

Confronting the Golden Age

Contents

Acknowledgments	7
Introduction	11
1. Confronting the Heritage of the Golden Age	19
The Situation around Dutch Genre Painting 1680-1750	
Introduction	19
Painter and Collector in Transition: The Search For a New Relationship	20
The Collector's Taste: In Praise of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting	22
Popular Subject Matter of Genre Painting in Eighteenth-Century Collections	26
The Painter's Choice: Updating Seventeenth-Century Genre Painting	35
Conclusion	42
2. Reproducing the Golden Age	45
Copies after Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting in the First Half of the Eighteenth Century	
Introduction	45
Commercial Misuse of Copies: Discussion between Johan van Gool and Gerard Hoet	46
Copies as Substitutes for Seventeenth-Century Painting	48
The Painter's Choice: In Search of a Favourite Painter and Subject Matter to Reproduce	53
Case Study: The Candlelight Scene as Popular Subject	61
The Function of Copying: Looking Back to the Golden Age	68
Conclusion	70
3. Emulating the Golden Age	73
The Painter's Choice of Motifs and Subject Matter in Dutch Genre Painting of the First Half of the Eighteenth Century	
Introduction	73
The Painter's Choice of Subject Matter	74
Willem van Mieris and His Genre Painting	74
Johan Hendrik van Wassaer Obdam: A Devotee of Genre Painting	77
The Case of A Grocer's Shop by Willem van Mieris	84
Competing with the 'Old Masters': Pendants by Gerard Dou, Willem van Mieris, and Hieronymus van der Mij	87
'Pleasurable Enjoyment of Dissimilar Similarity'	92
Conclusion	94

4. Ennobling Daily Life	97
A Question of Refinement in Early Eighteenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting	
Introduction	97
Gerard de Lairese's Attempt to Ennoble Genre Painting	101
The Painter's Practice of Idealizing Figures in Genre Painting	103
Meeting the New Demands of Collectors: Seeking Ideal Versatility	112
Conclusion	117
 Epilogue	 121
 Notes	 125
 Catalogue: Painters 1680-1750	 155
 Bibliography	 205
 List of Illustrations / Photo Credits – Text Part	 217
 List of Illustrations / Photo Credits – Catalogue Part	 221
 Index	 225



Introduction

Visiting one of the many museums in the world with a collection of Dutch old master paintings, one would most probably encounter small, jewel-like genre paintings by renowned masters like Johannes Vermeer, Gerard ter Borch, Gerard Dou, or Adriaen van Ostade. One's eyes would delight at a scene of a young lady lost in thought over the letter in her hand, at cheerful villagers drinking in a tavern, at a maidservant polishing a kitchen pot, or at an elegant couple making music. However, if one were to look for genre paintings of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in the same gallery, the search would mostly be futile: in these crowded galleries, the number of genre paintings made after 1680 is negligible. This category of painting is rarely on display, being kept instead in storage rooms without attracting the public's attention.

What might be the cause underlying this absence of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century genre painting in the galleries of prominent museums? The answer is rooted in the general disregard for the period after 1680, often considered the 'age of decline'. The Golden Age is presumed to have ended between 1670 and 1680 as a result of the economic downturn and political damage caused by the French attack on the Dutch Republic in 1672, the so-called *Rampjaar* ('year of disaster'). This is supposed to have put an end to the glorious period of art as well. According to Wilhelm Martin in his classic study *Hollandsche schilderkunst in de 17de eeuw* (1935-36), the age of decline began 'approximately after Rembrandt's death and continued into the eighteenth century'.¹ The documented financial difficulties of painters as well as art dealers during this period also strengthen our idea of an era 'in decline'. The eminent Amsterdam art dealer Gerrit Uylenburch, for example,

went bankrupt in 1675, and Johannes Vermeer's widow reported in 1677 that her husband, in the years preceding his death in 1675, had difficulty selling his own and other paintings because of the economic recession.² Furthermore, most of the representative painters, such as Vermeer, Dou, Frans Hals, and Jan Steen, had died by the year 1680, and the number of painters had started to decrease dramatically towards the end of the century.³

