

Zinnen en minnen. Schilders van het dagelijks leven in de zeventiende eeuw, ed. Jeroen Giltajj a.o., [exhibition and catalogue] 23–10–2004 through 09–01–2005: Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, and 10–02–2005 through 01–05–20005: Frankfurt a. M., Städelsches Kunstinstitut; 296 p., 260 ill., 110 in colour. Catalogue published in Dutch (ISBN 3-7757-1569-X), German (ISBN 3-7757-1522-3) and English (ISBN 3-7757-1523-1); Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz 2005; € 39,80

This important and beautiful exhibition on Dutch genre brought together a great number of paintings of the highest quality. Although the *Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen* recently opened its new extension with spacious halls for temporary exhibitions, the staff rightly decided to locate this show in the old wing, where the permanent collection had to make room for „Zinnen en Minnen“. Most of the old galleries suggest the intimacy of a private home where delicately executed small-scale paintings can be inspected from close by. Because of the expected throngs of visitors, the paintings were hung rather far apart; a surprise for the *habitués* who are familiar with the usual situation. In the larger galleries, the distances were somewhat greater, even, as if the exhibits had to compete for the visitor's attention with the high, white walls. Initially, the only information available was a booklet with explicatory texts, but after some days popular protest obliged the museum to hang the traditional labels on the walls. Apparently, the crowds are not always pleased with measures for crowd control.

The present exhibition does not offer a complete survey of Dutch genre painting and, for that reason, its catalogue cannot replace the handbook compiled by Peter Sutton as the catalogue for a comparable show in 1984¹. The reduction is not just a practical measure. Artists who did not fully specialise in genre painting were excluded: Frans Hals and Nicolaes Maes among others. The works of italianizing artists such as Pieter van Laer incorporate too much landscape to be considered pure genre. This shifts the focus from paintings to painters. As far as possible, the Rotterdam museum gave each artist his own wall. Some specialists were ostracised for their disappointing quality, such as Jacob Vrel and Esaias Boursse. I could not agree more. Museums are about art and art is about quality, but this is not easily defined, and the curators have the honesty to make critical remarks about some works in their exhibition (cat. nrs. 1, 15, 28). Pieter Codde's *Sitting young man* is praised as masterpiece, but Pieter van Thiel's justifiable comment on its clumsy composition is not suppressed (cat.nr. 9).

One group is completely left out as being not „realistic“: the Utrecht *caravaggisti* (p. 12). The use of „realism“ as a touchstone also decided the choice of the period covered. Painters born earlier than Willem Buytewech (c.1591–1624) or later than Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) were excluded. This means that the generation of David

1 PETER C. SUTTON a.o.: *Masters of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting*; Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art; Berlin: Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz; London: Royal Academy of Arts: 1984.

Vinckboons (1576-c.1632) is seen as being still too Flemish and not yet sufficiently „realistic“ (p. 14), whereas Godfried Schalcken (1643–1706) and his generation simply came too late, after the end of a great period (p. 19). These choices seem to hinge on style, but in fact „realism“, seen as the opposite of *schijnrealisme* [mock realism], is the central issue. This word is given the same meaning as it had for Abraham Bredius or Wilhelm Martin: a reliable depiction of real things and situations (p. 13). The only difference is the authors' avoidance of the r-word.

When nineteenth-century ideas about Dutch „realism“ came under attack from iconologists, the idea of *schijnrealisme* was grafted on the traditional concept of „realism“ without reconsidering the definition of this term². From the day of its introduction, *schijnrealisme* was standing on feet of clay. Soon enough, the method and its results were vehemently criticized. To my amazement, the battle still goes on after more than twenty-five years. In his introductory essay to the present exhibition, Peter Hecht belittles the research of his predecessors by stating that subject matter was no more than a pretext for painters who wanted to demonstrate their skill (p. 28)³. He believes that artists and art lovers in the seventeenth century were interested mainly in the imitation of reality, judging paintings on their execution rather than content. Hecht wonders if there is anything to be found in the paintings under discussion, apart from *schilderachtigheid* [the quality of being painterly].

