Caterpillars and Their Singular Plant Nourishment), and the work was enthusiastically received by the scientific community. "From my youth I have been interested in insects," she remarked, "first I started with the silkworms in my native Frankfurt-am-Main. After that . . . I started to collect all the caterpillars I could find to observe their changes . . . and painted them very carefully on parchment." The insects are shown in various stages of development, placed among the flowers and leaves with which they are associated. The second and third volumes appeared in 1683 and 1717 and together the works comprise a catalogue of 186 European moths, butterflies, and other insects based on her own research and drawings. The fact that the insects were observed directly, rather than drawn from preserved specimens in collectors' cabinets, revolutionized the sciences of zoology and botany and helped lay the foundations for the classification of plant and animal species made by Charles Linnaeus later in the eighteenth century.

Merian left her husband in 1685 and converted to Labadism, a religious sect founded by the French ex-Jesuit, Jean de Labadie (who later married Anna Maria Schurman). The Labadists did not believe in formal marriage or worldly goods, rejected infant baptism, denied the presence of Christ in the Eucharist; they also established missions, including one in the Dutch colony of Surinam. Spending the winter with her two daughters in the Labadist community in the Dutch province of Friesland, Merian had access to a fine collection of tropical insects brought back from Surinam. Goethe relates that, determined to rival the exploits of the French naturalist Charles Plumier, and sponsored by the Dutch government, she set sail for South America in 1698 with her daughter, Dorothea. They spent nearly two years collecting and painting the insects and flowers there; the result was the magnificent *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium* which appeared in 1705 and was translated into several languages. Merian did not undertake the engravings, as she had for her earlier works, and the sixty large plates were engraved by three Dutch artists

who used the superb watercolor studies she had made. Although Merian's work continues to be of interest to art historians as well as naturalists, its impetus was always scientific inquiry. The book's finest plates are among the most beautiful scientific illustrations of the period.

The latter half of the seventeenth century also witnessed the second major period of flower painting. Jan Davidsz de Heem, Maria van Oosterwyck, Willem van Aelst, and Rachel Ruysch achieved international stature as painters of floral pieces. Flower painters rarely if ever made their paintings directly from nature; instead they relied on drawings, studies, and botanical illustrations. The paintings often include blossoms with widely differing blooming seasons. Elaborate montages of colors and textures, they are spiritual responses to the world of nature, rich collages of blooms in an age when flowers were commonly grown in separate beds by species and combined only after they had been cut and were soon to die.

Maria van Oosterwyck, the daughter of a Dutch Reformed minister and one of a growing number of women painters who were not the daughters of artists, was sent to study with the prominent flower painter Jan Davidsz de Heem in Antwerp in 1658. She later worked at Delft, where she was the only female professional painter of the century (but does not seem to have been a member of the guild), Amsterdam, and The Hague. Her earliest dated work, a *Vanitas* of 1668, expresses a moral on the transience of worldly things and the vanity of earthly life. Oosterwyck included a great range of objects, all lovingly painted, including pen and ink as symbols of the professional life, account book and coins pointing to worldly wealth and possessions, and musical instruments and a glass of liqueur as signs of worldly pleasures soon to pass away. The accompanying flowers, animals, and insects reinforce the theme of the transience of life and the constant presence of sorrow and death.

Oosterwyck worked slowly, building up tight, complex compositions with marvellous surfaces. A *Still-life with Flowers and Butterflies* (1686) displays a glass of flowers resting on a ledge and containing several kinds of roses, iris, and two butterflies, the last perhaps symbols of life's transience. Louis XIV's purchase of one of her flower paintings was followed by the patronage of other royalty, including Emperor Leopold, William III of England, and the Elector of Saxony; this painting, one of her last still-lives, was either commissioned or purchased by King William and Queen Mary from the artist, who visited England in the year after it was painted.

Rachel Ruysch was born in 1664 to Frederick Ruysch, a professor of anatomy and botany in Amsterdam, and Maria Post, the daughter of an architect. Encouraged in her love of nature by her father's vast collection of minerals, animal skeletons, and rare snails, she was apprenticed at the age of fifteen to the celebrated flower painter, van Aelst, the originator of the asymmetrical spiralling composition which became Ruysch's hallmark. Compositions like *Flowers in a Vase* balance a swirl of twisting blossoms along a diagonal axis. The variety of blooms and colors, and the painter's subtle touch and impeccable surface treatment distinguish her work. In 1701, Ruysch and her husband, the portrait painter Juriaen Pool, became members of the painters' guild in The Hague. Between 1708 and 1713, she was court painter in Düsseldorf, but on the death of her patron, the Elector Palatine Johann Wilhelm, she returned to Amsterdam where she worked until her death in 1750 at the age of eighty-six.

Ruysch's status and undeniable achievement encouraged many other Dutch women to become painters. Among those who went as painters to the courts of Germany in the eighteenth century were Katherina Treu (c. 1743–1811), Gertrued Metz (1746–after 1793), and Maria Helena Byss (1670–1726). Other women, like Catherina Backer (1689–1766), famous in her time as a painter of flower and fruit pieces, and Margaretha Haverman, a Dutch flower painter who enjoyed great success in Paris and who was unanimously elected to the Académie Royale in 1722, were instrumental in the spread of flower painting among women and a testament to the expanding roles for women in seventeenth-century Holland.

Amateurs and Academics: A New Ideology of Femininity in France and England

If we are to believe the Goncourt brothers' account of life in eighteenth-century France, written a century later, "woman was the governing principle, the directing reason and the commanding voice of the eighteenth century." Never before in Western Europe had so many women achieved public prominence in the arts and intellectual life of a restricted aristocratic culture. Never had a culture been so immersed in the pursuit of qualities later derided as "feminine," namely artifice, sensation, and pleasure. It is not surprising that the fortunes of the best-known women artists of the century, among them Rosalba Carriera, Elisabeth-Louise Vigée-Lebrun, Adélaïde Labille-Guiard, and Angelica Kauffmann, are inextricably bound up in the changing ideologies of representation and sexual difference that accompany the shift from a courtly aristocratic culture to that of prosperous middle-class capitalist society.

The emergence of professional women painters of the stature of Kauffmann in England, and Vigée-Lebrun, Labille-Guiard, and Anna Vallayer-Coster in France during the second half of the century is astonishing given the increasingly rigid construction of sexual difference that circumscribed women's access to public activity. Neither their position as exceptions nor later dismissals of them as pandering to the most insipid demands of their age for sentimental paintings account for their phenomenal success or their official status as court painters. They were able to negotiate between the taste of their aristocratic clients and the influence of Enlightenment ideas about woman's "natural" place in the bourgeois social order, and this fact deserves much closer attention than it has received.

As long as the woman artist presented a self-image emphasizing beauty, gracefulness, and modesty, and as long as her paintings appeared to confirm this construction, she could, albeit with difficulty, negotiate a role for herself in the world of public art. In this chapter, I will show, firstly, that the reasons for the success of female Academicians in their own day became the cause of their dismissal by subsequent generations of art historians; secondly, that the ability of