

A review of the exhibition "Gods, Saints and Heroes: Dutch painting in the age of Rembrandt" at the Detroit Institute of Arts, January 4 - April 19, 1981.

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This exhibition, like others before it at the Institute, is designed to show us that what every schoolboy knows, isn't true. In this case, that Dutch painting does not consist solely of still life, people drinking, interiors and activities beside a frozen river. The paintings chosen trace the development of the representations of historical, biblical and mythological subjects from the various styles to be found in the first part of the 17th century to a unified classical style a few decades later.

At first, as one might expect in a country still being formed, where business interests in the cities were resisting the centralization of government, every city had its distinctive style. Utrecht, being Catholic then, might be expected to produce an archaic icon such as Hendrick ter Brugghen's Crucifixion as late as 1624. In fact, however, the work is not even typical of ter Brugghen. The slack-jawed peasant face of St. John is not necessarily medieval, but is at least as likely to owe something to Caravaggio, a great influence at Utrecht and elsewhere, who used realistic detail to make us accept that religious scenes really happened. Ter Brugghen's Annunciation (1629) has a peasant-faced Gabriel and a basket of washing in the foreground.

Caravaggio's dramatic use of shafts of light, falling on the centrepiece of a painting, is a byword. He is also the source of the startling close-up effect of painting figures seen only from the waist up. Both devices are seen in Gerrit van Honthorst's St. Peter denying Christ (1620/25), where Peter is picked out of the surrounding gloom by a candle cupped behind a woman's hand. Two other versions of the scene in this show, one by Rembrandt, use the same effect. Dirck van Baburen's Prometheus chained by Vulcan

(1623) has the hero frozen in anguish, his face lit by baleful light from above which stresses strangely his lips and nose, gaping red holes echoing his reddened hands (the fetters have cut off his circulation). He is upside down as if being hurled down. (In Greek myth the rebel against the gods is the creator of mankind.)

Another Utrechter, Abraham Bloemaert, painted in quite a different style; the oldest painting in the exhibition, The marriage of Peleus and Thetis (c. 1593-94), looks the most modern. It is in a refined unnatural style called mannerism - a sort of Renaissance decadence - characterized by elongated figures and unusual colours. Everyone is having an elegantly erotic time at a wedding feast, the canvas is filled with groups standing or lying about in the accidents of a landscape made of clouds, and neither the bridal couple nor the fateful visitors - the three goddesses, one of whom is to receive an apple as a beauty prize and thus unleash the Trojan War - are especially noticeable. The goddess of discord who brings the apple perhaps is: she stands between two pillars of cloud in a flame red dress with a flame red apple, the colour of destruction. Christ, in John the Baptist Preaching (1602) by the Haarlem painter Cornelis Cornelisz, is not prominent either; presumably he is the man in the yellow hat which, while entirely of the painter's time, also suggests a four-leaved halo. This relegation of the chief subject to a minor position is also a mannerist trait.

In Amsterdam there was another school, with whom the young Rembrandt worked in the 1620's; therefore they call them the pre-Rembrandtists. His teacher Pieter Lastman painted a Tobias catching the fish (1613) areas of which are occupied by elaborate foliage and water bubbles, heavily applied, which seem to be filler, to stand out from the canvas and not be a part of it. The big fish is just as improbably fishy and shiny.

In contrast, and despite the usual connotations of the term, Dutch baroque art seems restrained. Hendrick Goltzius,

who learned from Rubens in Flanders, offers us in Venus and Adonis (1614) two lovely tanned, almost orange bodies, evenly lit all over - none of Rubens' fat pink people, thank goodness. Adonis is holding his spear at a suggestive angle; it's too long to fit in the picture. His passion is in fact hunting, and Venus doesn't want him to go, but the fact that his passion will kill him is perhaps a moral message. There are a lot of those, in this exhibition. Even Peleus and Thetis is perhaps about the dangers of discord in the state. After all, these were troubled times, with the Dutch state being slowly formed.