Hecht rejects the word „genre“, rightly stating that it is no more than a variety of figure painting. This observation should have stimulated the author to take one further step, acknowledging that genre painting and history painting both are forms of figure painting and, as such, narrative forms of art⁴. Until recently, iconographic research of genre was largely based on emblems, but emblems propound timeless statements and immutable rules for ethical behaviour. The use of emblems for the interpretation of genre scenes not only tends to create confusion about the relation between details and whole paintings, but also denies the temporal element of narrative compositions. It is not always easy to decipher which story is being told or hinted at, but a thematic arrangement of the exhibition would have been helpful. A string of pearls may seem to be enigmatic in cat. nr. 81, but this is only because the authors disassociate this scene from other compositions with women using jewellery and cosmetic utensils to make themselves attractive for the men with whom they hope to exchange letters or make music. Seeing genre scenes as the illustration of stories evolving in time helps to understand the fact that their meaning is not injected into them with an emblematic needle, but is inherent in their subject matter. The stories told, however, are no police reports or journalistic investigations. They should be compared to the sitcoms and urban legends of our time that offer opinions and comments about reality, masked as facts from daily life.

2 LYCKLE DE VRIES: Jan Steen ‚de kluchtschilder‘; Groningen (privately printed) 1977, p. 108–109.

3 Compare: PETER HECHT: De Hollandse fijnschilders; Amsterdam – The Hague 1989, p. 13–19.

4 LYCKLE DE VRIES: Wat is genreschilderkunst? in: *AkT* (Groningen) 16, 1992–1993, nr. 57, p. 7–20 [erratum in nr. 58].

An elegant young man proposes to a lady who turns away from him in amazement. The couple is placed in front of a painting with *The Birth of Venus*. Two other women are singing, and playing an instrument that has an inscription about music offering consolation (cat. nr. 74). How could anyone doubt whether this composition by Jacob Ochtervelt tells a story? The fact that elsewhere Ochtervelt depicted two men rivalling for the favours of a prostitute is flatly ignored (cat. nr. 72); in accordance with the iconographic tradition, the loser fell asleep after his defeat in a drinking contest (compare Gerard ter Borch's cat. nr. 43). The story told in Frans van Mieris' *Boy blowing bubbles* (cat. nr. 82) was apparently overlooked. The inviting gesture of the woman who stands behind the boy, looking at the spectator, is not mentioned.

The catalogue entries seem to have been written to inform the museum visitor about the fact that these paintings mean nothing at all (cat. nrs. 1, 11, 17, 28, e.g.). Beauty and content are presented as mutually exclusive, a surprising view that obliges us to reconsider the whole history of art. Jacob Duck's *Sleeping woman* (cat. nr. 16) should not be seen as a moral warning, because the scene is meant to be humorous. The same is said about his cat. nr. 15 that, moreover, cannot contain a moral warning since it is a study of human behaviour. In Adriaen van Ostade's *Peasant inn* (cat. nr. 32) meaning is the opposite of a beautiful composition. Gerard ter Borch's *Drinking woman* (cat. nr. 45) has no content because it was painted for well-educated connoisseurs. Gabriel Metsu's paintings do have a meaningful content, but they are beautifully painted all the same (cat. nr. 58, 59). Where the iconographic literature cannot be ignored, the interpretational problems are solved by questioning the validity of earlier solutions without offering any alternative (cat. nr. 10, 17, 38, 40, 41, e.g.).

This rear-guard action against the iconologists was clearly motivated by the decision to define genre painting as the ultimate form of realism. Jan Steen's paintings are presented as anthropologic studies on the manners and customs of his own neighbourhood (cat. nr. 54, 55). A painting by Hendrick Sorgh (cat. nr. 27) is presented as the depiction of a moment from daily life, selected at random. The tension between *selection* and *random* is precisely what makes all claims of „realism“ unconvincing. This reminds me of the photographer Garry Winogrand, who took thousands of snapshots without consciously aiming his camera at a chosen subject. A book on his work was aptly called *Figments from the Real World*⁵. Even this amount of *random* was insufficient to capture the real reality.