The most deep-seated cause for the neglect of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century genre painting, however, can be ascribed to our heavy favouring of the aesthetics of genre painting produced before 1680. Early eighteenth-century painters who borrowed subject matter and compositions from the work of masters of the second and third quarters of the seventeenth century have always been considered servile imitators of their successful Golden Age predecessors. In the paintings of Willem van Mieris (1672-1647), Arnold Boonen (1669-1729), Nicolaas Verkolje (1673-1746), and Philip van Dyk (1680-1753), for instance, one can easily find the same kinds of motifs, compositions, and figures as in the work of seventeenth-century masters like Dou and Ter Borch, such as an arched stone window with a sculpted relief, a table covered with a colourful thick carpet, an elegant couple making music, or a candlelit room. This marked similarity to seventeenth-century genre painting is often noted as an uninspired repetition of the achievements of earlier generations.⁴ On the other hand, characteristic features of genre painting of the later period, for example decorative elements and a classicizing style, have been seen as 'foreign' intrusions that estranged these later paintings from the 'authentic' Dutch genre pictures of the earlier period. The specific types

of clothing and interior decoration as well as idealized figures that were associated with antique beauty were regarded as the ultimate deviation from seventeenth-century genre painting, which was perceived to be a faithful recording of the everyday surroundings of modest citizens.⁵

A closer look at genre painting of this later period, however, makes apparent its specific features and requires us to revise our idea of the art of this era. In regard to subject matter, for instance, not all themes that were popular in the seventeenth century were repeated; only certain types seem to have been chosen as favourites and re-used in the eighteenth century. Although these later paintings treat similar kinds of motifs and subjects, they are always translated into the artists' personal vocabularies, resulting in an unexpected variety in execution. Furthermore, regardless of such a variety of execution, these paintings seem to share a specific stylistic and aesthetic tendency. This observation leads us to a number of fundamental questions. Should we consider such paintings as worthless, as mere imitations of the art from the Golden Age? Why did painters produce pictures with features that were closely related to, and at the same time different from, seventeenth-century art? How were these paintings viewed in those days? Who bought these paintings, and what kind of impact did the purchasers' taste have on the painters' artistic decisions?

Historical documents about paintings can open our eyes to the context in which these paintings were produced and appreciated. Willem van Mieris (1662-1747), one of the representative painters of this period, produced a number of genre paintings of shop scenes, including *A Grocer's Shop* (fig. 62), which had originated with and was popularized by the seventeenth-century master Gerard Dou (fig. 63). At first sight, one might think that this painting is no more than a mere repetition of an illustrious forerunner's work. Yet, once we learn that this piece was

purchased from the artist by a renowned art collector – who paid the enormous amount of 825 guilders for it – and that it was also highly appreciated by a distinguished contemporary biographer, we cannot help asking what made this painting so special in its time.⁶ Of course, such a historical record is only one of the yardsticks by which we can measure the value of a painting. It makes us keenly aware, however, that people must have had different standards by which to evaluate this kind of genre painting.

Over the last few decades, our perspective on the art of the Golden Age and the subsequent period has been enriched by an increasing number of studies on the context in which art is created, such as art theory, the art market, and art collectors.⁷ One of the important contributions is found in the studies of literature on art from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. For instance, Lyckle de Vries points out that the early eighteenth-century idea of the 'decline' in art differs from our present view, which is informed by the nineteenth-century concept of Dutch art.⁸ Indeed, authors of artists' biographies from the eighteenth century, such as Arnold Houbraken (1660-1719), Johan van Gool (1687-1763), and Jacob van Campo Weyerman (1677-1747), mention the decline in art, but they had differing opinions about the exact moment at which this downfall began, varying from 1675 to 1720.⁹ This discrepancy in dating the 'decline' in art indicates that the dividing line between florescence and decay had not yet been drawn definitively at that time. The period around 1700 can therefore be considered a transitional epoch in which people gradually started to notice the changes in art. Biographers such as Houbraken and Van Gool realized that the period in which they lived differed from the second and third quarters of the seventeenth century, and they asked themselves how they could evaluate and define the art of both their predecessors and their contemporaries.¹⁰ This was the beginning

of the reception of seventeenth-century Dutch art, that is, the moment when the concept of the 'Golden Age' actually came into existence.