As these historical events unfold, and prosperity comes to the cities, all the styles gave way to a monumental evenly lit dignified classicism. There is some relief in the form of female nudes, notably subjects on the theme of disguise. In Caesar van Everdingen's Jupiter and Callisto (1655) the god, a very nasty and lustful expression on his face, is about to force the nymph, who thinks he is Diana (whose mask cupids are holding). In Paulus Moreelse's Vertumnus and Pomona (c. 1630), we seem to see an old woman giving a maiden advice. What (apart from the title) gives the game away is that the sweet old lady is leering down the girl's cleavage: it is the god in disguise. The nymph is the most comically naive-looking wench imaginable.

But there is a great deal of celebration of new civic architecture, of rulers, of the newly wealthy bourgeoisie. Works were commissioned for law courts, city halls, guild halls, and burgher's walls. Judges are urged to be impartial, rulers generous, children dutiful, widows faithful to their husband's memory; corrupt officials are to be punished, those in authority need wisdom, earthly riches are vain; only love can tame war (Venus disarming Mars - but when she arms Aeneas her son, that's divine might helping a just human cause). Caesar van Everdingen's Diogenes searching for a man (1652) - an honest one - carries his lantern across a Dutch market place, among figures obviously copied from real

life: a distinguished family is being urged to uphold its reputation for honesty. Indeed, present rulers are urged to imitate ancient models not only by paintings of the ancient worthies in question, but by being portrayed as them. If Prince Charles Ludwig of the Palatinate and his governor are portrayed as Alexander and Aristotle, it is to encourage the lad to become learned as well as strong.

Everything is done to give the new republic an instant antiquity and solidity. Parallels are established with the Roman republic. Medieval events are recalled, some as legendary as William Tell's exploits in another small republic - the beheading of a corrupt bailiff in 1336, for example - and some attested to, such as "Duke Willem II granting privileges to the High Office of the Dike-Reeve of Rijnland in 1255" (commissioned for the 400th anniversary of that event). To explain what is going on, there is an inset grey allegory of Wisdom and Trade pushing to keep a lock gate shut against a sea god mounted on a horse with webbed feet. I confess allegory makes my heart sink. "The city of Leiden inviting Cloth Manufacture" features city and cloth as women, plus Wisdom, Justice and Freedom (also female) and Commerce (the god Mercury). Significantly, he is the only nude figure. Naked nymphs give way to clothed Diana with her attendants.

One is struck by the strong even white daylight in many of these paintings for a new republic, even when the scene is indoors - the big new windows are responsible, no doubt. And also by the suppression of violence. Bad for law and order. There are two works in the exhibition showing Mercury handing Juno the eyes of the slain Argus, whom she had set to watch over the nymph Io to make sure she didn't turn back from a white cow into Jupiter's girlfriend; his eyes went to decorate the tail feathers of Juno's peacocks. Thus to mock her with her defeat and the murder - and the eyes - is a cruel act. In Goltzius' version (1615) things are made worse by the neck of the corpse; not only is blood

gushing forth in true medieval fashion, but muscles and guts show in the cross-section, thanks to advances in the study of anatomy. Mercury and Juno both have flushed faces, as if bloodshed stirred the blood. Whereas Jan Both's version (c. 1650-51) does not show the head, the eyes are not seen (the peacock's tail is already ocellate), Mercury is naked and gesturing in triumph but with his back to us, and Juno is regally clothed.

Other potentially gruesome scenes are played down even more. Salomon de Braij's Jael, Deborah and Barak (1635) shows a determined-looking Jael holding the hammer and the tent peg with which she slew the enemy commander she had sheltered, but the peg is in the very extreme bottom right-hand corner, and only two little drops of blood fall from it. Jan de Braij, son of Salomon, painted a Judgment of King Zaleucus (1676) for the courtroom in Haarlem in which the horror is likewise muted. The king had decreed that all rapists should be blinded; his son was convicted of rape; therefore the father ordered the destruction of one of his son's eyes and one of his own. (Moral: the judge who is lenient with his family and friends must pay for it.) We see the latter sentence about to be carried out. The executioner standing over him is not the centre of attention; he is not threatening; we are drawn rather to a pattern of muscular limbs, as assistants hold the king in readiness for the jolt.