Extensive biographies precede the catalogue entries. In his opening speech, Jeroen Giltaij hinted at possible links between the lives of the artists and their subject matter. Pieter Codde once hit Willem Duyster over the head with a jug when they had a fight in a tavern (p. 59). Fighting drunkards are a popular theme in peasant genre, but Duyster and Codde practised a different speciality and none of their exhibited works illustrates a comparable event. The romantic idea that all art, pre-romantic art not excluded, mirrors the biography and personality of the artist, echoes in cat. nr. 32

5 J. SZARKOWSKI (ed.): Garry Winogrand. *Figments from the Real World*; New York: MoMa 1988.

also, where the amazed author discovers that Adriaen van Ostade's *Tavern with drinking and smoking men*, dated 1666, shows no traces of the recent death of the artist's wife. Back again, to the days of Bredius and Martin, as if Jan Emmens never wrote about the „*tweedelige Rembrandt*“ [bipartite Rembrandt]⁶.

The confusion noticed here results from the fact that the authors, as many before them, wanted to overcome the appalling results of iconographic over-interpretation. Rightly so, but they should have realised that there is no way back to the days of Bredius and Martin. The iconological method should not be banned, but fine-tuned for use in Dutch seventeenth-century art⁷. A preliminary condition is to stop confusing the content or meaning of paintings with that of related emblems. Taking the stories told in paintings as a point of departure for their interpretation helps to keep form and content together as much as possible. Secondly, researchers should make a clear distinction between these stories, and their moralizing interpretation. Thirdly, educational or ethical messages are not alien to Dutch seventeenth-century life, literature, or art. The visual culture of that period, however, was not at all dominated by Calvinists. Using the word Calvinistic in this context (cat. nr. 43) is simply misleading. Making Calvinism the opposite of merriment or humour is even more so.

This excellent exhibition deserves a numerous attendance, a better catalogue and a more elegant name. Paraphrasing the title of a groundbreaking book on the iconography of Dutch art⁸, *Zinne- en minnebeelden* [emblems and images of love] was changed into *Zinnen en Minnen* [sentences and wet-nurses, or: pondering and making love]. Apart from being nonsensical, this title refers to the iconography of the paintings that the museum wants to consider as either unimportant or non-existent. The Städel showed more insight by renaming the exhibition *Der Zauber des Alltäglichen*.

LYCKLE DE VRIES
Groningen

6 JAN A. EMMENS: *Rembrandt en de regels van de kunst*; Amsterdam 1979, p. 10–37 (1st ed. 1964).

7 On the methods of Henri van de Waal, Christian Tümpel and Michael Baxandall, see: LYCKLE DE VRIES: *Iconography and Iconology in Art History*, in: Th. F. Heck (ed.): *Picturing Performance. The Iconography of the Performing Arts in Concept and Practice*; Rochester NY 1999, p. 42–64 (esp. p. 58–64).

8 EDDY DE JONGH: *Zinne- en minnebeelden in de schilderkunst van de zeventiende eeuw*; no place: Openbaar Kunstbezit 1967.

Der Zauber des Alltäglichen. Holländische Malerei von Adriaen Brouwer bis Johannes Vermeer, Ausstellungskatalog, hrsg. von Jeroen Giltaij [Frankfurt, Städtisches Kunstinstitut und Städtische Galerie, 10. Februar bis 1. Mai 2005]; 296 S., 110 Farb- u. 150 Schwarzweißabb.; ISBN 3-7757-1522-3; Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz 2005; € 39,80

In Ergänzung zur Besprechung von Lyckle de Vries soll hier das Ausstellungsprojekt von Rotterdam und Frankfurt unter einem weiteren Gesichtspunkt betrachtet wer-