Such a viewpoint was certainly shared by art collectors at the time. While these affluent collectors decorated their residences with luxurious eighteenth-century wall- and ceiling paintings in the classicizing style, many of them also owned an extensive collection of paintings by seventeenth-century masters.¹¹ Over the last decade, much research has been done on the art market and the collections of this period. Koenraad Jonckheere's study, among others, of the auction of King William III's collection (1713) draws a clear picture of the system of art auctions, collecting practices, and the international art trade in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.¹² His extensive research not only elucidates the taste of collectors, it also demonstrates that the practice of collecting paintings itself did not come to a close at the end of the Golden Age. It in fact continued to flourish, stimulated by a more organized and mature auction system.¹³ As will be discussed in the next chapter, it is true that the art market began to stagnate because of the economic downturn and the oversupply of paintings, and that the number of painters and the production of paintings waned towards the end of the seventeenth century, yet at the same time, a considerable number of second-hand paintings by seventeenth-century masters flooded the market.¹⁴ While these paintings drew international attention and, as a result, a number of Dutch masterpieces entered foreign collections, affluent Dutch collectors less affected by the economic recession were still able to enjoy plenty of opportunities to purchase these older paintings at auctions.¹⁵ The huge number of paintings produced before 1680 did not disappear from collections overnight; they continued to be appreciated and were joined by new work from contemporary masters.

Thus, the idea that the art of the Golden Age suddenly came to an end has slowly but surely been revised. The period after 1680 is now considered the era in which crucial changes in artistic circumstances were manifested, and more importantly, it was the time that works of art of the period before the last quarter of the seventeenth century came to be appreciated and collected – for the first time – as the heritage of a glorious past. The above-mentioned recent studies focused on how art theorists, biographers, art dealers, and collectors responded to this heritage, but what concerns us here is the painters' point of view. Once we realize that the concept of the 'age of decline' is no longer *a priori*, we are able to adopt the perspective of artists who became independent masters after 1680 in order to see what was, in fact, taking place at that time. These painters were surely aware of the unfavourable changes affecting their artistic circumstances, and yet they still had prospects for maintaining the prosperity of the preceding era. Our current assessment of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century art, which has shaped our retrospective viewpoint, was not shared by the painters of that epoch. Instead, they sought to reconcile their situation with the heritage of their renowned predecessors and make the most of their artistic capabilities under the given circumstances. Thus, the aim of this book on Dutch genre painting in the period between 1680 and 1750 is to understand the artistic choices made by painters of the new generations who confronted the art of the second and third quarters of the seventeenth century as an unsurpassed canon of the Golden Age. I will examine how painters coped with, responded to, and took advantage of this heritage in order to produce their own works of art. The painters' point of view – looking back upon a magnificent age and forward to future possibilities – is a key element underlying this study of the dynamic period that was the

first to glorify the art of Golden Age. It is thus neither my intention to claim that there was no decline after 1680 nor is it to write a complete survey of genre painting between 1680 and 1750. Instead, this book elucidates the way in which the art of the Golden Age was received in this vigorous, transitional period and to reconsider, in the category of genre painting, both the continuity and the alteration of the tradition of seventeenth-century art from the painters' point of view.

Until now, genre painting from the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries has rarely been discussed as a category of art that had coherent qualities and stylistic features. Although individual painters and their work have occasionally been examined in exhibition catalogues and monographic studies, little research has been done on the painters' active reception and adaptation of the pictorial conventions of earlier seventeenth-century genre painting.¹⁶ The first contribution that brings into sharp relief the long-lasting pictorial tradition from the mid-seventeenth century into the second half of the eighteenth century is the 1988 exhibition catalogue *Leidse Fijnschilders: Van Gerrit Dou tot Frans van Mieris de Jonge 1630-1760* written by Eric Jan Sluijter in collaboration with a group of students.¹⁷ This catalogue, which demonstrates that popular seventeenth-century subjects, motifs, and compositions were consciously selected and adapted by painters of later generations, has broadened our view of the span of Dutch genre painting and consequently has drawn more scholarly attention to individual artists active after 1680. This tendency was further fostered by another important exhibition catalogue, *De Hollandse Fijnschilders: Van Gerard Dou tot Adriaen van der Werff* (1989) by Peter Hecht, which sheds new light on the long tradition of refined painterly execution from the mid-seventeenth to the early eighteenth century.¹⁸ Such growing interest in painters of the later period has resulted