Govert Flinck's Allegory on the memory of Frederick Hendrick (1654) combines some of these features. It portrays the prince's widow, thereby preaching fidelity to the deceased. She is as still as the gold statue in its marble rotunda, beside another monument with cupids - to the husband as distinct from the warrior. The whole composition is monumental indeed, like the newly-rich architecture of other paintings. And one has the feeling that death is cleaned up and buried under a great weight, suppressed, so it cannot get out.

The name of Rembrandt is a bit of a come-on. (The Institute used the same trick for a show of Dutch painting about ten years ago.) Apart from an early "Historical Scene" of a ruler receiving petitions, also a moral treatise for some princely wall, only four of the master's works are here. They stand head and shoulders above the rest, both for skill and for sheer humanity. The Visitation (1640) shows Elizabeth and Mary embracing under trees dimly seen in the dark; Zacharias is being helped down a flight of steps to greet her. The only light and colour is around the Virgin's head, yet it does not radiate. In the Rembrandt-brown shadows, the lines that pick out objects are black brush strokes at once heavy and as fine as if done in ink.

Joseph accused by Potiphar's wife (1655) is equally intimate yet dramatic. The wife is flanked by her husband and Joseph in a dark room, and her accusing hand and dress sleeve are a pink line in the middle of a white triangle of light on the bed. She herself is the upright side of the triangle, and Joseph is seen in dimly reflected light to the left, beyond the triangle's point.

Most dramatic of all is Belshazzar's Feast (1635/37). It is lit by the blazing words of doom written by God on the wall. The king, a fat and fatuous man, has started back, spilling his goblet, and a shock wave is moving to the left: a woman has half risen and is amazed by the king's behaviour, the man next to her is amazed but has not moved, and the woman at the extreme left has turned to look at the man. Balancing the back of her head is the back of the serving girl's head on the far right; the king's sweeping arm seems to be propelling her out of the picture at us. Balance, yet contrast between the still guest and the moving servant. Now that's composition. It's also drama obtained by the depiction of the critical moment. Lastman taught Rembrandt to choose thus, but it was a skill widely understood, as two versions of the Esther story demonstrate (Jan Lievens 1625/26 and Jan Steen c. 1668). Both show violent movement at a

feast; Esther accuses Haman of plotting to destroy the Jews, Ahasuerus rises in anger, and Haman recoils. Steen shows him with one eye closed as if already as good as dead. Rembrandt's pupil Carel Fabritius chooses his scene with equal skill in The Raising of Lazarus (1643/45), where an uncanny yellow light arises from the sickly figure in the tomb and touches the bystanders' faces in patches.

Then it's back to moral lessons in paint. Eroticism has disappeared. To go with the Dianas there is a fondness for Annunciations. Two almost identical Conversions of St. Paul are an excuse to paint a tight knot of violently moving horses. More exotic animals appear, such as camels and elephants, with black servants; and Frans Post fills his paintings with the exotic flora he lived among for eight years in Brazil. In the middle of all this there remains one magnificent surprise. It's also a continuation of an older tradition. Domenicus van Wijnen, a painter outside any school, did a Temptation of St. Anthony (c. 1680-90) in which everything is pitch dark except for Lust lying behind the saint and shining a lantern on her breasts - and great globes in the sky like soap bubbles spewing columns of red and naked damned souls. Hieronymus Bosch, alive and well in this otherwise orderly age. The fear of violence and death and hell, a great Baroque theme, here makes its only appearance (to judge by this exhibition) in the classical world of the painting of the time.

In a word, this show effectively destroys the myth of Dutch painters as turned in on their own country and as portrayers of quaint and limited subjects. They are open to the major foreign influences of the time and prove themselves capable of treating all the great topics (mythological, biblical, political) with equal dramatic effect.