in recent monographic studies, such as Marjorie E. Wiese's book on Caspar Netscher, the dissertation on Jacob Toorenvliet by Susanne Karau, and Eddy Schavemaker's monograph on Eglon van der Neer, which provide us with detailed observations on a shift in stylistic features in genre painting around 1670.¹⁹ More recently, the exhibition *De kroon op het werk: Hollandse schilderkunst 1670-1750*, supervised by Ekkehard Mai, Sander Paarlberg, and Gregor J. M. Weber, gave an overview of the rich variety of paintings produced during this era. The catalogue of 14 genre paintings provides insight into the artistic circumstances under which genre painting was produced and the type of pictures that were made during this period.²⁰ All these contributions make clear that we can no longer speak of a divergence from the 'authentic' features of seventeenth-century Dutch art; rather, we must conceive of a different aesthetic aim that began to play an important role in genre painting after 1680.²¹ This framework can also be found in the most recent survey of genre painting, *Dutch Seventeenth-Century Genre Painting* (2004) by Wayne Franits, who dedicates four chapters to genre scenes between 1672 and 1702 and reevaluates it by considering its historical, economic, and regional background.²² By rejecting the 'faulty developmental paradigm' that Dutch genre painting solely pursued 'an ever more faithful representation of the surrounding world', Franits regards the evolution of genre painting as an incessant shift 'from certain prevailing stylistic and thematic conventions to others', and therefore concludes that 'those made during the late seventeenth century, with their bright, polished look and amalgam of classicizing elements reflect changing conventions'.²³

The features of genre painting from 1680 to 1750 that used to be criticized as too similar to – or, on the contrary, too divergent from – seventeenth-century genre painting must now be

reconsidered. In the following chapters, I intend to examine these characteristics by focusing on how painters inherited, adapted, and aspired to improve upon the pictorial conventions of genre painting from the second and third quarters of the seventeenth century, analyzing how this was closely related to the collectors' taste, art theory, and specific artistic trends of the period. For this purpose, I devote the first chapter to constructing a clear image of the artistic circumstances under which painters produced paintings, and the following three chapters to case studies, each of which highlights a different way in which painters incorporated seventeenth-century genre painting into their own work. Laying the foundation for these case studies, the first chapter examines how painters became increasingly dependent on a small group of wealthy collectors whose taste determined the painters' artistic choices. Based on existing research as well as on the results of my own investigation, it illuminates why painters repeatedly chose certain subjects and motifs that had been popularized by famous seventeenth-century masters.

The three case studies presented in the second, third, and fourth chapters approach three essential manners of receiving and adapting seventeenth-century art in genre painting after 1680 according to the degree of dependence upon seventeenth-century conventions. In other words, each of these three studies shows a different attitude towards seventeenth-century art, proceeding from the way in which painters adhered closely to the art of the Golden Age and ending with the way in which they distanced themselves from this unsurpassed canon. The first case study deals with literal 'imitation' – reproductive work made by painters during the first half of the eighteenth century after genre paintings by seventeenth-century masters. This study elucidates the purpose and function of copies in connection with the increasing popularity of certain types of genre painting, and it

clarifies why the practice of copying impacted the decisions that painters made in their own genre paintings. The second case study examines a more creative aspect of imitation – borrowing popular subject matter, motifs, and compositions from seventeenth-century genre painting and adapting these to the pictorial vocabulary of the early eighteenth century. In this chapter, I illustrate how the painters' close and interactive relationships with collectors compelled them to adhere to, but at the same time update, the pictorial tradition of their forerunners. Then, in the last case study, my focus shifts to one of the most innovative aspects, that is, an increasing refinement that is recognizable as a coherent classicizing style in early eighteenth-century genre painting. This feature, which decisively differentiates eighteenth-century genre painting from its seventeenth-century counterpart, becomes convincing evidence of the painters' efforts to innovate in Dutch genre painting.

To demonstrate the variety of painters' responses to their predecessors' work, I have compiled a catalogue of selected painters that produced genre paintings during this period, according to the criteria mentioned below. The selection of painters is based on consultation of the photographic documentation of the Netherlands Institute for Art History (RKD) in The Hague as well as on my firsthand examination of paintings in various collections. It is also supplemented by information that I obtained from other academic institutions, museums, auction houses, art dealers, and scholars in this field. My research covers a long period from 1680 to 1750, during which time a limited group of artists was active. In a broad sense, these painters belonged to the second and third generations of artists after the prosperous period of the second and third quarters of the seventeenth century. The starting point is set in 1680, since most of the leading artists of the second generation began working as independent masters after this time.



Thus, the catalogue does not aim to serve as an encyclopedia of all the painters who were active in this category of painting. Rather, it consists of artists from the above-mentioned generations who experienced the climate of this transitional period as their primary artistic circumstance and strove to adapt and translate their predecessors' work in their own genre painting. Each entry is devoted mainly to articulating this artistic response, be it near to or distant from the work of the period before the last quarter of the seventeenth century, and is illustrated by paintings representative of each artist.

Most of these painters were born between 1660 and 1700, and some of the artists whose extant work and information is extremely scarce cannot but be omitted from this catalogue.²⁴ Artists born around or even before the middle of the seventeenth century and who had passed away around 1700, such as Godfried Schalcken (1643-1706) and Eglon van der Neer (1634-1703), are also not included in this catalogue. As they were already painting during the third quarter of the seventeenth century and had established their careers before 1680, they are classified with the group of older artists that inspired later generations.²⁵ In the chapters, however, it is not my purpose to elaborate upon all the painters that are listed in my catalogue. Instead, my discussion focuses on a limited number of artists whose work and activities can provide us with specific examples. For this reason, Willem van Mieris, who is no doubt one of the most successful artists of this period and whose activities are well documented, receives significant attention in each of the case studies. Additionally, most of the examples I discuss in the following chapters were made after 1700, as is clear from the chapter titles, but this does not suggest an exclusion of the period between 1680 and 1700.²⁶

My research does not include painters who were active mainly after 1750, since artists of the second half of the eighteenth century showed a different interest in seventeenth-century painting. Particularly toward the end of the eighteenth century, art gradually came to be coloured by the spirit of the Patriotic movement, which peaked around 1800.²⁷ Painters of this period derived inspiration from seventeenth-century genre painting, but their emphasis lay on reviving faithful representations of the everyday life of humble citizens and projecting their current national identity onto these depictions. In the painting *Morning Visit* (1796, fig. 1) by Adriaan de Lelie (1755-1820), for instance, the representation of citizens working in a kitchen early in the morning seems to have little to do with a classicizing tendency or antique beauty. Rather, these figures are portrayed in such an unaffected way as to embody the virtues of diligence and modesty that were seen as the important mainstay of Dutch society at that time.²⁸ This retrospective attitude of painters active around 1800 toward seventeenth-century art makes us even more aware of the unique approach taken by painters working between 1680 and 1750. During the period of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, seventeenth-century Dutch art functioned as a mirror of national pride and formed a symbol of the glorious epoch that had ended more than a century before. However, around the year 1700, seventeenth-century genre painting was not yet a relic of the past. It was perceived as a model through which artists could pursue new possibilities to create their own art in response to contemporary artistic demands. This study is therefore devoted not to a revival of the lost glory of seventeenth-century Dutch art but to a story of painters who attempted to breathe new life into the long-lasting tradition of Dutch genre painting.

◀ Fig. 1: Adriaan de Lelie, *Morning Visit*, 1796. Panel, 53 x 43 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

